A Dystopian Democracy: Discourses on Leadership Failure and National Transformation in Malawi's Urban Public Sphere

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Cover photograph (M. J. Hutton)
Parliament Building, Lilongwe

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Introduction

On the 17th of May, 1994, the 30-year reign of Malawi's "President for Life", Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, came to a surprisingly peaceful end, not because it was the end of his life, but because he had lost a democratic presidential election. Instrumental in bringing about the fall of one of the most autocratic leaders on the continent, was a courageously outspoken group of mostly religious leaders, called the 'Public Affairs Committee'. Eighteen years later, on the 16th of March, 2012, President Bingu wa Mutharika was presented with the following ultimatum by the same Public Affairs Committee:

> We call on the President to call for a national referendum to seek a fresh mandate from the people of Malawi, as we believe the sustained trust given to him by the people of Malawi has been eroded. We call for the resignation of the President in the event that these demands are not complied with.[1]

PAC threatened to incite civil disobedience if the demands were ignored, but as it happened, the president was removed from office two weeks later – neither by ballot, nor by force, but by his own maker.

The members of PAC had seen a lot of changes in the 18 intervening years between these two events; notably, a nation which (albeit with a number of "teething problems") seemed to be moving "steadily down the road to greater democracy and accountability"[2], yet, in 2012, it must have seemed to them like the past was returning in the present. They were addressing an increasingly autocratic leader who had adopted the same heroic praise titles as the former 'dictator'. They had witnessed the return of the name *Kamuzu* to several public buildings, highways and stadiums, and a gigantic mausoleum constructed in his memory. Their president was asking his party cadres to protect him from his critics, and even threatened his own disrespectful citizens thus: "If someone comes to insult your father, do you just stay quiet... I want to say starting from today that I am tired of it. Those that are insulting me should stop."[3] And, just as they had done two decades earlier, the PAC found itself called once again to negotiate the end of a Malawian president's reign.

Following the departure of Mutharika, official adoration for Kamuzu was tempered, but did not cease. The incumbent President Joyce Banda, who speaks the language of democracy, human rights, and free speech, also evokes fond memories of the "Father and Founder of this nation", who "made sacrifices which most of us cannot even begin to imagine. He showed

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[1] PAC issues ultimatum, *Nyasa Times*, March 19, 2012, accessed August 9, 2013
[2] Somerville, K. (21 March, 2012). *Malawi's democracy dips into recession,* African Arguments, retrieved 9 August, 2013, http://africanarguments.org/2012/03/21/malawi's-democracy-dips-into-recession-by-keith-somerville/
[3] ibid.

exceptional love for his country…"[4] State House, she has declared, is to be renamed "Kamuzu Palace",[5] and when attending events in the former leader's home district, she has been seen wearing a chitenje cloth with the great *Ngwazi*'s face upon her chest. In contemporary urban Malawi one sees changes and continuities – relentless calls for transformation and a new beginning, yet at the same time resurrection of the messianic figure of Kamuzu. The slogan of the new United Democratic Front government in the 1990s was *Zinthu zasintha*! ("things have changed"), though to many, it was not exactly clear what had changed, and where change was taking them. It was not long before some felt that, "things have changed, but the rules remain the same"[6]; that there had been a transition, but no *transformation*. Today, these sentiments are echoed by many – not in bemusement, but in anger and despair. Shifting the gaze away from the (often bewildering) conduct and displays by the nation's leaders, a pertinent question to ask is: what does it all mean to Malawian citizens?

The transition was the result of a myriad cultural expressions of a desire for change, but in this process, far more is known about institutional and political cultural changes (focussing on elite-level politics) than ordinary people's interpretations and meanings (van Dijk, 2000: 183). Issues of central importance to local people have tended to be relegated to the margins. For example, Malawians' very first experience of democracy was the procedure of elections. But what did these new practices mean? According to van Dijk (ibid.: 184), the secrecy of the ballot box evoked another "local world of secrecy", exemplified by the secret *Nyau* masked societies that had come to represent aspects of Kamuzu Banda's control and coercion. What about the new concepts of *demokalase* and *matipati*? What would they have connoted, beyond simply the end of oppression? Apparently they meant various things: "a new policy", "a new way of thinking", "revenge for past injustice" (Poeschke and Chirwa, 1998: 75-76), rapid unwanted cultural changes such as lack of deference for the elderly (Ribohn, 2002), or simply, an "uncertain something else" (vonDoepp, 1998: 103). Such deeper understandings impact on actual practice in political participation and the functioning of the system as a whole. A point to take from this is that nothing should be seen as self-evident about the ways in which the political system was/is understood, accepted, challenged and exploited in democratic Malawi. As this study of discourses on leadership shows, beyond electoral procedures, following the end of the overwhelmingly powerful personality cult of Kamuzu, the notion of legitimate political authority has been constantly under negotiation and contestation in public life, in an on going process shaped by historical narratives and lessons, the rhetoric of leaders, Western democratisation discourses, and visions of a better future.

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[4] Keep Kamuzu legacy alive, says Malawi President Joyce Banda. *Malawi Democrat*, May 14, 2013
[5] Pres. Joyce Banda renames State House to Kamuzu Palace, *Maravi Post*, Nov 18, 2012
[6] Lwanda, 2004: 51

Having thrown off the shackles of oppression in the wave of political change in the early 1990s, Africa's fledgling democracies were hailed as signifying a new era of "freedom" and rule by the "will of the people" on the continent. Thereafter, it seems to have been their fate to be constantly assessed on how well they have 'consolidated democracy'. To this end, institutions designed to limit power, electoral procedures designed to ensure equal participation and representation, independent media and formal civil society designed to perform educative and watchdog roles as the "guardians of democracy", are all scrutinised and evaluated. There is great interest in the *system design*, and how to tinker with it. Political culture, 'good governance', and intra-party democracy do not escape the scientific gaze either; measurements thereof are said to indicate a democracy's state of "maturity". There is seemingly no end to the literature on institutions and procedures, and Malawi is no exception in this regard.

Achille Mbembe's criticism of portrayals of Africa as "a bottomless abyss where everything is noise, yawning gap, and primordial chaos", and "reason is supposedly permanently at bay" (2001: 3) may be overly zealous in its condemnation, but he has a point that the political science and development economic approaches to the continent are "in thrall" to the ideologies of development and modernisation; in other words, to the teleology of social evolutionism. Thus, they are "primarily concerned, not with comprehending the political in Africa or with producing knowledge in general, but with social engineering", such that "what African agents accept as reasons for acting, what their claim to act in the light of reason implies…what makes their action intelligible to themselves: all this is of virtually no account in the eyes of analysts. Since the models are seen as self-sufficient, history does not exist." (ibid: 7).

There are, of course, numerous anthropological studies that go beyond what Hasty (2006) calls the "empty discourses used to chastise and pathologise the African state", paying attention to the "sophisticated ways that the African state is imagined and enacted, challenged and disrupted" (164). Additionally, some political scientists (e.g. Schatzberg, 2001; Chabal, 2009) and scholars from other disciplines, such as communication studies (e.g. Heisey, 1997), have emphasised the important 'intersection' of culture and politics, and therefore also the value of interpreting "politics from below" (Bayart, 1993), i.e. what politics *means* to ordinary people. This is not to say that aspects of political economy, focussing on "state–society relations" and the "historical origin of the African state" (Eriksen, 2001: 298), are not also essential for a proper understanding of political developments. For this reason, a *longue durée* perspective is provided in chapter one of this thesis, explaining pre-colonial authority structures, the legacy of colonial indirect rule, and the development of state structures, institutions, elite networks and political culture in the postcolony. These give historical grounding to contemporary social divisions and state-society relations, and to patterns of behaviour such as neopatrimonialism and ceremonial displays of power. But at the same time, the political discourses of ordinary people, creating and contesting notions of power and legitimate authority, are a central, yet neglected, part of societal

development and transformation; they are processes which a culturalist perspective can shed light on. It was Geertz (1973) who highlighted "the specifically cultural character of activities, the manner in which they are expressive rather than instrumental… more like theatrical performance than economic exchange" i.e. of culture as "symbolic action" (Alexander, Giesen and Mast, 2006: 2), and since then, various domains of scholarship have shown that it is important to "take meaning seriously, not to dismiss it as an epiphenomenon", because, just like the structures of power and status that sociology is preoccupied with, "meaning is a structure" (ibid.). It both emerges from and determines the actions and relations of people.

'Leadership' in Democratic Malawi

There are two reasons why discourses on political leadership are very interesting to study in the case of Malawi, aside from the fact that they have been, to a large extent, ignored: Firstly, 'leadership' is one of the most prevalent themes in urban public discourse. It is heard in the banter of buses, bars and markets, fills the pages of newspapers and takes up hours of the airwaves, dominates discussions on social media, and preoccupies entire conferences amongst civil society groups. And secondly, societal and cultural divisions, as well as the contending historical narratives arising from various strategies to redefine leadership, and the contradictory forces of continuity and change in the democratic era, have led to instability and contention around the symbolic meaning of the 'political leader,' *especially* the president.

The opening paragraphs of this introduction allude to this: two decades into the democratic era, Mutharika's increasingly autocratic behaviour and mimicking of Kamuzu Banda's charismatic style and fatherly authoritarianism had left him totally illegitimate in the eyes of many sectors of society, and their calls for his resignation could not have been a clearer sign of this. Yet, six months after his death, the new president, in whom so many had vested all their hopes and goodwill to transform the nation from the dismal *status quo*, faced escalating urban strikes and calls for her resignation, not just for failing to heed public demands to change her economic policy, but also because she was said to "lack vision", a deficiency emphasised by comparisons to her predecessor and even, once again, Kamuzu Banda. This shows how selective memories of the past make history a strategic enterprise. Historical narratives and lessons play a part in the inconclusive (i.e. on going) communicative process of legitimising leaders and attempting to modify their conduct. Further complicating this process is the intrusion of foreign representatives, notably of Western donor countries, whose praise for the incumbent president, Joyce Banda (when she implements their conditions and policies), inadvertently undermines her attempts to demonstrate her independence of character and Malawi's sovereignty – that she is *not* just a "dancer to the tune of the West".

Public discourse displays a complex interplay of various strategies, shaped by a pervasive dystopian narrative about degeneration and stagnation in the democratic era, painful historical lessons, and visions of great national potential going to waste (which represents the utopian streak in this disillusioned discourse on leadership). The public process by which these discourses are constructed and circulated, and materialise in changing institutions, patterns of behaviour and 'mindsets', is influenced by issues of miscommunication and distrust between leaders and citizens. Whilst leaders and the public are often seen as binary opposites, public discourse displays a strong egalitarian ethos, relentlessly demanding humility, modesty, and sacrifice from 'the top' – an unstated public project of deflating symbolic power in order to bring leaders and people to a similar level. But this is not the "intimacy" and "illicit cohabitation" between rulers and ruled (so paradoxically caught up in the endorsement of excess and vulgarity) that one sees in Mbembe's (1992) portrayal of the postcolony. Quite the opposite: whatever nuances or even contradictions it may contain, this particular strand of urban discourse on leadership in Malawi's democratic era is in the process of redefining true leaders as *humble servants to the people*, who at the same time transcend the "transactional" character of politics as usual, and display a profound *vision* of national political and cultural *transformation*.

The urban public sphere

Numerous analyses note the continuities from the one-party system to multiparty democracy. But an undeniably important *change* was the freeing up of 'public space', allowing ordinary people to publicly discuss leadership, culture, the past, and the future, collectively interpreting the nation's developments and, importantly, giving them significance. This study analyses texts produced primarily (but not exclusively) in three different settings/institutions: the print media, the Public Affairs Committee's public statements, and a Facebook political discussion forum of 14,800 members. Across these 'discourse planes' (media, civil society and social media), political discourses are produced mostly in written English, but also some Chichewa (esp. on FB), and they invariably revolve around the central theme of 'leadership'.

There is a high degree of cross-referencing and cross-fertilisation between these settings, as well as further circulation into wider society, since, as is always the case, shared news, stories, debates, ideas, poems and photos that constitute the construction of reality feed constantly into the "giant milling mass of overall societal discourse. This milling mass of discourse is growing constantly and exuberantly" (Jäger and Maier, 2009: 35). Furthermore, the dailies, the PAC, and the Facebook forum should not be taken as emblematic of, or 'standing in for', the distinct social institutions of print media, civil society, and informal social media. Whilst these institutional settings certainly shape the discourses produced therein (such as the prevalence of specialist

social scientific assessments of the nation), they are just a part of a wider 'national public sphere' (imagined as a nation-wide site of engagement in public deliberation). It is this imagined sphere and the "reality" constructed by discourses within it that are the focus of analysis, rather than any specific institutional setting or social demographic. It was found that ignoring even 'trivial' strands of discourse – seeing them as marginal or 'epiphenomenal', simply because they do not involve rational deliberation on political issues – can miss a significant part of the diffuse process of giving meaning to political and cultural developments, of colouring them with certain narratives that ultimately recreate the basis of political culture. Instead of a normative institutional assessment of formal "civil society" and how far it opposes the 'inherently irrational' state (as Eriksen, 2001), this study of civic engagement in the democratic era is based on an interpretation of the processes of leadership legitimation and its intrinsic connection to myth-making and political cultural transformation in the search for *significance*, by a critical sector of the urban public sphere.

Research Methods

This thesis is based on data collected in Zomba, Lilongwe and Blantyre, over a period of four and a half months (early August to late December, 2012). Whilst maintaining the core focus on "politics from below" in Malawi's democratic era, the empirical object of study shifted in the field. Early experiences inspired me to change the focus from a target demographic – urban youth – to a prevalent discourse strand on 'leadership' as an entity in itself. Grappling with the heterogeneity of the nation's "youth" and having to choose which variables, such as class and education, to further isolate, became less interesting than focusing on the fascinating notions of leadership being created in the public sphere. The theoretical approach i.e. employing a constructionist theory of representation; contrasting Foucauldian discourse theory with Habermasian discourse ethics; incorporating Hall's notion of oppositional decoding; interpreting the texts from the perspective of strategic narratives and myths, and recognising strategies of extraversion in the exploitation of Malawi's unequal relationship with the West, was developed at the same time that the data were analysed. The sheer number of texts about 'leadership' was not anticipated, and this thesis is therefore characterised by an abundance of quotes, to give as much of a sense as possible, of how language is effectively used in these transformative processes. It became clear that the central theme was entangled with other strands on 'mindsets', opportunities, and breaking from the past, and so prior assumptions and ways of framing the topic had to be reworked and reapplied in accordance with the findings. A Foucauldian notion of discourse informed the whole analysis.

Newspapers

Malawi today has only two private print media houses with any notable circulation, and for most of its democratic era these have produced the only significant publications. Each publishes one Monday-Friday daily, and one Saturday and one Sunday paper. (State-owned newspapers have emerged and disappeared but never been significant). Every day on fieldwork, both newspapers were purchased. Additionally, back issues were photographed from the Chancellor College library collection and the Zomba National Archives. In total, approximately 3200 photographs of single front page and double-page spreads were obtained, from the years: 1994, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013. These years experienced certain key political moments, such as elections, uprisings, party defections, an attempted drastic constitutional amendment, and so forth. I was assisted in the photographing of archived newspapers by African Heritage Research and Consultancy, Ltd. All photographs were then catalogued twice: 1) according to exact dates and publication; 2) according to year and theme/speaker (e.g. political opinion, prominent public figures, addressed directly to govt., govt. criticism, statements by govt., foreign interference, reflexive journalism debate, public surveys, youth-related, etc). This allowed efficient data searches for both historical events or periods, and particular strands of discourse. Analysing newspaper discourse across the breadth of the democratic era allowed for a more diachronic analysis of political legitimacy as a process, rather than a static "matrix" or set of notions.

Interviews

A total of 30 recorded interviews were conducted, ranging in length from 5 minutes to one and a half hours, depending on the nature of the interview and the data sought. The format was either semi-structured or open discussions. The longer (avg. 1 hour) open interviews were carried out with 15 of the more prominent figures in the public sphere – journalists, editors, civil society activists, politicians, and academics (including the three speakers at the PAC conference). Remaining interviews were with university students (including union president and VP), youth parliamentarians, a political theatre performer, and a few 'ordinary members of the public'. Five newspaper columnists responded to an email questionnaire.

Choosing and accessing informants

Most informants were selected on the basis of their frequent appearances in the public domain: as columnists, reporters, editors, activists or 'academic experts'. Two politicians were interviewed for an elite perspective. Some Chancellor College students, as representative of educated urban youth, and the union president, who had been involved in the 2011 academic freedom saga, were also interviewed. Additionally, I had many discussions with ordinary members of the public. I

personally approached most informants, and was sometimes introduced to them by others whom I met during fieldwork.

PAC conference observation

I attended the Public Affairs Committee "all-inclusive stakeholders conference" (the second of two PAC conferences held in 2012) at the Sunbird Mt Soche Hotel in Blantyre, from 30-31st October, as an invited "observer" (for which I am very grateful to the organisers). The conference of approximately 80 delegates (from religious groups, politics, civil society, academia, and trade unions) discussed issues of national concern, such as governance, economy and specifically leadership. I was in attendance for the full 2 days, observing and recording details, and obtained the presentation slides and final conference resolutions. I interviewed the three conference presenters.

My Malawi My Views

Approximately three hundred screen shots were taken of numerous discussions on this Facebook forum, between September 2012 and August 2013. These included debates, highly symbolic photographs, and numerous 'trivial' comments.

Additional Data

I attended the opening and first parliamentary sessions of the Malawi Youth Parliament at the National Assembly in Lilongwe, 22nd – 24th August, 2012. Here I observed the proceedings and conducted very brief interviews with 4 youth MPs and 3 members of the public.

I visited the Zomba craft market on many occasions, and talked with the craftsmen (all men) about their interest in politics, observing how a local aspiring MP (whom I later interviewed) would visit them to get the "word on the street" and spread his reputation. They were considered important conduits of stories, rumours and street-level opinions on politics.

Casual conversations, online newspapers and blogs, a tense Chancellor College political demonstration, and of course a thorough reading of secondary literature, added to the data and concepts that produced this thesis' arguments.

Thesis Structure

This thesis develops, in four parts, an account of the processes of political cultural change in one sector of society in a 'nascent' democracy. Concepts taken from various disciplines, both Africa-

focussed and non-region specific, are integrated throughout these four parts, as are the research findings…

1) Acknowledging the adage that, "men make their own history", but "under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx), relevant aspects of Malawi's colonial and post-colonial history are taken to be integral to the study of contemporary phenomena. Chapter one is an account of the history of the split between the urban and the rural, the profound impact of Kamuzu Banda's hegemony for 30 years on society and politics, the development and functioning of democratic institutions over the past 20 years, the prevailing political culture that sustains a neopatrimonial logic, political ceremonialism and the importance of charismatic authority, the dynamic relation between society and the state, and reflections on 'middle African' notions of power.

2) The second chapter elaborates on the urban public sphere, both as a problematic idealised Habermasian concept (see Jürgen Habermas, 1974), and in its non-ideal manifestation, *nevertheless shaped by the concept,* but also by 'power' and 'discourse' (as notions put forward by Michel Foucault). The context of how, why and by whom these discourses on leadership are produced, is elaborated in terms of the relative positioning of institutions (the media, civil society, social media) and individuals (specifically influential and innovative speakers) vis-à-vis the state.

3) The third chapter analyses the redefinition of ideal democratic leadership conduct in urban discourse, highlighting the prevalent themes (behavioural traits) of arrogance, excess, sacrifice and 'substance', and connecting them to a common strategy of re-imagining the relation between leaders and citizens in a way that is inimical to inflated symbolic power. The process of communicating and negotiating this relation is hampered by mutual distrust, antagonism and miscommunication between the state and the public.

4) Chapter four looks at diffuse strategies in the transformation of political culture: exploitation of the unequal relation with the West (extraversion); dystopian imagery of stagnation and "wasted potential", including the rehabilitation of Kamuzu Banda as part of a narrative depicting regression in the democratic era to undermine the myth of development; and a clarion call for visionary leadership, which exhibits a utopian search for significance and national transformation. The leadership discourse is seen to inspire a diffuse soul-searching endeavour that motivates a change in mindsets, influenced particularly by 'cultural elites'.

Chapter 1

Colonialism, Dictatorship, and a Democracy of chameleons

Understanding contemporary Malawian politics and public debate is impossible without some historical perspective. The legacies of key people and events of history have not only shaped the country's historical trajectory, but they also appear frequently in contemporary narratives, coloured by sentiments of nostalgia, longing, anger or caution. On a less visible level, social structures and power cultures of the past have partially determined the developmental trajectory of the nation, divergence from which becomes an ever more costly and colossal enterprise, due to the path-dependency of political processes (see Pierson, 2000). The inherent conservatism of most cultures means they change "tectonically" over the *longue durée* – in imperceptible shifts punctuated by rapid transformation (see Chabal and Daloz, 2006).

Tracing the diversity of factors that have shaped contemporary Malawian politics and society is a project that can only be partially completed. Certainly, it is not just plausible but inevitable that many features of modern African states derive from pre-colonial power cultures (see for example Bayart, 1993; Schatzberg, 2001; Chabal, 2009); colonialism (e.g. Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996), and the dynamics of postcolonial authoritarian rule. It is to the purpose of uncovering these connections that this chapter sets itself, elucidating those historical processes that seem to have had a particular impact on contemporary political and social dynamics. This task can be most conveniently undertaken by dividing the last century into three 'eras' (though, as will be seen, surprising continuities transgress them):

1. Colonial indirect rule over Nyasaland (1907-1964),
2. Thirty years of a one-party state, under the colourful but oppressive leadership of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda and his *Malawi Congress Party* (1964-1994),
3. The multi-party 'democratic' dispensation that is certainly surviving but rarely said to be "thriving" today.

1 Legacies of colonialism: Citizens, subjects & clients of the bloated state

What had Nyasaland become by the end of colonial rule? The answer to this question is still relevant in today. Minnis identifies the following legacies:

At the dawn of independence in 1964, Malawian society could be characterized as having the makings of a centralized state, a weak, inward-looking private sphere, and very few intermediary institutions incapable of survival without state tutelage (1998: 139).

To facilitate the exploitation of resources and maintain a supply of cheap labour, European settlers appropriated customary land, which led to a land-scarcity situation that forced local small-holders to enter tenancy relationships with the settlers, meaning that larger communities broke down or experienced altered development, since the mutual assistance relationships became irrelevant (Minnis, 1998: 136). With this weakening of the indigenous rural institutions, colonialists took control of rural economic relations, and to this day the state continues that control. We see the result of this in the monopolistic economy, dominated by international capital, in place of the farming systems that used to be rooted in indigenous structures (ibid., 137). The colonial state that dwarfed existing social institutions resulted in a swollen post-colonial state that made government a primary source of fortune. Malawian political scientist, Blessings Chinsinga, points out that, even in Malawi today, the state is "possibly the only mechanism for quick wealth accumulation". Efforts to change this reality are undermined by the magnitude of poverty in the country (author interview, 12 Oct., 2012).

Turning "ethnicity" and "kinship" into the primary bases of identity, introducing a hierarchical bureaucracy, leaving health and education to the missionaries, and economic development to a few settler planters, led to the weakening of civil society and monopolization of political space by the colonials (Minnis, 1998: 137). The family became a refuge from the excesses of the colonial state. This has been linked to the unwillingness of Malawians to look 'outward' in order to publicise, or politicise, private issues (ibid). The 'political realm' since colonialism has to rural peasants been a site of struggle between rulers, not a domain of participation by the ruled (Kishindo, 2000). (This fact is particularly important today, in terms of the extent to which Malawi can call itself a "participatory democracy".) Such a mindset paved way for the single party government that took over soon after independence, making state control through patronage a relatively simple task. The social atomisation that occurred under colonialism, with collective organisation eroding, has had ramifications traceable to today's "civil society". It has meant that any attempts at political or developmental cooperation "face extremely high transaction costs" (VonDoepp, 1998: 108).

Mahmood Mamdani's (1996) influential investigation of this matter – based as it is on an assumption of the historical unity of Black Africa (a "colonial chimera" in itself, according to Copans (1996: 102)) – provides valuable insights into the profound impact of indirect rule. From his studies of the constancy of the colonial state structure, despite the many variations in agrarian systems that came under its rule, he concludes that the politicised aspects of state power can be separated from economic interest, i.e. from the "labour question". Colonial power is not

explainable purely in terms of political economy, since it was primarily organised around the imperative of maintaining order. This inspires Mamdani to place the "native question" at the centre of analysis, to look at how the African was "containerised, not as a native, but as a tribesperson" (1996: 24). British rule civilised Africans as communities, not as individuals, in a manner that created a "one-sided opposition between the individual and the group, civil society and community, rights and tradition" (Ibid.).[7]

Before its exploits in Africa, Britain had had long-term colonial experience in the East, whence came important lessons from encounters with native resistance that inspired an *indirect rule* approach in Africa. The strategy behind indirect rule was to "salvage and to build creatively upon the authoritarian strand in 'native' tradition" (Mamdani, 2000: 102). This meant that in Africa the colonial emphasis was not so much on civilising, but more on establishing and administering law and order (ibid., 1996: 109). But this "full-blown bifurcated power" (ibid., 2000: 101) meant that civil society, civil rights and citizens (mostly white) belonged to urban life, while the majority African population were peasant subjects governed through tribal authorities in the rural areas. Thus, the vision had shifted from colonials as "torchbearers", bringing individual freedoms to Africans, to colonials as "custodians protecting the customary integrity of dominated tribes" (ibid., 1996: 286).

Each dominated African "tribe" was defined in terms of its distinct "custom" (meaning its customary laws), and subject to these particular customary laws, *not* to the received modern law that applied to non-native citizens (and relations between non-natives and natives). The Native Authorities who ruled these tribes were state-appointed; they not only obeyed colonial directives from the centre, but were also endowed with the authority to both define and administer customary law. Thus, the colonial fantasy of bringing 'the rule of law' to Africa belied the reality, which was that peasants were merely subjects ruled by native authorities who themselves were not rule-bound. Since this meant that judicial and administrative authority were "infused in the same agency", customary "justice" was in fact administratively driven (ibid., 2000: 102); in other words, justice was infused with the imperatives of keeping order amongst natives.

Instead of the importation of modern European-style states to Africa, colonies were actually structured as two-tiered states where peasants were directly governed by their ethnically defined Native Authorities, and indirectly subject to the central authority of white officials (ibid., 1996: 287). The legal duality between modern and customary law therefore created a distinction between *citizens*, who were comprised of settlers and a few indigenous people enjoying civil rights

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[7] Some caveats may be placed on the wholesale acceptance of Mamdani's conclusions from this investigation. One is that, in reflecting on such colonial legacies in contemporary democracies, he leaps too quickly from the dynamics of the colonial period to the complexities of the present (Freund, 2000: 107). The other is that the focus is perhaps too one-dimensional. By viewing the colonial state "through the prism of the native question", Mamdani overlooks the "various modalities in which European colonizers connected the labour question with the native question" (ibid.: 384). But despite its shortcomings, the gist of the argument contains elements applicable to Malawi, both past and present.

under civil law, and *subjects*, who were the rural majority governed indirectly under customary law. The state was racialised: European "colons" ruled urban Africans through *direct despotism*, and the majority rural Africans indirectly, through *decentralised despotism*. The whole colonial state was thus completely "Janus-faced", in that the central state was bounded by the rule of law, while the indirect rule it exercised over peasants was not law-bound and respectful of rights; it used "extra-economic coercion" and "administratively driven justice" (ibid., 2000: 105). Max Gluckman's (1949) essay "The Village Headman in British Central Africa" describes how headmen and chiefs could also be Janus faced: balancing their obligations to both the colonial authorities and their local subjects. Mamdani acknowledges that the defining of "custom" was a contest between various forces, not just something imposed from above, but "the dice were loaded" in favour of state-appointed native authorities (2000: 103). Bifurcation has remained largely in place after independence, since the emphasis has been more on deracialising urban civil society than democratising the countryside. For a conservative postcolonial state like Malawi, the structures of indirect rule were simply adapted, with the local state still functioning as a decentralized MCP despotism. The rural-urban divide remains significant in Malawi, not just in terms of political economy but also in the imagined nation.

Peter Ekeh's (1975) seminal essay locates the origins of the dialectical relationship between a primordial and civic public – a unique configuration in African post-colonies – which explains more *systematically* the prevalence of corruption in a civic public that is "starved of badly needed morality" (111). The colonial bourgeoisies' *ideologies of legitimation* that justified their rule – the "backwardness of the African past"; "the lack of contributions by Africans to the building of Africa"; "intertribal feuds"; "benefits of European colonial rule" etc, (Ekeh, 1975: 96-100) – had a significant impact on the urban, educated Africans who became the *African bourgeoisie*, internalising many colonial principles and ideals and thereby creating their own ideologies of legitimation to serve two purposes: replacing the colonial rulers, and then, having accomplished this, legitimating their own initially tenuous authority in the postcolony.

For the first task, the African bourgeoisie responded to colonial ideologies by claiming to be the equals of their former colonisers. Their criteria of legitimation were therefore based on the prevailing colonial standards, such as English or French competency, and claims to be able to rule as effectively (ibid. 102). The independence struggle is seen as a fight between bourgeois groups, a fact to which Ekeh attributes the "intellectual poverty of the independence movement in Africa (ibid.)". In Malawi, the centrality given to the elites in the official narrative of the nationalist struggle is contestable (Woods, 2002). Not only did their cooperation with colonial institutions rather than indigenous structures set them apart, but their supposedly arrogant and condescending attitudes created a "wide gulf" between them and ordinary people, whom they described as being generally uncivilised, especially with regards to their lack of education. In 1947 the Nyasaland Times described Congress as "a small coterie of pseudo intellectuals who

represent nobody but themselves" (ibid, 191). Kamuzu Banda's attitude expressed in letters from abroad also indicate his intentions to replace a European elite with an African one.

In their efforts to achieve their own take over of power, the elites encouraged the sabotage of the colonial administration through various means of civil disobedience – striking, avoiding taxes, etc. The resultant message was that government duties were burdens to be avoided, but rights were still to be demanded. Ironically, by "encouraging the abrogation of duties and obligations to the colonial government and the demand for rights in excess of the resources available to meet them", this lack of civic commitment amongst the masses continued into the postcolony (Ibid., 103). The promise of independence was that benefits would greatly increase and the burden of colonialism (such as taxation) would decrease.

The outcome of these developments was two distinct public realms in the postcolony: the *primordial public*, which is based on primordial groupings and ties (e.g. kin, voluntary association and ethnic group), and the *civic public*, which was formerly associated with the colonial administration, and is today the site of popular politics and the formal public sector. The primordial-civic divide, though it is a caricature, is a useful reminder of the generally unequal distribution of rights and duties between the two publics. Strong moral obligations towards the primordial public make it the domain of duties to, for example, extended family, ethnic group, voluntary ethnic association, etc. Returns are "intangible, immaterial benefits in the form of identity or psychological security" (Ibid., 107). The civic public, on the other hand, is generally more *amoral* and economic, where individuals seek to gain materially, as Ekeh describes it:

> While many Africans bend over backwards to benefit and sustain their primordial publics, they seek to gain from the civic public…[but] there is no moral urge on him to give back to the civic public in return for his benefits. Duties, that is, are de-emphasized while rights are squeezed out of the civic public with the amorality of an artful dodger (1975: 107).

Importantly, Ekeh links the ideologies of the colonial and African bourgeoisie to the myth among the "ordinary African" that the civic public is essentially infinite in its resources – "it can never be impoverished" (Ibid., 108). This myth is sometimes alluded to in Malawi today. Especially under the presidency of Bakili Muluzi, some commentators noted elites' frivolous and unaccountable handling of "unlimited" state resources. This civic realm is the source from which to acquire resources for the fulfilment of weighty moral obligations in the primordial public. Ekeh's connects this to the need for psychological security in the modern world (1975: 107), but it no doubt reveals its deeper roots in a cultural sense of belonging.

Chabal (2009) suggests that, "There are no pristine subjects, citizens or clients, but only people who are haphazardly all three" (87). In pre-colonial Africa, there was relatively fluid

movement between kingdoms and less centralized polities, so that subject-hood was "far less totalizing" than in Europe or Islamic East Africa (88). Colonialism then brought the double subjection of non-elite (i.e. native, "uncivilized") Africans to the modern state in which they had no say, and the traditional authorities who now exerted power in a context where most of the established mechanisms of accountability to the people had been removed. The problem with the shift to independence was that ordinary people had entrusted everything ("mortgaged" their futures) to the nationalist elites whom they could not control. The new leadership failed to represent ordinary men and women, and seemed above the constitutional accountability mechanisms. Thus, clientelism became the form of dispensation that bypassed postcolonial subjecthood; it was often the only way to connect with elites. The realization of this new form of subjecthood and the inefficiency of the post-colonial state led to disenchantment and a recourse to "traditional" modes of politics to suit the new circumstances (Ibid., 91).

The 'bourgeois' nationalists for the first decades after independence discredited traditional authority even further, forcing chiefs to pay complete allegiance to the state, and switching the clientelist relation to the modern sector; politicians became the new patrons. (This paradoxically restored some authority and legitimacy to the traditional chiefs). The result in the postcolony is the "institutionalization of a relation of instrumental clientelism between political master and populace", which has removed the moral reciprocity of the patrimonial relationship. The "traditional" relation is no longer conducted in the spirit of morality (ibid., 96). Of course, people are also, especially at election times, treated as *citizens*. But at other times they are treated as subjects, and clientelism can often provide the belonging and protection needed where constitutional provisions of citizenship fail.

Turning now to the postcolony, and the legacy of Banda's one-party rule, it will be shown that a belief in the end of subjection with the departure of the colonists was misguided: the political kingdom did not finally come to belong to all Malawians. Instead, the system in place was merely adjusted to new postcolonial realities; it was run by an African elite but remained, like its colonial predecessor, "imperious, greedy and coercive" (Chabal, 2009: 90).

2 Nationalism and independence (1950 – 1994)

Independent Malawi developed its national identity and postcolonial political culture under the leadership of its first president, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who left an enduring legacy. In addition to coercion, intimidation and censorship, Banda's authority was buttressed by grassroots popular support, legitimised by the appropriation of cultural symbols of guardianship and heroic praise titles. The cult of personality included a revision of history to place Banda at the centre of the nationalist struggle:

During the reign of Banda in Malawi, the dominant political discourse was shaped by what is called Kamuzuism, an ideology that produced a powerful myth of Banda as the "fount of all wisdom" and a leader who "always knew what was best for the nation" (Chirambo, 2007).

His reign was, in that sense, also *hegemonic*. He even stated in 1963: "I am a dictator of the people by consent . . . by permission" (*Malawi News*, Feb 22, 1963 in ibid.). To this day he is not thought to have been an incompetent leader, and his undeniable iron fist approach appears to many (especially those who did not experience it) to have been a necessary evil in the task of maintaining discipline and unity.

For the entirety of Banda's reign, almost nothing that might displease him could be openly expressed. Questioning his legitimacy, suggesting systematic reforms, or bemoaning the state of the country were seen as types of insolent behaviour, by a leader and state machinery that was more than capable and willing to kill or imprison critics, often without trial. The regime's motto aimed to instil the "four cornerstones" of Unity, Loyalty, Obedience and Discipline (Brown, 2008: 194) to maintain order in the post-colony. Interestingly, the origins of the MCP's dictatorial tendencies are traceable to its earliest days.

2.1   Nyasa African Congress/Malawi Congress Party pre-independence

Already in the early 1950s the Nyasa African Congress (former incarnation of the MCP) faced the tension of maintaining unity while disciplining dissenters when its membership grew rapidly and it claimed to speak for *all* Africans in Nyasaland. When chiefs failed to comply with the NAC's boycott of federation discussions, for example, they were fiercely rebuked by NAC leaders. But between 1956 and 1964 the NAC/MCP became a significant nationalist movement in Africa, and it was already at this time that it began to show "elements of a totalitarian ideology" (McCracken, 1998: 237). Banda and other nationalists allowed, or indeed sometimes covertly encouraged, anyone who did not agree with the MCP's total boycott of federal institutions to be threatened with physical assault, usually by the Youth League – acts which Banda did not publicly condone, yet silently benefitted from. His tactful and lenient stance had by the late '50s changed to aggressive denunciations of 'moderates'. Young MCP figures joined him in denouncing opposition parties, churches, and other groups – even those who were sympathetic to the MCP but wished to remain independent (ibid.: 242).

The massive recruitment drive of the NAC, with increasing political agitation and daring criticisms of colonial policy, were all being carried out by other influential nationalists before Banda actually arrived in Malawi in 1958 to take up leadership of the party, by which time his

'hero' status had already been established for him by other party figures. Masauko Chipembere actually warned Banda that he might have to be presented to the people as a messianic figure to capture their hearts, and after initial doubts, Banda apparently began to very much enjoy this role ascribed to him (Power, 2001: 198). The younger 'new men' of the MCP saw Banda as an important unifying figure, yet they believed they could still advance their own agendas while being the managers of his leadership 'performance'. They tended to all his needs on his eventual arrival in Malawi in 1958, and presented him to the people on a national tour, during which he developed mass oratory skills and his speeches became ever more inflammatory (ibid.: 198).

Most of the younger nationalists – while they could certainly envisage a more egalitarian society than the older generation of nationalists, who, with all their experiences living under colonialism, combined authoritarian strands from both African and 'white' political traditions – did not see the validity of multi-party politics in Africa (Chanock, 1975: 346). Chipembere, for example, was pleased that Africa could avoid the "political ailment" of the multiparty system with its "built-in subversive mechanism". States with authoritarian regimes were in no way worse off, he claimed (Chipembere, 1960, in McCracken, 1998: 240). From early on, not only Banda but many MCP founders were hostile to the European multiparty system; they preferred to Africanise the government and give their president absolute authority, as Chipembere stated:

> The new independent African states…are developing what Britons deride as 'monolithic states'. This is nothing to worry about. Africa must evolve systems that suit her people's attitudes and temperament (ibid.).

One politician, Dunduza Chisiza, was uncannily prophetic in the way he emphasised the need to keep a check on "strong men", since (although he believed in this African style of leadership) they could easily slide into totalitarianism[8]:

> Where do we draw the line between a strong man and a dictator? Assuming a strong man has lapsed into dictatorship backed by the police and army, how can his clutch be dislodged? … To a man who has been surrounded by submissive associates for a long time, the exercise of initiative by his associates is easily misconstrued as a sign of rivalry and disloyalty (Chisiza, 1962, in Lwanda, 2008: 76).

The Young Turks of the MCP thought they could stage-manage Banda's leadership to some extent, while proceeding with their party's agenda. Kanyame Chiume and Masauko Chipembere,

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[8] He believed in modernisation theory and strongman government, which meant a "dictatorship which the citizens choose to put up with", yet he also firmly believed that human rights and dignity had to be guaranteed, which left him struggling in his philosophy to reconcile the two. He tried to balance out the need for politically free trade unions, opposition parties, etc, with the need for allegiance to the nationalist movement, and ultimately believed in some kind of voluntary subordination of the former to the latter (Lwanda, 2008; McCracken, 1998: 247).

for example, who had groomed their leader and built up his personality cult, did not see the danger in vesting so much authority in him. As Ross (1993) argues, there was a sense in which they totally "lost control" of Banda.

2.2   Independence: the one-party state

As we have seen, the MCP was never a fully democratic party, given its intolerance towards rival parties in the nationalist struggle. Just two months after independence, in September 1964, disagreements arose regarding various policy issues and the unexpected nature of Banda's leadership – specifically favouritism and condescension towards his former nationalist colleagues, whom he referred to as "my boys" (Power, 2001: 201). This personal challenge provoked Banda to expel many Cabinet ministers, including Chiume and Chipembere – to whom Banda basically owed his presidency. He began to refer to them as "wild animals" who needed to be "destroyed at all costs" (Kayuni, 2010: 411), and turned to ordinary Malawians for support, whom he trusted more than the intellectual nationalists. The expelled ministers were replaced by others who accepted Banda's terms, and so began his ever tighter control over party and country. The crisis was to be, according to Lwanda, the "last set piece battle in which both external (the British Governor, Commonwealth Office, and others) and internal voices were engaged publicly", until 30 years later (1996: 39). The 'Young Turks' had failed to stand up to Banda, and thereafter their struggle was a covert and dangerous one.

The 1966 Republican Constitution established the MCP as the sole legal party. In 1971 Banda was officially anointed President for Life. Throughout his 30-year rule, open dissent was dealt with by extremely harsh and unlawful means, the favoured one being imprisonment without trial under the "Preservation of Public Security Regulations" (Carver, 1990: 29). There were three main enforcers of the dictator's will: the Young Pioneers, the army and the police, and each had its own intelligence wing with informers everywhere. Every Malawian was a member of the MCP, and saw the state and the party as inseparable. Indeed, the leader owned the state, for all intents and purposes, as its resources were used according to his dictates, and any disagreement with this arrangement was a personal offence, not to be tolerated. This meant that he established himself as the ultimate patron, and it was only through his patronage that a rich elite could emerge, since Banda controlled all business licensing, access to easy credit, and land allocation (Brown, 2008: 195). Close associates and top civil servants became huge land-owners; the majority population remained poor. The elites were indebted to Banda, but their wealth came at the price of absolute loyalty. Banda's very own Press Holdings conglomerate (comprising 50 companies) controlled approximately a quarter of the Malawian economy, commanding "large shares and even monopolies of key sectors of the economy, including agribusiness, industry, general trading, oil, banking, and insurance, making competition impossible" (Ibid.). Behind the

scenes, other individuals, especially the extended family of John Tembo, whose niece, Cecilia Kadzamira, was the Official State Hostess and "Mama Malawi", played a powerful role in advising and possibly manipulating Banda.

Aside from coercion, Banda's reign was also very significantly hegemonic in the sense of gaining legitimacy and creating consent from the populace through ideological control: censorship of alternative viewpoints ensured that the official MCP version of history became a dominant narrative, placing Banda at the centre of the fight for independence. Even more important, however, was his reliance on tradition and charisma as sources of legitimacy, in a way that made him a "culture hero" and great *African* leader (Kirk-Greene, 1991). This involved the appropriation of traditional Chewa artefacts, notably several heroic praise-titles, including: *Chata wa Fuko la Malawi* (Father and Founder of Malawi), *Ngwazi* (conqueror), *Mkango* (lion), and *Nkhoswe number one* (guardian of women) (Chirambo, 2009).

Banda actually *admitted* to being a dictator, but a benevolent one – a "dictator of the people" – which he felt suited the traditional culture of Malawi (Forster, 2001: 276). His nationalist colleagues were of a younger generation who treated traditional authority with suspicion. In turn, Banda was suspicious of them, and enjoyed more support from traditional authorities. His political philosophy was quite explicit: first of all, *separation of powers* was appropriate in a Western context, but simply not suitable to Malawi, where, according to the divine right of kings in the Maravi (Malawi) kingdom, the singular authority was not only the political leader but also military commander and chief justice. His model for the nation (presumably complementary to the "family") was the "good village" – a harmonious set-up where chief and elders were respected, and in turn respected the rest. The country, in this way, could be a *moral community* – an organic model that required obedience to common values, and retribution for any behaviour that was contrary to them (ibid.).

Blended with this organic model, legitimised by an ideal tradition, was authoritarianism. In fact, Banda was schooled in Western philosophy, and interested in Greek and Roman civilisation (ibid). It was particularly the idea that society was unruly and required order to be imposed upon it that appealed to him. With the blend of traditional paternalism and Machiavellian despotism, Forster characterises his rule as "the organic velvet glove cloth[ing] the Machiavellian iron hand" (ibid.: 277). Defining politics as "the art of the possible", Banda could claim that the Malawian conditions made it impossible to replicate Western styles of leadership; they required firm measures, such as occasional detentions without trial. While this may seem entirely autocratic, it was couched within the myth that people actually *wanted* to have such a dictator. He was therefore simply a "democratic dictator" at the top of the modern (but traditionally-inspired) national hierarchy. This was also justified in terms of pragmatism. The nation required a pragmatic leader for it to progress, for the civil service to be disciplined, and so on (ibid).

Appropriating cultural symbols enabled Banda's cult to permeate every aspect of Malawian society. As the *Nkhoswe number one*, all women were his *mbumba,* who were then expected to dance for him. The MCP co-opted the League of Malawi Women: "Through this process, the political singing and dancing of women activists, once used for liberation, was appropriated by the Banda government into both one of the most salient national symbols and a tool for repression" (Gilman, 2009: 47). Banda often claimed that when he saw "his women" singing and dancing with their heads held high it made him very happy, and he took credit for having improved their lives. Across the entire country and at all levels – even the smallest rural branches of the Women's league – dancers had to practice in case Banda visited the area. At all public functions, women had to wear chitenje cloths wrapped around them with Banda's face imprinted on them (ibid.: 54). Of course, praise for the leader was often not a voluntary exaltation. Women were often forced to dance, even if they were ill, and husbands were arrested if they interfered in "women's affairs". If they could not afford to buy the cloth, the Malawi Youth League could ransack people's houses and withhold possessions (ibid.: 38). In an interview with a Women's League member, Gilman records the interviewee's perceived relation to the MCP: "I should just say that they are like a parent to all of us, and we are supposed to listen to what a parent says" (Ibid: 48).

Banda's control also required cultural suppression, especially of Northern languages and traditions, which he declared subordinate to Chewa language and culture. In 1968, at an MCP Annual Convention, ChiChewa was declared the national language – a symbol of national unity (Mkandawire, 2010: 29). When this had been attempted 30 years earlier by the Nyasaland Governor, it was instantly challenged by Livingstonia Mission, who took the fight to the Colonial Office in London and managed to overturn the decision. Under Banda, however, this sort of stand was impossible. When ChiTumbuka was banned from the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, a Northern Cabinet Minister held a rally in the north, in which he celebrated in broken ChiChewa the "good news" that ChiTumbuka was censored so that the country would speak with one voice (ibid.). The reaction to this cultural suppression was violent. People attacked the Minister as he announced the ban, and later burned the MBC northern radio station in Karonga (Ibid.: 30).

2.3   Criticism and Dissent

According to Vail and White, orality has historically enjoyed a special licence of freedom in southern Africa:

> The oral poetry of south-central Africa, in its different genres and many languages, is linked by a common aesthetic. Central to this aesthetic is the concept of poetic licence, the convention that poetic expression is privileged expression, the performer being free to express opinions that would otherwise be in breach of other social conventions. In Banda's Malawi, it has remained precariously in the culture as a medium of dissent preserving readings of history alternative to the official one (1991: 319).

Songs, poetry and stories were the only way that people could communicate their discontent in Banda's Malawi. Metaphors create impact, and at the same time can be elusive or shrouded enough to evade censorship. Singers can describe "pungently and accurately the terms of their exploitation" (ibid.: 41) – a subtle form of everyday resistance that tends to go unnoticed by authorities. Lwanda (2008) traces interesting examples of song lyrics that subverted traditional songs and exposed common experiences of misery, often in humorous ways that make a cynical mockery of their own misfortune and the government that denies it. One song contained "a minefield of metaphors contradicting Dr Banda's concept of a secure, well fed and disease-free Malawi with images of predatory crocodiles, hillsides roaming with lions and diseased homesteads" (85).

Banda was aware of the power of song when used against him. Through heavy-handed censorship of performances, the possibility for musical resistance by performers was stifled (Gilman, 2009: 69). At the same time, the regime also knew how to use song in its favour. The songs that people sang in praise of Banda were often modified traditional songs. Chirwa (2001) observes several phases in the evolution of praise singing for Banda: from 1958 to '64 they targeted colonialism and emphasised Banda's and others' roles in the liberation struggle; from 1964 to '70 they targeted Banda's enemies, following the Cabinet crisis, so as to tarnish their image and consolidate his power. Thereafter (1970s – 80s) they were broadcast in mass media and propaganda films and demonstrated Banda's power and dominance over the country (4). Banda's cult made him inseparable from government, which meant that he could legitimately claim ownership of the country's resources[9]:

> Everything else, belongs to Kamuzu Banda
> Everything else, belongs to Kamuzu Banda
> All the lakes, for Kamuzu Banda
> All the cattle, for Kamuzu Banda
> All of us, for Kamuzu Banda (Chirwa, 2001: 9)

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[9] Originally in Chichewa

Although their songs were written to legitimise Banda's authority, Kamuzu's *mbumba* were able to display more embodied forms of protest. While they were expected to sacrifice significant amounts of their time and energy to dance and sing the president's praises, they often refused to participate, or with the subtle movements of their bodies, conveyed a distinct lack of enthusiasm (Gilman, 2009).

2.3.1 Dissenting Poets

The literary dissenters hailed mainly from a radical group of writers at the University of Malawi (Mapanje and Kerr, 2002). Banda predictably did not allow an institution that produced independent, critical thinkers who would question and expose his hegemony; his commitment to education for all was mere lip service. There were various methods of controlling publications, particularly the Censorship Board, which could tamper with texts by cutting them or insisting rewrites, and the National Research Council, which had to give official clearance to all research projects. Even access to the National Archives needed permission from the Office of the President. In short, nothing but the most uncontroversial research could take place. History was revised to either smear or totally remove the young nationalists who were expelled in the Cabinet Crisis (Ibid., 80).

Within this environment, academics developed means of evasion and subversion. The Malawi Writers' Group and the Travelling Theatre emerged when the debating society and student newspaper were banned, determined to express their grievances through other subversive means. These informal groups were constantly monitored, but managed to survive the hardest years by avoiding controversial subjects of philosophy and politics and instead using poetry and allegory to express their message subtly. This clearly resonated with audiences, and performances or poetry readings became "almost surrogate demonstrations with unexpectedly enthusiastic audience participation" (Ibid., 83). The writers' group produced high quality poetry in an attempt to sensitise people to the problems of their time, influencing two generations of university students who were deprived of alternative African cultural viewpoints, by using traditional symbols and folktales to counter Banda's own appropriation of them (Lwanda, 1996: 41).

2.4 The 'Life Presidency' comes to an end

Few other sectors of society had any means at their disposal to voice their grievances. Journalists, for example, relied entirely on patronage, and there were no media that provided a space for critical journalism. Another sector that remained quiet and apolitical throughout Banda's reign until the near end was the church. Internationally, Western donors played a large

role in sustaining the Banda's reign, "providing vital political, economic, and military support, while never raising the issue of human rights or democracy until the late 1980s" (Brown, 2008: 196).

But with the end of the Cold War came aid conditionalities and less support. Combined with domestic unrest, the forces of change meant that Banda's grip on power became tenuous. It was the Malawian churches which then began to play a pivotal role in challenging the legitimacy of the one-party system and the oppressive regime. The key moment that ignited the country and inspired the push for change was the Roman Catholic Bishops' issuance of a pastoral letter in March 1992 entitled "Living our Faith", in which they very bluntly stated the painful truth about the dire situation of many people. Ross writes that, "Rarely in modern times has a church document had such an immediately explosive effect on the life of a nation" (1996: 38). Blaming the MCP and therefore introducing, "quite suddenly and dramatically, accountability to Malawian public life" (Ibid, 39), the letter provoked an immediate reaction from the regime, which banned it for being "poisonous and seditious"; hundreds were arrested for having it in their possession (Newell, 1995: 251). The Bishops were consequently threatened in the state-owned newspaper with a "No Mercy" editorial (Ross, 1996: 39), but it was too late. The letter was devastating in its accuracy:

> For too long we have refused to see that, besides the praise worthy achievements of the last decades our country still suffers from many evils... People will not be scandalised 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 (*Living our Faith*, quoted in Newell, 1995: 249).

The all-powerful MCP's legitimacy was finally directly challenged; it was "becoming a laughing-stock. The sense of liberation was palpable" (Ross, 1996: 39). Banda's moral and spiritual authority within the Church had derived in part from his ordination in Edinburgh, 1941, into the Church of Scotland, whence the influential Malawian missionaries had come. The Lenten letter, however, subverted Banda's spiritual authority (Newell, 1995: 250). For the first time in 28 years, he felt pressurised to engage with civil society, and invited the Presbyterian Church leaders to meet with ministers to discuss political issues. While the government dithered on this commitment, the Church organised a huge commission of representatives from many Churches and the Muslim Society, Malawi Law society, and Chamber of Commerce. This *Public Affairs Committee* (whose public discourse is one of the focuses of this study) was the first non-party organisation to ever influence national politics in Malawi (Ross, 1996: 42).

Many sectors of the nation felt mobilised. University students marched in support of the bishops, and the Chancellor College campus in Zomba was consequently closed for the first time in its history, inciting students from Blantyre and Lilongwe to take to the streets as well (Dulani, 2009: 145). These natural centres of subversion had been suppressed for so long, and the eruption of so much at the same time was clearly unmanageable by a weakening regime in the context of global shifts of power and new aid conditionalities imposed by donors. While the MCP's legitimacy was being questioned, and new pressure groups (later to become political parties) came into the open, there was no cataclysmic collapse of the regime. It still continued with pomp and ceremony throughout the transition period (van Donge, 1995). Yet it was clear that Banda's hegemony and symbolic power were crumbling. For example, "Some of the praise-titles that had been used to express awe and admiration of Banda as a brave warrior such as Mkango [Lion] were now seen as having aided and justified Banda's preying on innocent and vulnerable Malawians whom he either threw into detention without trial or killed" (Chirambo, 2009: 79). By 1994, Banda was defeated in the multiparty elections, heralding the new democratic era.

3   Malawi: A Democracy

BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT

Born to Malawians, after a long struggle, a long awaited baby. Lovingly named
Freedom Change Hope, on June 14 1993

OBITUARY

Malawi Congress Party
(nee Nyasaland African Congress)
Born 1944
Changed name 30.9.59
Died 14/6/93
Laid to rest 16/6/93

Died after a long illness and was cremated in polling station waste receptacles
country-wide. Leaves children named Ballion, John, Louis, Robson, Hilda,
Tijepani and others too numerous to name. We thank the various active religious
groups, the Catholic Bishops, the international community, PAC, Aford, UDF,
MDP's Channel Africa crew, observers, monitors, the independent press,
'*amkhwere*', '*anyani*', '*bongololos*', '*ansabwe*', '*amatekenya*', 'crooks',
'dissidents', 'confusionists', '*wabodza*', and indeed all the people of Malawi.
R I P

Figure 1: **Satirical announcement in the *Malawi Monitor,* 18 June, 1993 (reproduced in Chimombo, 1998: 219)**

3.1   Zinthu zasintha! [10]

"Things have changed!" The national referendum took place on the 14th of June 1993, with 67%

voting in favour of a multiparty system, which promptly led to the mushrooming of new political

parties. An interim constitution was drafted in a process dominated by the political parties, rather

than constitutional experts or civic organisations (Brown, 2008: 197). Election campaigns made

little mention of the constitution, as they were more preoccupied with demonising the MCP and

its past, and getting their names out, than strategizing for the future. The most of the rural

majority were therefore neither conscious of, nor involved in, the important democratic

constitutional amendment process after the elections, and even years after, many had little idea of

what a constitution even was (Ibid.).   Instead of a full implementation of the Westminster

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[10] UDF campaign slogan

system, a system was established whereby a president is elected separately and his/her party might not command a majority in parliament[11] (Ibid, 198.).

The General Elections took place on 17 May 1994. For the first time in independence history, Malawians could vote for their chosen presidential and parliamentary candidates. Most of the voting was heavily region-based (UDF for the south, MCP for the centre, AFORD for the north). Winning 47% of the votes (87% of which came from the Southern region), Bakili Muluzi became the first president to succeed the Life President (Dzimbiri, 1998: 91,92). He stirred up the crowds by repeating UDF's key message: *Zinthu zathani?* (What have things done?), to which the enthusiastic response was, *Zasintha!* ("They have changed!"). But perspectives on what was changing differed significantly. The country was in a situation that one commentator described as "beyond authoritarian rule and towards an uncertain something else" (vonDoepp, 1998: 103[12]). The concept of "*matipati*" was appealing, yet somewhat mysterious to many; it has since become associated with not just political, but unwanted rapid cultural changes as well, such as youths disrespecting the elderly (Ribohn, 2002). These cultural changes cannot necessarily be encapsulated in the term 'democratisation', for they do not represent a rapid unidirectional evolution towards the sort of non-personalised political culture that modernisation theories propose. But there was a general sense of breaking with the past, evidenced in the wary tone of Malawian historian Kings Phiri's warning – some would say prophecy – that unknown problems could arise from rapid cultural change:

> Those symbols, traditions, and values which reflect our own unique genius as a people, at whatever level, can only be ignored or discarded at what will be a terrible cost in the long run. The risks are enormous in the kind of open or democratic society we are in the process of building in Malawi. Our current dispensation is one in which old assumptions and sources of knowledge are being ruthlessly challenged… (1998: 165).

Democratic Malawi is politically freer, but most Malawians have become frustrated and disillusioned with the "rivalry, factionalism, shifting allegiances, changing coalitions, and complete U-turns by party leaders" (Bauer and Taylor, 2005: 34, in Gilman, 2009: 175). Elections have tended to be fought as a winner-takes-all contest for access to state resources and the patronage opportunities this provides. Devoid of strong ideological standpoints and articulated programmes for development, party campaign strategies since the first elections have tended to focus primarily on candidates' moral character, far-fetched development promises, and the vilification of opponents. Behind all the rhetoric, blatant selling out has also occurred. An early

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[11] This hybrid parliamentary-presidential system has led to frequent floor-crossing by MPs who are seduced by the patronage or other perks of being in the ruling party. Such acts of "crosstitution" continue to be condemned in the newspapers today, seemingly in vain.

[12] He borrows the phrase from O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, n.p

example was the astounding "flipflopping" of the respected politician, Gwanda Chakuamba, who'd been on the political scene since the 1960s. Having fallen foul of the MCP regime, he had been given a 22-year sentence of hard labour, of which he'd served 12 by the time of his release (with all political prisoners) in 1993. In prison he had joined the UDF, and in a moving scene on his release, he condemned the MCP for killing and torturing so many poor souls. Astonishingly, just a few months later, Chakuamba joined the MCP (who were desperate for a foothold in the South) and soon became the party's vice President and Minister of Home Affairs. Allegedly bought at a price of 10 million kwacha, he began to proclaim his love for Kamuzu Banda, to campaign vigorously for the MCP, and to denounce UDF members for having masterminded his arrest (Dzimbiri, 1998: 94-96). Towards the end of Muluzi's presidency, Englund warned that:

> As long as the political leadership changes its allegiances without transparent reasons, Malawi's political pluralism is a democracy in doubt, a puzzling combination of expedience and idealism, a democracy of chameleons (2002: 17).

In 2004 Bingu wa Mutharika, hand-picked by Bakili Muluzi, was elected President on a UDF ticket. Since Muluzi had become the de facto owner of the party, it was clear to the electorate who would be pulling the strings. But half a year after election, Mutharika defected from the party and formed the Democratic Progressive Party. He won a landslide victory in 2009, having snubbed the IMF with his implementation of the Farm Input Subsidy Programme that massively boosted rural agriculture and reduced food insecurity. [13] He was hailed in the New York Times for "ending famine simply by ignoring experts" (Dugger, 2007).

On April 5, 2012, in the middle of his increasingly autocratic, oppressive, and economically disastrous second term, Mutharika died of a heart attack, and his Vice President, Joyce Banda (whom he had expelled from the DPP after they fell out in 2010), ascended to the presidency. She is still in office at the time of writing, as the parties gear up for an election in 2014 – the first test of Banda's popularity at the polls – where some experts predict she will "pay dearly" for failure to articulate a coherent vision for the future. A decade on from Englund's warning, 'chameleon politics' still seems to be prevalent, as MPs appear to shamelessly change their colours as it suits them. The backstabbing and opportunism displayed by political elites throughout the democratic era has done little to dispel the common belief that politicians put self-interest before public service; and visionary leadership is perceived to be in short supply.

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[13] See Chinsinga (2013) for interrogation of the myth that FISP was an unqualified success.

3.2 Zinthu zasintha, malamulo sanasinthe!
(Things have changed, but the rules remain the same…[14])

The "rules" of postcolonial politics in Malawi had become well established by the end of the thirty years under one party and one father. When the 1994 elections introduced a system of party competition and a liberal constitution, an entirely new model of the state was also conceived. This idealised system required a new political culture in congruence with legal-rational bureaucratisation and a universal dispensation, free from particularistic interests. This required placing strong legal constraints on all abuses of office (such as the seeking of favours (rents), or channelling resources into unofficial places). In short, a significant historical break from the system of patronage that was so central to the distribution of resources in Banda's regime was proposed; the *personalisation of politics* was to have no place in a multiparty democracy. But for numerous reasons these misguided expectations have led to widespread disappointment. Some prophetic commentators at the time of transition foresaw the continuity of the prevailing political culture from the Banda era (see Mhone, 1992; Kaspin, 1995; Kaunda, 1995).

I have chosen to present Malawi's multiparty politics in the spirit of local discourses and experiences. The aim, after all, is not to make a normative assessment of the nation's political progress, but to understand it from the perspective of engaged Malawian citizens. Nevertheless, however tiresomely predictable the employment of negative '-isms' – *opportunism, neopatrimonialism, nepotism, regionalism, clientelism, presidentialis* – may be, they signify indispensable social scientific concepts, and in any case are frequently invoked in the actual discourses under study. But to relate the conceptual analysis to local experience, the text is embellished with citations from newspapers, civil society, social media and interviews. If it seems there is a heavy emphasis on *problems* and *deficiencies*, this is only to capture the pervasive sense of disillusionment amongst the Malawian urban public.

It is too far-fetched to claim, at least in the case of Malawi, that the state has become a mere "facade" behind which everything is based on personal relationships – a picture often crudely painted of the African postcolonial state. But it is not unwarranted to point out that high levels of corruption and patronage have characterised Malawi's democracy so far; a conspicuous absence of ideology has made party politics a region- and personality- focussed activity (though this is changing); democratic institutions have been weakly independent (except for, at times, the judiciary); significant elements of Kamuzu Banda's approach to maintaining legitimacy and authority, such as the appropriation of praise titles and a paternalistic attitude towards the electorate, have prevailed; the populace have become exceedingly disillusioned with such developments, as economic hardships and the notion of Malawi's failure in the midst of a regional boom (Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia) circulate in the public sphere.

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[14] (Song lyrics by Saleta Phiri (in Lwanda, 2004: 51)).

3.2.1 Regionalism

Kamuzu Banda promoted the Chewa ethnic group and favoured his home district in the central region; the better-educated Northerners were treated disparagingly, and the south was ignored. This divided the country into three and reified the regions, despite ethnic diversity within all of them (Kaspin, 1995). Regional variation was glaring in the referendum of 1993: four fifths of Northerners and Southerners voted for a multiparty system, against only one third from the central region (Brown, 2008: 210). Nevertheless, Banda's 40 years abroad had given him a sort of cosmopolitan identity that transcended ethnicity, while Bakili Muluzi's strong Southern (Yao) and Muslim identities absolutely precluded him from establishing legitimacy across the whole nation (Englund, 2001: 95). It provoked regional, religious and ethnic assertions of identity from other candidates, and thereby reinforced the trend of regionalism, affecting voting patterns in all of the elections until 2009. The numbers[15] show this clearly: in the 1994, 1999, and 2004 elections, more than 70% of northerners supported AFORD, which received completely insignificant support in other regions. Similarly, central voters consistently voted for the MCP leadership in all three elections. The south belonged almost exclusively to the UDF, which won 78% and 79% of presidential votes in 1994 and 1999 respectively. Parliamentary voting in all of these elections was even more regional e.g. the MCP won all 56 seats in the centre, and zero in the north and south (Hussein, 2009: 356). Afrobarometer[16] measurements of peoples' satisfaction with Muluzi's performance showed huge regional variations: he was highly unpopular in the north and extremely popular in the south .

Things changed a bit for the UDF in 2004, when Mutharika only got 53% in the south, but that was because of new heavyweights with strong southern credentials campaigning there for other parties (Ferree and Horowitz, 2011: 538). What is interesting about the 2009 elections, is that Bingu wa Mutharika, who had split from the UDF during his first term and formed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was voted in for a second term with a landslide that drew votes from all regions. *Afrobarometer* readings show that Mutharika's performance was rated positively by 83%, 91%, and 81% of the north, centre and south respectively (ibid., 551), which shows a massive change from the regional divisions of Muluzi's reign.

The 2009 election results drew interesting comments about the progress of Malawi's democratic development from columnists in the press:

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[15] Taken from Ferree and Horowitz, 2011
[16] Afrobarometer Rounds 2-4 (2003, 2005, 2008)

> The DPP… has caused arguably the biggest shock result in our youthful democracy and election history… The people's overwhelming endorsement of this party is unprecedented. What this election has done is to refresh our meaning of what democracy is all about.[17]

> So, as Bingu said in his inaugural speech, the next 5 years will be exciting as Malawians will experience a seismic change in the way we do our politics. Gone will be the era when people voted according to tribes, regions or party colours. We are slowly – but surely – moving away from personality-based to issue-based politics.[18]

> Malawians have become more knowledgeable of late. They understand democracy more now than they did in 1999 and 2004 general elections.[19]

> "The fall of these political heavyweights means people are no longer voting according to regionalism, status, or according to the big man/party founder political syndrome[20]

Apart from a general perception that Mutharika was much less discriminatory towards the North and Centre than his predecessor[21], his rehabilitation of Kamuzu Banda's reputation endeared him to the Central region voters; his reaching out to the North due to vilification by the UDF in the south; his efforts to tackle rampant corruption, and most importantly his IMF-snubbing agricultural development scheme that saw crop yields boom, all helped towards his landslide victory (Ferree and Horowitz, 2010: 551-553). Also of particular importance, was the fact that the opposition appeared to show no interest in any issues beyond that of opposing, and if possible, bringing down Mutharika's government by whatever means – impeachment, blocking the budget, rejecting Bills and presidential appointments, and attempting to remove the president and establish a National Governing Council in his place (Hussein, 2009). The dirty politics of the opposition may have caused many to *protest vote* for the DPP, reflecting a sense of frustration with politics as usual.

Joyce Banda has yet to stand as a presidential candidate in elections, and so her regional support base is yet to be fully determined; though it would be if anything stronger in the South. But she has a Northerner Vice President, and it is likely that the next elections, just as those in 2009, will reveal that the regional factor in voting behaviour has diminished.

3.2.2 Powers of the President

The new constitution was designed to restrict the powers of the presidency following the one-party era, but in the configuration of Executive, Legislature and Judiciary, the first has remained "excessively strong" (Brown, 2008: 198), and indeed, by dint of its own power, has become

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[17] Speaking of the unprecedented unpresidented, *Sunday Times*, May 24, 2009

[18] End of an era, *Sunday Times*, May 24, 2009

[19] He who the cap fits, let him wear it, *Sunday Times*, May 24, 2009

[20] Rafik Hajat, *Sunday Times*, May 24, 2009

[21] Afrobarometer Rounds 2-4 (2003, 2005, 2008)

strengthened since 1994 (Cammack, 2011). With the "culture of legality and legalism" having been trampled under Kamuzu Banda's regime (Ng'ong'ola, 1996: 86), it has been no easy task for institutions to keep the executive in line. The presidency is much stronger than parliament, and the latter has no say in ministerial appointments (Brown, 2008). What has been key to the strengthening of the presidency is excessive power over parliament, especially by appointing cabinet ministers from the ranks of MPs (even though this is unconstitutional) (Cammack, 2012: 383). Constitutional changes over the democratic era have failed to limit the powers of the president. Local level officials are directly answerable to the central authority (this will change with tripartite elections in 2014); and at the national level, presidents notably have the power to appoint the Electoral Commission and media regulatory board. Within their parties, they effectively control funds, offices and parliamentary candidates (Brown, 2008; Cammack, 2012). The People's Party Convention of 2012 was a mildly successful attempt to introduce intra-party democracy.

The three democratic presidents have exercised their authority in different ways. Bakili Muluzi, bound in patron-client relationships with ministers, turned a blind eye to excessive corruption, while he himself often refused to be subject to the law. Whenever he remained obstinate on certain issues, it was difficult for opposition parties to force a compromise, and they soon discovered that boycotting parliament was the only effective means of doing so. This led to a 9-month paralysis in 1996 over the issue of floor-crossing, until the judiciary had to make a ruling to resolve the issue, and the Public Affairs Committee had to mediate between the parties (Brown, 2008: 199-201). Muluzi's worst attempt at abusing power to stay in office was the Open Terms Bill first tabled in July 2002, to amend the constitution's section limiting a president to two terms. This attempted amendment was based on the specious argument that "the provisions of section 83(3) are considered to infringe upon the people's power to elect into office of President the person of their choice and renew his mandate for as many times as they may wish him or her to serve them" (Chinsinga, 2003: 2).[22]

In terms of wielding his presidential powers in a repressive manner, Mutharika's track record has been the worst. In his first term he displayed similar tendencies to Muluzi, by ignoring legal restrictions. With only a parliamentary minority on his side, and struggling against an opposition determined to impeach him and enforce Section 65 of the constitution (declaring vacant the seats of all the MPs who crossed the floor after the elections to his Democratic Progressive Party), Mutharika resorted to proroguing parliament whenever this inconvenient constitutional provision came up (Chirambo, 2009: 80). After a popular and perhaps visionary first term (depending on who you believe), Mutharika tried in his second term, with a much less competent finance minister, to eliminate aid dependency and introduce a zero-deficit budget. But he ended up sending the economy into a tailspin with his fixing of the exchange rate and other

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[22] See chapter 3 on Muluzi's third term bid.

detrimental policies (Cammack, 2011, 2012). His war with university academics and civil society in 2011 led to some serious human rights abuses, attacks on civil society and attempts to curtail free speech, provoking Paul Zeleza to portray him as an unfortunate combination of "President Banda's authoritarianism without the competence of his government and President Muluzi's corruption without his government's tolerance for democracy"[23]. The following are among the repressive laws that were introduced in Bingu's second term (from Cammack, 2012: 377):

- Giving the minister of information the right to ban media publications in the public interest
- Allowing police to search properties without a warrant
- A Local Courts Act that "raised fears of a return of Banda's repressive 'traditional courts'".
- Changing the national flag at enormous expense without public consultation.

After the British High Commissioner's comments in April 2011 that Bingu was becoming "ever more autocratic and intolerant of criticism"[24] leaked to *the Nation* newspaper, the Commissioner was ordered to leave the country within a week. Malawi consequently lost massive donor support. As Bingu's erratic behaviour worsened – he "vacillated from trying to reason with Malawians (e.g. to be patient), to criticising them (calling them 'chickens' for instance), and sometimes threatening them ('burning out' civil activists)" (Cammack, 2012a: 382) – the term "executive arrogance"[25] began to circulate through the media and public sphere, and it continues to be used (esp. in newspaper commentaries) to chide any leaders displaying a paternalistic attitude.

President Joyce Banda immediately repealed many of the repressive laws introduced by Mutharika. She has yet to wield excessive power in the manner of her predecessors, but is, in any case, given very little leeway by a watchful public to transgress her prescribed powers. Any appointments that are unconstitutional, or actions that appear to personalise what should be her strictly public office, receive relentless condemnation. The PAC sent a communiqué to the media and State House in November, 2012, in which it was stated that:

…although as a country we claim to be in a multiparty dispensation of political governance, our style of doing politics remains trapped in the one-party era. This has led to formal rules being ignored and personal agendas taking centre stage.[26]

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[23] Malawi on the Brink: the July 20 Movement, *Face of Malawi,* July 22, 2012,
http://www.faceofmalawi.com/2011/07/the-july-20-movement-malawi-demonstration/
[24] Malawi threatens to expel British High Commissioner, *Guardian*, April 19, 2011
[25] Academic and activist Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula claims to have coined the term (author interview, 11 Oct. 2012).
[26] PAC second all-inclusive stakeholders conference, Oct 30-31, 2012 communiqué

3.2.3   Weak institutions

Institutions in Malawi's democratic dispensation have often failed to fulfil their functions. The constitution, as well as new democratic institutions such as the Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Electoral Commission, have been ignored, altered, or infiltrated by politicians. For example, although the High Court has ruled that MPs cannot also be ministers because the constitution prohibits an individual from holding two public offices, this ruling has always been ignored (Brown, 2008: 198). Article 88 of the Constitution commits presidents to declaring their assets within three months of their appointment (ibid, 199), but to this day none have done so. Nevertheless, avidly fulfilling its watchdog role, the media has demanded repeatedly throughout the democratic era that presidents should declare their assets.

The most flouted section of the constitution is Section 65; it deals with MPs crossing the floor, stating that, "The Speaker shall declare vacant the seat of any member of the National Assembly" who joins another political party between elections (Malawi Constitution). Despite this, such a practice appears to have been utterly uncontrollable. Indeed, the DPP was composed entirely of defectors from the UDF, MCP and AFORD in 2005. Similarly, when Joyce Banda unexpectedly came to office at the time of the DPP's rapid demise in April 2012, a wave of MPs from various parties crossed to her People's Party. The *Weekend Nation* ran a front-page article about the fact that 80 DPP MPs defected to the Peoples' Party, with the editor complaining that: "The mass exodus of former ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) legislators to the People's Party following the recent change of government is testimony that many politicians in the country have no respect for this piece of legislation [Section 65]."[27] The Public Affairs Committee's also observed that:

> …Delegates noted that there has been a serious lack of political will to invoke section 65 in the eighteen years of the multi-party dispensation of political governance. This has fueled a culture of crossing the floor each time leadership has changed, thereby perpetuating irresponsibility among our Members of Parliament.[28]

The Section has only been successfully applied three times in the past 19 years of its existence, despite numerous instances of floor crossing (Kanyongolo, PAC conference, Oct 30-31, 2012). Consequently, this particular article of the constitution is very commonly known by ordinary members of the public, who frequently talk about "section 65" being a typical example of politicians' disregard for rules. With the dominance of the ruling party over parliament, and the president over MPs, parliament does not constitute a "platform for national dialogue" (Chinsinga, 2010: 127).

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[27] DPP warns MPs of section 65, *Weekend Nation* April 28, 2012
[28] Communique of the Public Affairs Committee second all-inclusive stakeholders conference, Blantyre, 30-31 October, 2012

3.2.4   Transnational influences on Democratic Culture

It sometimes pays to turn the gaze from the usual suspected "hijackers of democracy" – political elites – to the less obvious role of NGOs in pacifying and depoliticising young adults (Englund, 2006). These NGOs represent an increasingly transnational influence on Malawi's political culture in the democratic era, which can both empower and disempower people. For example, many NGOs employ youth to teach "civic education" and human rights to rural Malawians, but by forcing these youth to remain apolitical in the name of the NGO, and to depoliticise the whole issue of human rights, they tend to impose Western norms in subtly condescending ways, without any consideration of local variants (often due to ignorance of local languages); nor do they notice the numerous local ways to assert socio-economic rights (see Englund, 2011).

Divala (2007) argues that Malawi's programmes of civic education and democracy promotion mostly utilise materials that contain elitist conceptions of representative democracy, in which citizen participation is limited to the placement of certain people in power during elections. This competition for votes – providing the winners with the power to make political decisions – is all that constitutes "representation." Democracy, under this conception, is achieved simply through universal suffrage, and associated with electoral procedures and political leadership. This means that people are considered as "objects of legislation or as passive subjects to be ruled" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2005:3 in Divala, 2007: 40). Democracy is produced by politicians, so that a leader-driven conception of development prevails, in which "good leaders promote the development of their area whereas bad leaders bring problems that may retard development" (Cairns & Dambula, 1996:14, in Divala, 2007: 37). This does not deviate much from the conditioning of rural subjects under colonialism and the one-party era. It is, according to Divala, the dominant understanding in Malawi, resulting in apathy and lack of interest. Missing are the substantive aspects of deliberative democracy, where citizens' interests in public affairs are stimulated by active engagement in the public sphere, so that public virtue can be cultivated. Divila's (2007) apply mostly to rural Malawi. On the contrary, as this thesis shows, the very active engagement of some citizens in the urban public sphere is a protest against the tired and hollow rhetoric of 'development'.

4   Interpretations of Political Culture and the State in Malawi

'Political culture' is indeed a concept that is "too easily bandied about in different guises" (Silbey 1999: 8), rarely defined yet frequently invoked. Since political scientists, who have used the

concept for 50 years, have "engaged in a virtually continuous assessment, re-evaluation, and criticism of the political culture concept" (Formisano, 2001: 394), it remains elusive, and may be popular simply because it is an indeterminate, intuitive umbrella concept. For the purposes at hand, it is not necessary to grapple with the concept in the abstract, suffice to make it clear, that the focus here is less on the actual mechanisms of power and machinations of political power-holders in Malawi, than on the meanings and ideals (or rather contests over meanings and ideals) with which members of the public (non-state actors) conceive and assess the performances of their political leaders. But in order to make sense of the discursive process by which such meanings and ideals of legitimate political leadership are created, various aspects of the political cultural context must be explicated, since the behaviour and rhetoric of political actors are structured, naturally, by a culture and a history, that have formed patterns and established practices, and even certain "stylistics" and "aesthetics" (see Mbembe, 1992). The logic and symbolism of these patterns of behaviour are obviously not a distinct elite code; their meanings are shared with large sections of the population with whom Malawi's leaders engage.

Some sectors of society, however, may reject or seek to transform these prevalent behavioural patterns and symbolic codes. This rejection makes it difficult to speak of "a" universal national political culture. Furthermore, it is clear that while these critical social groups understand the dominant codes of behaviour and political language (which a foreigner might not), they deliberately take an *oppositional stance* in their interpretations thereof – a process that will be analysed in this study, since it is part of a strategy by which publics collectively seek to transform culture and thereby behaviour of political elites. Bifurcating the process is the urban-rural gap, which forces political representatives to strategically adopt different registers of behaviour in different settings. The entrenched system of resource distribution (i.e. the state as the source of most wealth), however, no doubt hinders the transformative power of discourse.

This chapter proceeds with an elucidation of prevailing patterns of political behaviour and the cultural logic that makes it rational. It must be remembered that rationality is to some extent culturally relative. As Chabal (2009) points out, the Western political science definition of rationality in terms of "maximisation of individual preferences" does not necessarily correspond with the morality of reciprocity that applies to the "communal" individual, for example. The supposedly 'universal' criteria of rationality would have to see a significant proportion of commonplace African behaviour as inherently irrational, which is of course problematic. This chapter seeks to bring meaning and rationality to prevailing patterns of (politically-related) behaviour in Malawi, to provide an overview of the dominant trends to which critical public discourse is a reaction.

4.1   Neopatrimonial Politics and the Personalisation of Public Office

There is seemingly no end to the studies on 'democratisation' in Africa, yet across the varied spectrum of opinions, there remains a general consensus on one thing: it has proven a complicated and difficult process. The colonial state largely excluded indigenous majorities from enjoying citizenship. Black Africans had only experienced a coercive regime that ruled them indirectly through "traditional" patrimonial authorities. Despite a decade or so at the end, of extending the legal-rational colonial state to directly include Africans, "the period was too short and the resources too small for there to have been a major and lasting move to an 'autonomous' legal-rational bureaucratic culture" (Erdmann and Engel, 2006: 20).   Similarly, postcolonial one-party states never became free from personalised influences. At the risk of over-generalising, it is fair to say that after independence informal relationships took over the bureaucracy in all authoritarian regimes, and thus, "the state in Africa has always been a hybrid one, a mixture of patrimonial and legal-rational domination" (Ibid.).

As elsewhere in Africa, the concept of 'neopatrimonialism' has been widely applied to Malawi's political culture (notably Cammack and Kelsall, 2011; see also Englund, 2006; Lwanda, 2006; Brown, 2008; Hussein, 2009). It succinctly captures the nature of authority, power, legitimacy and the distribution of resources, and is in that sense a useful general model, whatever its shortcomings with respect to its elision of contextual nuances and changing realities. It explains "hybridity" in terms of different power logics, namely, the fusion of *patrimonial* authority – where a single "big man" rules "by dint of personal prestige and power" over his people, who are essentially extensions of his household (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997: 61) – with legal-rational authority, where elected political representatives exercise their duties of public office within the confines of codified laws and without the influence of personal interests. The patrimonial character of modern African rulers sees them distributing favours and benefits to loyal followers in a way that makes the latter more like clients than citizens (Ibid.), which undermines the legal-rational bureaucracy. It is this pattern of behaviour that is signified by the neo-Weberian term *neopatrimonialism*. Such behaviour is seen by portions of the Malawian public to undermine the proper function of the state.

From the very beginning of his rule, Kamuzu Banda installed himself at the pinnacle of the authoritarian system inherited from colonial Nyasaland, and therefore entrenched his neopatrimonial regime with himself as the ultimate patron. In 1972 (having the previous year been appointed Life President), he declared:

> Nothing is not my business in this country: everything is my business, everything. The state of education, the state of our economy, the state of our agriculture, the state of our transport, everything is my business (*African Contemporary Record*, 1973-74: B210, in Jackson and Rosberg, 1982: 165).

Relatively disconnected from the peasant majority, the educated middle class Africans (previously low-level employees of the colonial civil service) who became MCP officials put the advancement of their own interests before any agenda of radical democratisation that would allow the rural masses to participate (Brown, 2008: 193). Instead, the MCP acquired agricultural produce from the masses, which it converted to cash, a practice that increasingly became coercive. Substantial rural money was thereby diverted to party patronage, which damaged the formal economy. Businesses were also forced to enter the informal sector, as they competed not just economically but also politically, relying on patronage. Having political connections was a precondition for acquiring wealth. In these ways, "the political-economic legacy of colonialism [was] inherited, exploited and perpetuated by the African elite" (Lwanda, 2006: 542).

The political culture of patronage continued in full force in the democratic era, as did many of the elites who had cut their teeth in Banda's time. In fact, the careers of all the major political players in the multiparty dispensation had been heavily shaped by Banda (van Donge, 1995: 257). Bakili Muluzi, for example, who once ranked second in the MCP hierarchy after the *Ngwazi* himself, stated in 1977, "I was nothing before I came to Parliament, but His Excellency the Life President made me what I am" (Ibid). The Chichewa term *achikulire* refers to "big men", or neopatrimonial patrons. These men have direct informal access to state resources, which they can often channel, without any accountability, into their various personal projects. This system has also helped to entrench the "old guard" who remain at the top of Malawi's gerontocratic society. The many open doors and access to contracts that are available to those in the politics business allows for personal businesses to become lucrative side-projects. Thus Muluzi built up a huge business empire simply because of his political power and access to resources and clients. As Malawian political science professor Blessings Chinsinga put it: "Our politicians are essentially part-time politicians, and primarily businessmen" (author interview, Oct. 2012). This is not an uncommon belief amongst members of the public. However, the normality of such behaviour derives from its being seen by many as not necessarily "wrong, unethical, or a misuse of people's money" (cf. Ekeh, 1975), and therefore the "veritable explosion of corruption" that occurred after the transition overwhelmed the Anti-Corruption Bureau (Brown, 2008: 204).

Bakili Muluzi's government became notorious for its patronage activity: offering lucrative contracts to friends or relatives, enticing opposition members with cash, appointing loyalists to high positions in government, etc. For example, US$1.8 million from the UDF regime's Ministry of Education was channelled to ghost contractors, yet the Minister of Education, fortunate to be protected by the president, avoided prosecution (Hussein, 2009: 359). With great stamina and oratory skills, Muluzi would tour the country with a stash of money obtained from unknown sources, which his minions would distribute at the various places and institutions that he visited. According to a typical eye-witness account, a "brown envelope with

K50 000 for school desks [was] taken from a landcruiser where piles of such envelopes were stored, and K300 000 for church cloth" (Morrow, 2006: 154). Muluzi also spread the notion that "the MCP rule was lacking in *umunthu*", making them a "brutal party" and a "party of doom" (Kayambazinthu and Moyo 2002: 94) because it forced people to give gifts. The democratic leaders, on the contrary, were good because they reversed the MCP's forced gifts legacy, and instead established a culture of handouts (Tambulasi and Kayuni, 2005: 149).

Despite Kamuzu Banda's nepotistic and patrimonial regime, corruption during his reign was held somewhat in check by the fact that no one wanted to cross his interests. It was not quite as economically devastating as Muluzi's form of corruption. In fact, neopatrimonialism may not always be inimical to economic growth; it may even support strong economic performance (see Cammack and Kelsal, 2011). In the period 1965-1979 Malawi was governed in a developmental neopatrimonial manner by Banda, and so despite its geography (small and landlocked) and dearth of natural resources, it performed above the sub-Saharan average in economic growth. Economic rent-seeking (i.e. the benefits sought by people through the political arena, such as cheap government contracts via personal connections) was controlled by Kamuzu Banda, who stood firmly at the apex of the state; it was therefore "centralised, long-horizon rent management" (ibid., 88), guided by a long-term vision for expanding the country's income.

Banda's concentrated power, combined with his solid work ethic and intelligence, allowed him to control every single sector of policy-making, and to use economic rents to create modern infrastructure and an African business class. All sorts of infrastructure – roads, railways and the university – were created under him. With this system of "state monopoly capitalism" (Harrigan, 2001: 37 in ibid., 89), the state and business were fused into one, and effectively belonged to Banda himself. The civil service had also been technocratic, disciplined (through fear) and efficient, but between 1980-1994, the economy ran into problems, Banda grew old, and political successors stepped in, thus leading to the politicisation of the civil service. Additionally, the system for channelling rents was disrupted by IMF structural readjustment programmes (ibid., 91).

Because Muluzi did not have the powers of oppression and full control of the state, rents management became decentralised. In a desperate attempt to hold power, Muluzi relied on political pay-offs and enriched himself, which meant the end of "developmental neopatrimonialism" with its long-horizon vision, and heralded destructive neopatrimonialism, with rents distributed to non-productive activities. The cabinet was increased to include more cronies, unqualified supporters were appointed to the boards of state companies, and government coffers were drained by senior party members' personal use. Corruption was rampant, and illicit money was used to fund political careers, coercive youth wings, patronage, etc., at the expense of many public sectors such as education (ibid.: 91). Mutharika's first term was more in line with Banda's earlier developmental state. He had a tighter grip over the civil

service and dealt with corruption. Unfortunately, populist economic policies in his second term changed that.

To sum up, it was the "technocratic integrity and vertical discipline" in Banda's regime and Mutharika's first term that was most conducive to growth. Muluzi's regime, on the other hand, was characterized by anti-developmental, opportunistic behaviour, because of weak leadership and a system where clientelism rather than merit determined the quality of officials (ibid, 95). Joyce Banda's government has shown improvement in some ways, but has not displayed a clean break from this neopatrimonial culture.

Politicians have earned good money and a terrible reputation (see chapter 3), but what about the cultural understandings about distribution of state resources to constituencies? Examined at a deeper level, common attitudes towards clientelism may be rooted in people's sense of "being" and "belonging" (Chabal, 2009). Seeing people as 'individuals' and individuals as the sole building blocks of society may be a fallacy in the African context. The anthropology of personhood in Africa has provided a better understanding of how a person's self-identity is conceived in terms of the "multiple and multifaceted relations which link [them] with others within ever-expanding and overlapping concentric spheres of identity" (Chabal, 2009: 43). With this relational sense of identity, political behaviour may be structured by the notion that, "one is a person, one belongs, one is part of a community, in so far as one is integrated in a complex system of authority, deference and participation..." (Ibid.: 48) Thereupon lies the basis of the strong reciprocal ties between patrons and communities. Such ties are often established through the provision of 'development' as a gift:

> Giving is not merely instrumental but also constitutive of the very identity of the individual-within-the-group. The purpose of the gift is not just to act as a social hedge against future fortune; it is also a core component of self-identification and of the assessment of the morality of the 'others' (ibid.: 73).

In the case of Malawi, Englund observes that, "Muluzi's regime established a form of patronage in which development (*chitukuko*) often took the form of handouts, personalised as gifts from the compassionate president and made conditional on votes for the UDF" (2006: 16). The expectations of constituencies can even overwhelm politicians, as Gilman (2009: 198-9) learnt from a Parliamentarian who complained that local communities thought she had to deliver all kinds of minor services, such as personally helping to transport people to hospital; thus, "they think if you are a member of Parliament, it's the same as the husband in a house" (June 21, 2004, in ibid.).

Informal activity in public office occurs throughout all levels of government. IMF reforms have resulted in civil servants struggling to make a living since the 1990s, and side-businesses have emerged as the only measure for them to complement their low incomes. While they still depend on their regular salary, they resort more often to *katangale* – a term that traditionally referred to a respectable informal system of bartering between rural subsistence families to sustain their livelihoods, now applied to workplace behaviour that is in the moral grey area with its connotations of "illegal or dubious deals…corruption, embezzlement, theft, fraud and unauthorised use of state resources" (Anders, 2002: 54).

These insights into patterns of behaviour are not intended to characterise 'essential' African attributes. They help to explain *rational behaviour* in terms of notions of individuality and morality that go beyond Western assumptions, especially rational choice theories that are based on a conception of atomistic identity and maximisation of self-interest. It is also too simplistic to lump all types of non-legal-rational (informal) activity together, or to characterise all such behaviour as "primordial" (see Ekeh, 1975). As Anders (2009: 5) argues, there are "manifold ways in which state and society, public office and private life, are actually intertwined", which suggests a "patchwork of moralities", with many people actually trying to evade their kinship obligations, for example. There is not only a lack of uniformity, but also cultural changes are taking place in the democratic era with respect to social relations and obligations (ibid.). Individuals exhibit agency and unpredictability in their negotiation of social obligations to the "primordial public". Such changes will not be mechanically linked to the development of a capitalist economy; the "politics of being and belonging" will no doubt change more slowly and unpredictably than market forces and superficial state system alterations (Chabal, 2009). What is interesting in this study is the ways in which such prevalent patterns of behaviour, such as leaders' personalisation of resource delivery, are ruthlessly challenged in Malawi's urban public sphere, a classic example being the widespread condemnation of President Joyce Banda's personal distribution of maize bags around the country in September, 2012.

4.2   The absence of party ideology

Some scholars attribute the "virtual vanishing of competing ideologies" to a pre-colonial political culture based on "wealth in people" resurfacing in the present era of African multiparty democracies (Englund, 2004: 19). In place of ideological distinctions, political parties are seen to compete for the "provision of 'development' in regionally and locally defined constituencies, [with] the apparently shared ideology of political pluralism provoking fierce assertions of difference in identity and belonging" (ibid). In other words, the process of accumulation of supporters under a charismatic party leader is based on unspecific promises of development and backed by ethnic or regional identities. Unsurprisingly, ideological vagueness has resulted in the

build up of followings around charismatic individuals, which has caused "power mongering" and "personality clashes" between party leaders, fuelling conflicts within and between parties (Khembo, 2004: 93). When the ideological vacuum is filled by appeals to ethnic and regional identities, then electoral discourse tends to avoid defining alternative *projets de societe*, and relies instead on "vague slogans of change…and opposition to incumbents" (Joseph, 1999: 29). Of course, it must not be forgotten that a level of economic development is also a pre-condition of ideology-based politics, and some attribute Malawi's underdevelopment to the "ideological malnourishment" of its politics (Khembo, 2004: 93).

Over the last 20 years, scholars, civil society and increasingly the Malawian media have all bemoaned the endless tiresome "development" rhetoric (employment, boreholes and bridges), rarely backed up by a vision for how society should be structured and which models of development to adopt. For example, during the 1999 election campaign, a commentator in the *The Nation* complained that the numerous political parties were indistinguishable:

> There are no self-confessed communists here, no clear socialists, no religious fundamentalists agitating for a Christian, Islamic or Hindu state. There is not even a labour movement campaigning for the interests of workers and peasants[29].

> The electorate will not vote for people because of their policies, but just because he/she is a homeboy.[30]

Even today, these complaints are on going. In 2012, Rafiq Hajat, a leading civil society activist (and former UDF shadow minister of industry and energy who left because of corruption), had this comment to make:

> There's no ideology. That's one thing about political parties in Malawi: they're personality driven. They have no ideology. If you look at their manifestos, alleviating poverty, eradicating illiteracy. But they don't talk about how they're gonna do that, which is where you reveal your ideology. And it's basically driven by the big man syndrome: neopatrimonialism. (author interview, October, 2012).

Similarly, Malawian historian Kings Phiri highlights the problem of "ideological fuzziness", "the opaqueness or banality of the messages party leaders deliver", the prevalence of party defections, and the extent to which regionalism and ethnicity are the only principles on which the electorate can base their allegiances, in the absence of any party political philosophies (2000: 68-69).

Only vague ideological differences were perceptible between the main regional parties in the 1990s: the UDF (South), MCP (centre) and AFORD (North): the UDF presented a liberal front, balancing the interests of all sectors of society (government, people, and business), and emphasising poverty reduction and human rights. The MCP, on the other hand, was more

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[29] Letter to the editor, *The Nation*, April 17, 1999
[30] The Challenge of Elections, *The Nation*, 9 June, 1999

conservative, offering mature and incorruptible leadership, emphasising efficiency, peace and stability. Their messages were infused with nostalgia for the Kamuzu Banda era (in which the MCP was the sole party). AFORD was more socialist in some respects – resembling a workingman's party in its calls for workers' rights, but also upholding free market principles. Its desire for a socialist programme may have been stifled by the need to retain donor confidence (Phiri, 2000: 76-78). But even the vaguely liberal-democratic position of the UDF was said to suffer from being a "poor carbon cop[y] of systems and structures that have evolved in the context of the Western world" (Musambachime, 1997: 23, in Phiri, 2000: 84), lacking in ideologies grounded in Malawian social realities. The 2004 and 2009 elections saw little in the way of improvement in this regard. During Mutharika's second term, Cammack (2012) notes that the "jockeying for positions" in the political parties was "typically neopatrimonial": "Recruitment and public loyalty are based on personalities, rarely platforms" (382).

What is important about personality politics is how much it is derided in the urban public sphere. As time goes on and deeper issues are not presented to members of the public crying out for more substance, the legitimacy of leaders depends increasingly on their ability to differentiate their own ideological stance, articulate a vision and go beyond developmental promises. When *The Nation* tried to gather party manifestos in the run-up to the 2009 elections, what they published was almost identical plans and generic solutions from all parties. Set in this historical context, one can better understand the reactions to Joyce Banda's first state of the nation address, in May 2012. The *Nation on Sunday,* for example, carried a front page with only these words: "*Same old story? JB's speech under the microscope*". Its dismissive news report described the speech as follows:

> President Joyce Banda on Friday vowed to rid the public sector of corruption, erase nepotism, cut waste and usher in a new economic order – high-sounding but recycled rhetoric only freshened up by the new mouth uttering it…When you have a speech with so much unnecessary detail, delivered in such… uninspiring tone and style, the whole gist of the message is lost. That is always the problem when a leader concentrates on small details instead of strategic or big picture issues…There is nothing in the Friday speech that distinctly defines Banda and her PP.[31]

In 2013, with parties gearing up for the 2014 elections, public demands for ideological substance have been deafening in the discourse settings that are analysed here. A weekly columnist, *Raw Stuff,* asks if there is "fresh political hope on the horizon":

> Esteemed patriotic Raw Stuffers, listening to the current crop of contenders, one seems to hear a level of broader understanding of issues than a limitation to the cheap philosophy of 'money-in-people's pockets' and *mandasi*-selling politics[32] this country has been subjected to since the death

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[31] Is JB Mutharika's carbon copy? *Nation on Sunday*, May 20, 2012
[32] Mandasi are Malawians donuts sold by street vendors. The reference is probably to Joyce Banda, who used to be a mandasi seller.

of the founding father of Malawi, Ngwazi Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, a man of letters and vision—despite his dictatorial shortcomings.

Esteemed voters, one sees a more business, informed, globalised, strategised or structural solution to Malawi's myriad of development problems than the jungle, village or vendor politics this country has been subjected to, especially in the last 20 years.

In fact, one envisages a robust civil service, a vibrant private sector and an exporting economy, a 'less-sconed'[33] civil society or a more leaner and professional administration…instead of the nepotism, regionalism, tribalism, 'villagisation', baselessness that has characterised the post-Kamuzu Banda era.[34]

4.3   Society and the State: Mockery and magnificence

The relationship between leaders and people – the mode of domination – has been a complex one in postcolonial Africa. This section extracts some pertinent themes from Achille Mbembe's insightful, though contradictory, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony" (1992).   This text attempts to explain the phenomena of the postcolony – state violence, fetishisation of the rulers, popular humour based on corporeal obscenities, and extravagant ceremonialism. He reorients our focus away from strategies of *resistance* to state power by ordinary people, suggesting instead a relation of "conviviality" and even "connivance" between rulers and the ruled.

4.4   The *commandement*[35] and its 'subjects'

Certainly, in the case of Malawi, popular humour has been a way to deflate the pretensions of power, from Kamuzu's time up to the present (see e.g. Lwanda, 2008). But Mbembe actually claims that the "obscene" and "grotesque" essentially characterise postcolonial regimes; they are not just a counter-culture.[36] The *laughter* of ordinary people about orifices and genitals[37] reduces official discourse to "an object of ridicule", showing its vulnerability and arbitrariness (4), *precisely because* the *commandement* is itself inherently vulgar – presidential power is actually imagined in terms of bodily functions, especially the symbolism of "the mouth, the belly and the phallus". It is about eating, drinking and proudly possessing "an active penis" (ibid, 9). What this means is

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[33] "Eating scones" refers to the benefits of patronage.

[34] Fresh political hope on the horizon? *Weekend Nation*, 4 June, 2013

[35] A term used by Mbembe recalling the way it denoted the colonial authority, "embrac[ing]" the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them, without, of course, discussing them" (Mbembe, 1992: 30).

[36] Inspired by Bakhtin, according to whom (in the case of lewd humour in the non-official cultures of medieval Europe) obscenity and grotesqueness were a means of resistance (through parody) in the worlds of ordinary people.

[37] As an example of obscene "political derision", Mbembe cites, among others, Toulabour's (1981, 1986) studies of Togo, where the state was embodied in the president who alone controlled the law, and official discourse depicted the country as conflict-free, and the people as united. (To uphold this fantasy, zero dissidence was tolerated.) Meanwhile, in the very public arenas where people gathered to confirm the legitimacy of the state, they could subvert the metaphors of power by, for example, a simple shift in tone of voice while singing the official slogan, which made the song refer to the "sudden erection of the 'enormous' and 'rigid' presidential phallus" or that "the powerful key of Eyadema penetrates the keyhole". The party acronym 'RPT' was said to sound like "faecal matter dropping into a septic tank", or a "fart emitted by quivering buttocks" (Mbembe, 1992: 6).

that there is a shared aesthetics and stylistics of power between rulers and ruled, a sort of "illicit cohabitation".

Mbembe claims that state power does two things:

1) Creates its own world of meaning (mastercode) through its bureaucratic practices. [38]

2) Attempts to make that world fully real to the population "not only by instilling it in the minds of …[the people] but also in the imaginary of an époque" (Mbembe, 2006: 382).

Postcolonial state power attempts to legitimise itself by becoming a *fetish*, in the sense of a sacred object which "feeds upon…applause, flattery and lies" (ibid., 11). Part of this self-adulation is the "omnipresence" of the ruler and the obligatory "amulets" (such as the party cards) "without which moving around in the postcolony is difficult" (ibid: 19). Indeed, all Malawians had to carry MCP cards at all times under Banda's regime. They were often checked on entry to bus stations, hospitals and markets (van Dijk, 1998: 173). Kamuzu was also omnipresent, his name and portrait adorned not just public buildings, but also women's bodies. In fact, Mbembe quotes a description of Kamuzu's Malawi:

Here in the land of 'President for Life' H. Kamuzu Banda everybody knows exactly who's in charge. From the tiniest village to the capital city, the ubiquitous mark of 'His Excellency's authority is plain for all to see. Expecting visitors in Malawi or planning to fly to another country? You have to travel first along the Great Kamuzu Processional Road on your way to Kamuzu International Airport. Feeling sick or desire to take in a ball game? Try the Kamuzu College of Nursing or the Kamuzu Stadium and Fitness Complex. Hoping to give your child a decent education? The only good school is the Kamuzu Academy, the leading preparatory school in the nation. But be prepared to spend for tuition lots of Malawi kwacha, the local money imprinted with Banda's face" (Henry, 1991: 'Africa's "big men" outliving welcome', *Washington Post 278*, 9 September, p. 1., In Mbembe, 1992: 19).

In order to inculcate obedience and discipline in people, the *commandement* must insist that its fantastical image of itself and the world is in fact true; it "aspires to act as a total cosmology for its subjects", but because it is so odd, ordinary people often unwittingly draw attention to the crudeness and absurdity of the *commandement's* majesterial displays, its delight in eating and

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[38] But Mbembe makes contradictory statements about whether it is a state "mastercode" or reciprocally generated by both the state and subjects. While he sometimes claims that the *commandement* produces the corporeal idioms (mouth, belly, phallus), it is also said that it "*mimics popular vulgarity,* inserting it at the very core of the procedures by which it takes on grandeur" (1992: 10 my emphasis).

drinking, and demonstrating sexual domination over subordinates. When Kamuzu Banda's entourage travelled around Malawi, concubines were arranged for all his officials at every point of call, but Kamuzu most definitely did not conform to Mbembe's insistence that "the purest expression of *commandement* is conveyed by a total lack of restraint… [by] debauchery and buffoonery…" (1992: 7). Kamuzu Banda was neither obese nor demonstratively lecherous; his power was not manifested in corporeal *excesses* in the particular manner described by Mbembe. On the contrary, he was known for being extremely self-disciplined, hard-working and sober. Bakili Muluzi and Mutharika came closer to these characterisations of excess, and it is certainly no coincidence that Mutharika's heart attack sparked rumours that over-exertion from involvement with a prostitute must have been the cause, given the common association of power with sexual potency.

In Mbembe's depiction of the postcolony, the "official fictions" of state power, formulated in a particular language that is violently protected, spellbind the people "within an enchanted forest of adulation that at the same time makes people laugh" (1992: 11.). Their laughter is "fun" and "play" to them, but sacrilege from the government's perspective, because it attacks the cosmology of the rulers and in so doing "unpack[s] the officialese and its protective taboos and often, unwittingly, tear[s] apart the gods that African autocrats aspire to be" (ibid.).[39] Postcolonial regimes are thus described as a hollow pretence or "simulacrum" because they are characterised by constant attempts by rulers and ruled to remythologise power in a plurality of unstable meaning (a chaos of signs and images). People pretend to obey by simulating all the required codes of behaviour such as carrying the party card and praising the leader, but escape this codification through humour and ridicule, acts which reveal the state fetish to be a sham, reducing it to a powerless idol (ibid., 8-9). The crux of the matter is that even though postcolonial subjects can take over the language of officialdom to *demystify* the *commandement* (and possibly thereby undermine its legitimacy but not its material power), this only disempowers both rulers and subjects.

Because of the shared aesthetics and stylistics of power, the *commandement* is expected to be extravagant, "since it has to feed not only itself but also its clientele…"

> It must furnish public proof of its prestige and glory by a sumptuous (yet burdensome) presentation of its symbols of status, displaying the heights of luxury in matters of dress and lifestyle, thereby turning prodigal acts of generosity into grand theatre (Mbembe, 1992: 9).

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[39] However, at the same time, it is claimed that "to a large extent, the outbursts of ribaldry and derision are actually taking the official world seriously" (ibid., 7). Such contradictory claims make it hard to figure out when/whether the peoples' ridicule is intentional or unintentional, and also why the *commandement* flourishes its lechery, while at the same time attempting to hide it.

This reflects, albeit in a slightly different formulation, Chabal's claim that when a politician "represents" his community of origin, he becomes the "embodiment of [their] virtue." By embodying their material and symbolic qualities, or rather, the qualities they would desire to have – wealth, fame, power – the politician demonstrates the group's "marks of honour" (2009: 53).

While colonialism made Africans docile to serve its ends more productively, according to Mbembe, power in the postcolony aims instead to "tire out the bodies of those under it…to ensure maximum docility" rather than productivity. Thus, postcolonial 'forced labour' involves "requisitioning [peoples'] bodies" to dance at ceremonies (1992: 13), which exemplifies the people's spirit of conviviality instead of resistance. But although dance was used to absolute maximum effect with Banda's *mbumba*, who danced at every single public occasion, they often did so under conditions of violent coercion by the Malawi Young Pioneers. Even today, the practice of bussing women in to rallies to dance is prevalent, but one wonders how often these public political ceremonies are actually engulfed in a spirit of conviviality or are more to do with opportunism. However, that people do not necessarily oppose or endorse the state's displays of power, but remain *fundamentally ambivalent*, is an interesting point for consideration. Endorsement and praise seem to go hand in hand with evasion and mockery.

4.5   Interpreting Ceremonialism

It is difficult to accept Mbembe's implication that postcolonial subjects are somehow nihilistic or possibly even masochistic in their acquiescent dancing for dictators. His notion of popular "play", of the people as *homo ludens*, could be seen as a type of *resistance* even if he would not admit it as such. If people actively demystify despotic power, this should be construed as some form of resistance. In Malawi, there was eventually a direct confrontation between the despotic MCP regime and groups in society, and the nature of state power has since then changed considerably. But there may also be something valid in this image of conviviality and a shared stylistics of power, particularly with respect to dancing for the leader. Lecherous and/or extravagant leadership, grand ceremonies (displaying the state's magnificence to its subjects), and sycophantic praise-singers have all been part of Malawi's postcolonial experience. And it is in criticisms of these aspects of the state-society relation by members of the urban public that one can see clear strategies of resistance and transformation of these problematic postcolonial patterns of behaviour.

Bakili Muluzi's corruption was excessive, and his promises so absurd, yet his humour in the vernacular never failed to leave people in stitches.[40] But has Malawi ever really been caught in an "inescapable cycle of pointless violence and cynical laughter?"(60). Are the people such

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[40] In an election campaign he once promised to buy every citizen a new pair of shoes, but following his win at the election he simply retorted „how am I supposed to know your shoe sizes?" (anecdotal evidence from informants, 2012).

nihilists? Do they really relish extravagant rulers who gorge themselves so excessively and "vacillat[e] incoherently between [the] extremes" of praise and mockery, thereby "systematically disempower[ing] both themselves and their political leaders" (Karlström, 2003: 61)? How and why would such a mindset arise? Karlström's (2003) critique gets to the heart of the supposedly "pathological" relationship between rulers and ruled as described in Mbembe's bleak commentary, providing a more plausible explanation for the apparent dysfunctionality. It has to do with an unjustified pessimistic interpretation of laughter. Even Bakhtin's analysis of medieval folk culture, whence Mbembe got many of his ideas, saw folk humour as an "'affirmative negation' that implies a utopian project" (ibid.: 63). In other words, it does more than ridicule; it implies a vision of a better world. African ambivalence towards state power also has this affirmative dimension; it reveals an alternative political imagination, aspirations, and ideas of legitimacy that are autonomous of the state's mastercode.

But what is the purpose of political ceremony (a practice still common in Malawi today)? It may be that it reflects what should be the establishment of a reciprocal relation between rulers and ruled. Traditionally, specific codes and formalities have guided the establishment of a political relationship. This is commonly a form of "political hospitality", whereby "fattening" the politician ensured his reciprocal obligations to a community; under Kamuzu Banda, this gift-giving was forced. But the ceremony has a clear social logic to it. It is not disempowering, and the relationships it establishes at the village level with political representatives may be considered a more reliable way to access state resources than via the abstract rational-bureaucratic state (ibid., 68). Discourses about eating, then, can be interpreted in relation to this social matrix of reciprocity, not, as Mbembe would suggest, a "dysfunctional" relation devoid of substance. But what is problematic in the postcolony, is the imbalance between the formal and substantive aspects of these reciprocal ties at the level of the state. There is a tendency for the state to engage in the *formal* ceremonial aspects i.e. consuming excessively and putting on a magnificent display, but then failing to commit to the substantive aspect of reciprocity. The dialogical component of ceremonialism that takes place at the village level is not present on the level of state ceremonialism and, being far removed from state power, people are unable to effectively establish a substantive reciprocal relationship. It is this that may account for the ambivalence with which postcolonial subjects have regarded public displays of power, as described by Mbembe. Ceremonialism has become a contentious issue in Malawi's democratic era. It has become an illegitimate means to establish authority in the eyes of a sector of the urban public, to whom ceremony is incompatible with ideology and substance.

4.6 Notions of Power

To understand the basis of legitimate authority within a given society/culture, it helps to understand the more general notion of 'power'. As Pye observes: "Of all social phenomena power is one of the most sensitive to cultural nuances; its potentialities and its limitations are always constrained by time and place" (1985: viii). Applying a "one size fits all" definition of power beyond the Western context where it was formulated, results in "a distorted or skewed representation of political reality… [which] misses those elements of power that political actors simply take for granted and assume to be important without ever really thinking explicitly or systematically about them" (Schatzberg, 2001: 37). Therefore, identifying cultural specificities helps to go beyond those Western culturally derived notions of power that are axiomatic to the social sciences. Hayward (1998) shows how Robert Dahl's efforts to explicate the "intuitively understood meaning" of power led to a debate that was infused with a normative commitment to freedom. Thus, it came to be seen as an instrument that "power 'A' uses to constrain, to distort, or otherwise to alter the free action of a powerless 'B'" (3). It was about action that could be classified as free, and that which was seen as constrained by powerful others.

The assumption is that power is transformative (modifies behaviour) and Newtonian (meets with resistance) (Ibid: 38). Famous definitions throughout the last century, including those of Weber, Russell, Dahl, Bachrach and Lukes, contain such assumptions. Lukes defined power as, "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests" (1974: 34). The basic idea is that power transforms behaviour either directly, or by transforming structures that shape behaviour, and those conscious of such attempts will resist them[41]. Political realities in Malawi may be better understood by venturing outside the limited conceptual box of transformation and resistance. The notions of 'eating', 'spirituality' and 'indivisibility' identified by Schatzberg (2001) provide complementary notions of power in middle Africa.[42] What is interesting is not so much how universal these notions are, but how they are being contested.

4.7 Eating

The connection between power and consumption, rather than transformation, may explain why power appears to manifest itself in the "ample girth" of the quintessential African 'big man'. Power through consumption is seen to "emphasize… the allegiance of subordinates to superiors rather than the power of superiors over subordinates" Karlström (1996: 491). The connection between consumption and power can be reasonably inferred from numerous

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[41] The later Foucault seems to be the exception in this regard, in that he conceptualised resistance in a non-reactive way; but he is explicitly dealing with the "genealogy of the subject in Western civilisation" (Hartmann, 2003: power and resistance in the later Foucault).

[42] His analysis of discourse in 8 countries does not include Malawi in its data set, but he proposes that his insights can be extended to other countries in the region.

examples in every day language. Malawian political discourse is full of metaphors equating power with consumption. The image of "eating scones", for example, is an allusion to immoral self-enrichment. Thus, when members of civil society or the media are appropriated into governmental positions (as is often the case), subsequently becoming silent on matters that previously were criticised, this change of behaviour is attributed to "eating government scones". Visually (in cartoons) 'sell outs' seeking power are depicted as stuffing their faces with food.[43] At the Public Affairs Committee conference in October, 2012, one of the presenters described the recent formation of Joyce Banda's government as "replacing one group of eaters with another in as far as government contracts are concerned".

4.8   Spirituality

The Western binary opposition between church and state is not valid in most of Africa. Formal religion represents the "spiritual face of power", and leaders are often imbued with divine or messianic qualities; for this they associate closely with religious authorities. Alongside formal religion, local cosmologies tend to divide the world into the visible and invisible – the "paradigm of the night" (spirit world) and the "domain of the day" (Mbembe, 1991: 89-121 in Schatzberg, 2001: 54), which are not entirely separable. When metaphors of eating are applied in the context of the spirit world, they evoke sorcery, "an important part of the political terrain in middle Africa" (Schatzberg, 2001: 58). The occult is very present in the cosmologies of many Malawians, but in the educated urban public sphere, it disappears altogether from discourses on politics.[44] Neither does formal (Christian and Muslim) religion play a role in the way Schatzberg describes, imbuing the leader with divine qualities. Certainly, leaders engage in religious activity as part of their public legitimation 'performance', attending prayer meetings, fraternising with religious authorities and so forth, and, as one politician informed me, Malawian presidents will talk down to just about anybody except religious leaders (author interview, 19. Oct. 2012). But aside from occasionally attributing election wins to "God's will" and describing Malawi as a "God-fearing nation", the public political discourses under study separate political power from spirituality. Political phenomena are explained in the language of social science; legitimate authority does not connote spiritual power. Even PAC, despite being a quasi-religious organisation, invokes academic/scientific discourses in its political assessments and prescriptions.

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[43] It also indicates disempowerment. For example, a common joke as inflation drove many people to the edge of hunger in 2012 was that even middle class people had begun to eat "bonya" (small, dried fish with a powerful odour) which was considered an embarrassment, but "as long as you have colgate, nobody can tell".

[44] On the contrary, it will very occasionally arise only to be dismissed e.g. one commenter on MMMV wrote that he had never seen any evidence that witchcraft exists, and he challenged anyone on the forum to actually provide him with "irrefutable evidence".

4.9   Indivisibility

Mobutu epitomised the maxim that "power is eaten whole"; but this notion of the indivisibility of power runs right through middle African discourse, according to Schatzberg (2001: 59). Sharing power – even just symbolically – is undesirable, if not inconceivable: "There can only be one father of the large national family, and the presently serving political 'father'…is unlikely to be willing to share his paternal rights and responsibilities with any of his political 'children'" (Ibid., 63). To what extent is power indivisible in Malawi? One need look no further than Kamuzu Banda to see this notion exemplified. Barely had he taken presidential office than his erstwhile nationalist comrades (who had graciously handed him the sceptre of power) became his "boys". Their resentment at this subordination saw them driven into exile in the Cabinet Crisis of 1964. Since the inception of multipartyism, power sharing at intra- and inter- party levels has been limited. Party leaders effectively own their parties, facing little internal dissent (Magolowonde, A.; Svåsand, L., 2010). The battle to rule government is a battle for control of state resources, and opposition parties often become obstructionists rather than constructive opposition; a fact that in the 2009 elections may have cost the opposition its heavy losses (Hussein, 2009; Ferree and Horowitz, 2010).

Summary: Political Developments in Nyasaland/Malawi

From this chapter overview, several relevant factors to the study of contemporary discourses on leadership come to the fore: the rural-urban gap produced by the colonial state's preoccupation with the native question, and perpetuated by postcolonial centralised despotism; the 30 years rule of Kamuzu Banda and the MCP creating a powerful hegemony of elites, dependent upon the president, who, as the liberator of the people from colonial oppression, father of the national family, and guardian of women, was overwhelmingly powerful, leaving somewhat of a symbolic vacuum in his place; the continuation of a powerful executive dominating patronage networks in the multiparty era; institutions that have not been entirely successful at curbing abuses of power; personality and regional/ethnic based, rather than ideology-driven, party politics; a prevalence of chameleon politics i.e. endless shifting alliances, floor-crossing, and therefore betrayals of the electorate, etc. These observations are concerned with national-level systems, structures, institutions and patterns of behaviour, and they are elite-focussed. They have contributed integrally to contemporary politics, and constitute, therefore, an important part of the overall picture of Malawi's democracy – where it has come from and where it is heading. But it is a fallacy to presume that they comprise the *whole* picture, which has another dimension to it, namely how Malawian citizens engage with these realities. The picture needs to take account of the discourses and strategies of citizens, acknowledging both their partial structuring by

institutions and culture, and also their agency in *transforming* those structures. Agency is a contentious notion in the social sciences, and especially in African studies, given its normative dimension in efforts to counter Afro-pessimism (Chabal, 2009). This thesis reveals (but does not glorify) the agency of Malawian citizens in the democratic public sphere.

Chapter 2

A Critical Urban Public

It has been argued that the changes in the early 1990s constituted in many ways a transition without transformation. Much has remained the same in terms of the ways of doing things in politics. But one significant change *did* take place during the transition – there emerged a space for open public discourse on politics and leadership. This space has often been idealised but rarely investigated. For 30 years the political and social world for Malawians had been dominated by the hegemonic discourse of Kamuzu Banda and the MCP, defining national identity, history, and progress. It was a world in which Banda was the nationalist hero and the benevolent father *for life*. A few counter-hegemonic discourses and movements circulated through underground channels, but in the public realm, resistance was either dangerous or extremely well concealed. Citizens in the democratic era have been much freer to express themselves.

This chapter discusses theory on the power of discourse, and the realities of power relations within Malawian discourse. Although they are traditionally in opposition, Habermas's modernist idea of the "public sphere" and Foucault's postmodern power analytics are both seen to be relevant for different reasons to the analysis of public political discourse in Malawi. In short, the aim of this chapter is to provide important contextual information about the 'who', 'where' and 'why' of a specific discourse on political leadership in Malawi's democratic era.

1 Discourse and public sphere(s)

The 'public sphere' as envisaged by Jürgen Habermas is something specific, a normative ideal; it is much more than just a 'public space' of communication. His normative arguments, however, are fused with descriptive history of the emergence of bourgeois public sphere in Europe (comprised of certain spaces, especially salons in the cities, where people discussed matters relating to the state, autonomously of it), since he saw this early historical manifestation of the public sphere as the closest it has ever come to the ideal. The ideal is based upon "communicative rationality". The public sphere that satisfies the conditions of communicative rationality would be a "realm of our social life, in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, Lennox S., Lenox, F., 1974: 49). To this end, it requires a reasoning public engaging in rational discourse and debate, whilst status inequalities are "bracketed out", to achieve public accord that will influence decision-making. Habermas sees communicative reason – "the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech" – as

universally inherent to social life, part of the process of seeking consensus without force, making human beings by their very nature *Homo Democraticus* (Habermas, 1985: 10, in Flyvbjerg, 2000: 2-3).

How is the concept of the ideal public sphere relevant to Malawi?   It is relevant in two senses: 1) Rational public deliberation about matters of national interest does occur, to some degree, in the public space that was freed up in 1992-4. 2) The ideal Habermasian public sphere is the model upon which Malawian public discourse is based; and to a large degree, it is considered to closely approximate that ideal model. In this study, the second sense is more important. It will be argued that the very idea of "*the* public sphere" in Malawi – perpetuated in international democratisation discourses and sustained by local actors' (especially media practitioners') representations of Malawian public discourse – has created a powerful institution. For this reason, the term 'public sphere' will be applied to 'public space', even though this space does not strictly speaking (and can never) achieve conditions of perfect communicative rationality – where only the force of the best argument guides deliberation.

1.1   Plural public spheres

John Lwanda (2008: 95) asks the following pertinent questions about Malawi's public sphere:

> Given the English/urban, on one hand, versus urban/vernacular and rural, on the other, does one argue for two or more public spheres or various components of the main one, each accessible to a particular grouping? An immediate question is whether these spheres communicate with each other and with external public spheres. Further, are these spheres of equal importance?

The Malawian national public sphere where "public opinion" is formed, is in reality fractured. In fact Habermas himself has moved away from the singular conception of a bourgeois public sphere, acknowledging the complexity of modern society. Furthermore, the concept has come to imply not so much a geographical metaphor as a form of communication; consequently, the public sphere(s) is/are widely dispersed in space (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 92). In Malawi, spheres of discourse can be distinguished by both their geographical locations and their communicative forms. Nevertheless, the myth of 'national public opinion formation' in '*the* public sphere' is sustained, both domestically and by foreign commentators. Consider the following statement: "Ordinary Malawians are telling [Joyce Banda] that they have had enough of "donor-fearing" politics" (*The Guardian (UK)*, April 24, 2013). Without an elaboration of who "ordinary Malawians" are, and in the context of cultural, educational and communicative gaps

between the rural and the urban[45], generational differences, etc., such general statements about public opinion without qualification should be interrogated.

Discourse circulates throughout society, but fractures carve out various public spaces where specific discourses tend to form, not in isolation, but in concentration. Defining these spaces / spheres according to some demographic variable – age, rural/urban, middle-class, etc. – may provide analytical convenience, but will always be a construct. This study has selected three planes/settings on which the analysis is mostly focussed, and several things can be said about the discourses produced therein: they circulate largely in an urban environment; they are written, and in fairly sophisticated English (with a Chichewa supplement in the newspapers and some code-switching to Chichewa on *MMMV*); most participants are educated (notably the journalists, columnists and expert analysts who dominate newspaper discourse, as well as the elite class comprising the PAC); a large proportion are of a generation[46] which, compared to the crop of politicians, could be described as "youthful".

It is important to reiterate that, while "spheres" imply bounded spaces, discourse "is not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation" (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 89). The newspapers, PAC, *My Malawi My Views*, and other online discourses are all very much interlinked, and they feed constantly into wider societal discourse. Since "discourse" is an entity – it produces meanings that shape actions, institutions and therefore culture – it can be analysed in its own right, as a "societal means of production"[47] (Jäger and Maier, 2009), and need not be restrictively tied to the utterances of one specific social group. In their intimate entanglement, these discourses on leadership produce meaning "structures" just as powerful as "power, money, and status" (Alexander and Mast, 2006: 2) that shape the interpretations of political phenomena and the process of leadership legitimation for Malawian urbanites in the democratic era.

But they can still, for analytical purposes, be subsumed under a category that approximately describes the geographic and demographic sphere in which they are concentrated and therefore have impact. "Urban", "educated", "middle-class", "written in English", and "youthful" are all descriptors that could be (somewhat loosely) attached. But combining them results in an inaccurately strict demarcation. For one example, some of the older members of PAC are just as revolutionary in their rhetoric as young adults; and they are active and influential co-producers of the leadership discourse being analysed. The most co-extensive feature would be "written in English" (because this study does not look at non-English discourse, and there are

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[45] The emergence of significant private radio stations broadcasting in Chichewa to wide audiences in recent years may be changing that.

[46] Most participants on *MMMV* are adults in their 20s. Most employees in the newspaper business are males in their mid 30s e.g. of the 8 columnists and journalists who told me their exact age, the average was 34; the eldest 41. Even some of the prominent academics in the public sphere are in their early 40s.

[47] See next section – *the notion of discourse*

few spheres of English discourse it does not look at)[48], but since the analysis does not require grounding in one social group, and to save having to attach this whole list of descriptors to every mention of the "public sphere", it is expedient to simply choose one label and justify the value of that choice. Therefore, this study refers to the *urban public* and *urban public sphere*, for the following reason: the impact of the leadership discourse under study extends beyond its most active participants (who are by no means living in a bubble), yet remains concentrated in the urban, due to the historical rural-urban divide enforcing logistical, educational and language barriers. Having said this, these discourses are neither completely exclusive to, nor do they *saturate,* the "urban public sphere", and so this label should not be taken as a rigid demarcation. It is shorthand for the locus of generally more educated, urban, cultural-elite discourse, which is widely but not completely disseminated through the urban environment. The urban descriptor is meant to give a sense of the sphere of impact and therefore relevance of these leadership discourses in the national context.

1.1.1 Further notes on demographics

There are still some pertinent questions to ask about the producers of these leadership discourses, and the way they represent their social positioning vis-à-vis the entities ('the powers that be') whom they discuss and address. For example, in analysing Mutharika's crisis of legitimacy in 2011, Cammack notes the importance of the middle classes and urban youth:

> Though all classes suffered, particularly important here is the middle class. It had grown slowly from Hastings Kamuzu Banda's civil servants-cum-estate holders and Bakili Muluzi's new businessmen and women to form Mutharika's burgeoning, car-importing, house-building, luxuries- shopping urbanites… At the same time a new youthful, relatively well-educated and Internet-connected group had arisen, with modern aspirations and urban lifestyles. Servicing the needs of this broader elite proved impossible for Mutharika… (2012: 376).

1.1.1.1 The Importance of Urban-ness

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[48] The intermingling and code-switching between English and (especially) Chichewa takes these leadership discourses beyond English speakers. However, the English language has very specific social significance in Malawi (Matiki, 2001). It is understood only by a minority, yet is the language of officialdom, parliamentary debate and most of the media. In addition to its many connotations of colonialism and superiority to local Malawian languages, "through its dominance in official domains and education, English has created an elite group in Malawi" (ibid., 205). For someone pursuing the social significance of English in political discourse, this variable could be brought to the fore. Unfortunately, it is a limitation of this study that non-English discourses were not analysed[48], due to limited resources.

There are three immediately obvious restrictions on participation in the discourse settings under study 1) language & education 2) logistical access 3) cost. Not only is 25% of the country's adult population illiterate[49], but only a minority of the literate portion would be able to read the sophisticated English of the newspapers and even the discussions on *My Malawi My Views*, let alone engage with the economic and political concepts therein (this is the education factor). The second factor is logistical: only the urban centres of Mzuzu, Lilongwe, Zomba, and Blantyre receive newspaper copies; the internet is only accessible to approx. 2.2% of the population[50]. These logistical factors significantly preclude the rural majority (84.7% of the population[51]) from convenient access. The third point is based on the safe assumption that the cost of newspapers and access to internet remains prohibitively high for many people. These points revolve around the urban-rural, education and wealth gaps.

But there are some things to consider: almost every urban dweller has a rural home, to which extended family and a sense of belonging gives them a close connection. So citizens of the cities are not out of touch with the realities of rural life, and likewise, most rural citizens are connected to the discourses of the cities, through the return of their urban relatives bearing stories and news. In addition, rural listeners of Zodiak radio – one of the widest reaching broadcasters (approximately 2 million) – receive summaries of the newspapers' main stories every day[52]. So while the newspaper discourses may be urban-generated, they still contain significant coverage of rural Malawi. This ensures that the content is by no means only relevant to city dwellers, and nor is it representative of higher-class interests.

With the amount of newspaper sharing that takes place, circulation is far higher than sales, and so the price factor is a weak limitation. Additional to the sharing of newspapers in libraries and businesses, there is a culture of borrowing anyone's copy. (One is barely able to fold a newspaper up before someone politely requests if they could borrow it.) Beyond physical sharing, a considerable amount of newspaper discourse gets disseminated verbally and online. Many a casual conversation recycles phrases typical of Malawian journalistic language: "executive arrogance", "let's call a spade a spade", "it's time for a change of guard", "we're in the doldrums" and so on. On Facebook forums such as *My Malawi My Views*, online newspapers such as *Nyasatimes* and *Malawi Voice*, and in the blogosphere, newspaper stories are often cited. There is therefore a very high level of interlinking between newspapers, online media and the PAC in the *urban public sphere.*

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[49] Unicef
[50] There were 336 759 users in 2010 (tradingeconomics.com)
[51] Govt. of Malawi Statistical Office, 2008
[52] On its website, Zodiak radio describes having a "bias towards the underprivileged, especially the rural poor", and claims to have "physical presence across the country with journalists currently in 14 of the 28 districts and 24 transmitting stations reaching virtually every nook and cranny of the country." (zodiakmalawi.com).

1.1.1.2 The Importance of Youth

Age is a socially significant variable in all societies; but demarcating a 'generation' is conceptually problematic. Firstly, "youth" as a social category can only be somewhat arbitrarily defined, and secondly, referring to social phenomena as specifically youth-related requires isolating the generational factor from many other variables; youth are not a homogeneous social group. Nevertheless, given their positioning in a cultural age-hierarchy in Malawi, youth share common experiences when it comes to empowerment and interaction with the political sphere. Additionally, the 15-24 literacy rate is 87%[53], which is higher than the average adult literacy rate. De Boeck and Honwana observe that in Africa "children and youth are often placed at the margins of the public sphere and major political, socio-economic, and cultural processes" (2005: 1). But at the same time, many studies find that "despite all the difficulties they face, young people in Africa are actively participating in social, economic and political developments and, in the process, constructing their own identities" (Ibid.). Evidenced by the discourses under study, the latter observation is a particularly apposite one for Malawi today.

1.1.1.2.1   Gerontocracy in Malawi

According to Rijk van Dijk (1998), in the precolonial and early colonial dominant cultures of Nyasaland – i.e. in three quarters of the population – youth were subjected to the hegemony of all elder men and women, whose control of magical forces and relationship with the ancestors legitimated their authority. In these matrilineal societies, newly married men in their wives' villages were exploited for their labour, and enjoyed only weak social standing. Although this hegemony of the elderly began to peter out in the late colonial days due to various societal forces and shifts, at the dawn of independent Malawi in 1964, Kamuzu Banda "embarked on a social programme to bring the youth back under proper gerontocratic control" (ibid., 172). With a view resembling the traditional Chewa model, Banda expected youth to be 'the nation's workhorse'; but also, apparently, the strong arm of government. With the establishment of the Malawi Young Pioneers and the League of Malawi Youth, Banda created two highly coercive, intimidating instruments of control under his direct command, both of which played a significant role in maintaining compliance amongst the population (ibid.).

In his analysis of Malawi's democratic transition, van Dijk (1999) shifts away from the scholarly focus on national politics and the role of elites, to the changing position of Malawian youth:

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[53] Unicef

> To this writer, democratisation appeared to signal a change in the dominant gerontocratic power relations and to give the young an opportunity to escape from the tightly circumscribed socio-political space in what for 30 years had been a highly supervised society…[T]he political-leadership model, from independence in 1964 onwards, held the youth captive, in terms of both discourse and practice (166).

The early 1990s involved youths discrediting the gerontocracy base of Malawian society,[54] as the "religiously and magically determined perspectives on power" that had sustained the elderly hegemony were undermined (ibid., 183). This signified a change in the *meaning* of elderly authority; however, the *structural* paradigm (i.e. the age hierarchy) still remained intact. This reflects a tendency for changes in meaning to precede social structural changes (Ibid., 167). Although Malawi's political system is still dominated by old elites to this day, Malawian youth have a freer public space to redefine their own identities and deconstruct the symbolic power of elders in the gerontocracy.

1.1.1.2.2   Youth in formal politics

Since Kamuzu Banda's time, and with the possible exception of the People's Party, ruling political parties in Malawi have often exploited their youth wings for coercive intimidation campaigns, with some intense episodes resulting in killings. An editorial in *Malawi News* (July 27, 2002) claimed: "One name that seems to crop up whenever there is a case of political violence is that of UDF Young Democrats, notorious for striking terror at everybody who does not share their world view". Similarly, in July 2011 the ruling DPP's Youth Cadets carried pangas in their terrorising campaign as the nation rioted. But youth are not a homogeneous group, and it is particularly the uneducated and poor urban youth, desperate for a bit of money, who are susceptible to involvement in party political violence.[55]

Englund (2004) observes that youth are often manipulated by their elders and therefore feel disillusioned with politics. Rhetoric about youth empowerment has created unrealistic expectations,[56] perhaps provoking the perception that party politics is a "deceitful pursuit" (ibid.,10). From the perspective of the older generations, there have also been expressions of distrust of the "rebellious youth". Many Malawians lament what they perceive as an increasing

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[54] Van Dijk (1999) emphasises the role of Pentecostal churches in this "break from the past"

[55] In an interview with members of the Young Democrats (youth wing of the UDF), journalist Peter Banda found that the youth participated in coercion and violence out of necessity more than ideology. One participant lamented, "I am involved in these atrocities because I am poor and uneducated. I have nothing to do. I worry about my today's problems and not about the future" (South African Institute of International Affairs, 02.04.2004).

[56] In an article entitled "Malawi Young Politicians Feel Cheated", the Young Politician's Union made a statement: "It is time the youths weighed the benefits they get from political participation against their socio-economic aspirations before attempting to take risks in the year 2012." The YPU described political parties' youth activities as "disheartening and defeating aspirations of the youth" (Zodiak Online, 02.01.2012).

disrespect and indiscipline amongst youth since the end of one-party rule (Ribohn, 2002). The Catholic Church uses pastoral letters to highlight "abuses of democracy" such as the enjoyment of "excessive freedom".[57]

Konings' (2005) states that, "the present generation of African students is not only being confronted with growing marginalization during economic liberalization but has also acquired more space during political liberalization to articulate its grievances and to organize in defence of its interests against the ruling political elite whom it holds responsible for its predicament" (184). This could not be more true in the case of Malawi. Through numerous demonstrations and interventions in the public sphere, students have demonstrated to Malawi's government on several occasions that they are a force to be reckoned with (but also potentially a force to harness.) Every political party has a youth wing with many enthusiastic members at university campuses. But very conspicuous political involvement still comes with risks, because students who need to find career opportunities after their graduation know that they can find doors closed in their faces if they antagonise the wrong authorities, as the Chancellor College Student Union President, who is very conspicuous himself, informed me. For this reason, he said, a preferred medium for public expressions of discontent amongst students is poetry and theatre (author interview, Zomba, Oct 17, 2012). Similarly, a 23-year old highly critical columnist with the *Daily Times* said that he has received threatening calls with the message: "You are too young. You have a future; you shouldn't get into this game for old people" (author interview, 22 Sep. 2012). But he, like many, refuses to become a "praise singer".

The discourses under study often represent youth aspirations. A youth column in the Weekend Nation's Young and Free section integrates the wider leadership discourse into its frequent assessment of youths' exclusion from the political realm, arguing, for example, that,

> The more the youth are undermined the more the country progresses in the opposite of upright development…There is a silent discrimination against young people in this country and this kind of vibe is killing the youth softly and systematically… The youth are the vision of Malawi, or else the 'trial and error' or 'experimental' leadership styles shall continue suffocating this country.[58]

A presenter (former finance minister) at the PAC conference in October, 2012, implored the audience to accept that "the future of the nation lies in its Youth. We need to impress upon our elders that our time has come".[59] And on *My Malawi My Views*, frequent comments such as "The youth represents change and the future...change should begin here by being different from the old generation" (*MMMV*, May, 2013), add to a growing discourse on the need for a generational alternation.

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[57] In a 1996 letter Bishops reminded Malawians that "'true freedom and democracy require great discipline', directing their words especially to youths (Englund, 2000: 588).
[58] Youth: the vision of Malawi, Weekend Nation, 17 Nov. 2012
[59] Chikaonda, M. PAC second all-inclusive stakeholders conference, Blantyre, Oct 30-31, 2012.

1.2   The notion of 'discourse'

Democratisation theories that hail "public debate" and "dialogue between the government and the people" as the basis of political legitimacy overlook the power in and of discourse. According to Gaynor, democratisation theory lacks an account of how discourse "constitute[s] the way individuals see themselves and their social world. For most deliberative democrats… discourse seems more 'innocent'" (2009: 131). Michel Foucault's notion of "discourse" is useful in dispelling these simplistic assumptions. While his unique 'genealogical' historical method was applied to the task of tracing the origins of specific discourses in Europe, making it notoriously difficult to replicate, the fundamental power of discourse that these studies reveal is something to think about in the case of Malawi, where discourse is presumed to be rational and 'innocent'.

1.2.1   A constructionist theory of representation

According to the eminent cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, "representation connects meaning and language to culture" (1997: 15). Representation by this definition is a central concept in this study, since the way legitimate political authority is represented in discourse shapes the conceptual maps of "political reality" shared by groups in society. Constructionist theories of representation supplant the inadequate 'reflective' and 'intentional' theories. Reflective theories take meaning to be something that inheres in objects, events, people, with 'representation' then simply reflecting their "true" meaning. Intentional theories take meaning to be imposed by the speaker. But this misses the essence of language as a social system, as communication, where intended meanings have to "*enter the rules, codes and conventions of language* to be shared and understood"; it is not a private game (ibid., 25). Only the 'constructionist' approach, therefore, captures language as a system of symbolic practices, employing 'codes' with numerous signs to signify concepts that separate from the actual material world. The language/code only makes sense if it is shared by a society and culture – through communication.

While indebted to Saussure and Barthes for these ideas, Foucault shifts attention from language in the static semiotic sense to 'discourse', which is a *system of representation* that regulates people's characteristic ways of thinking about concepts, thereby governing the way reality can be meaningfully talked about, and even people's self-knowledge, their own identities and modes of self-discipline. The primary focus of this approach is relations of power; the way meaning shapes not just thought but also practice (Hall, 1997: 43-44). Unlike the semioticians, who reduce discourse to "the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue", Foucault seeks to capture its "violent, bloody and lethal character" (1980: 115 in Hall, 1997: 43). Having said this, we need not wholly accept the implication that everything can be explained in terms of the "totalizing notion of power" (Isenberg, 1991: 307).

But the power of discourse, in terms of how it constructs reality, disciplines and normalises conduct, while implicating *everybody* in the process, is certainly worthy of attention. Foucault historicises notions that are normally considered to be ahistorical, such as "objectivity" and "truth", emphasising the need to look not at truth as an objective value, but rather the effectiveness of *power/knowledge* in "making itself true". A 'regime of truth' is sustained because it has clout, such as religious authority or science does, and power is exercised through this knowledge of the truth. Thus truth is not immutable but historically contingent, which "demonstrate[s] conclusively 'that reason has its reasons that reason knows not of'" (Vighi and Feldner, 2007: 151). Even reason plays its part in the field of power.[60] Power in this sense is not brutal repression, nor simply a class struggle. It does not radiate from one source, such as the state or bourgeois class; it is ubiquitous and diffuse (implying that anyone at any level of society is both oppressor and oppressed[61]).

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power… Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, 1978: 100–101)

This notion has strong implications for this study's analysis of political legitimacy as a process of contestation over the meaning of power and leadership, as a *diffuse* struggle over meaning, rather than a static cultural logic or a set of rational criteria. This analysis of Malawian discourse therefore brings even the vaguest thoughts of everyday people into focus, revealing their role in changing notions of legitimate authority. Such an approach is preferable to other common approaches. For example, the famous "thick description" approach of Clifford Geertz (1973) is useful for interpreting the meanings of artefacts, events, etc., but not so much cultural *transformation*. Meanwhile, the Marxist-based notion of 'ideology' sees ideas as emerging out of underlying economic and class relations, supporting the economic interests of the dominant group in a way that "blinds" people from the objective "truth". But this gives little credit to ideas in themselves for bringing about social transformation (Whisnant, 2012: 1-4). By rejecting simple class reductionism which pits bourgeois ideological 'distortions' against Marxist scientific 'truth', we can appreciate that "all political and social forms of thought…[are] inevitably caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power" (Hall, 1997: 47).

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[60] It has not gone unnoticed, however that if "truth", as Foucault claims, is completely culturally and historically relative, then Foucault's own argument paradoxically undermines itself by negating any rational and true basis for it (see Rodrigues, 2011). But it could be said that Foucault uses "the techniques of formal discourse, such as arguments, footnotes, and historical data, to undermine the previous narratives within that discourse." He is thus engaged more in a "project of demolition" (Pickett, 1996: 459).

[61] This is the position of the later Foucault, which diverges from his earlier focus on institutions (see Pickett, 1996).

In summary, the most important notion to be conveyed here is that discourses "take on a life of their own as they evolve". They transport more knowledge than the single subject is aware of, and so their power effects are beyond "the conscious and manipulative intent of some individual or group" (Jäger and Maier, 2009: 38-39); and they are where meaning is constructed, thus nothing meaningful exists outside discourse. As is shown in this and the following chapters, a *narrative form* is intrinsic to discourse on leadership in the Malawian public sphere, and *expert knowledge* is a component of a strategy of self-legitimisation – certain individuals and institutions, such as erudite academics and the media, have clout that allows them to exercise more power *over* societal discourse (though never to escape it), redefining notions of power and authority. Iris Young succinctly captures these elements in her definition of discourse as, "The system of stories and expert knowledge diffused through society, which convey the widely accepted generalisations about how society operates that are theorised in those terms, as well as the social norms and cultural values to which most of the people appeal when discussing their social and political problems and proposed solutions" (Young, 2003: 115, in Gaynor, 2008: 125).

1.3   Democratic deliberation in Malawi

Both the modern idealist account of Habermas and the postmodern realist one of Foucault seem problematic when it comes to analysing actual democratic deliberation. Flyvbjerg (1998) sees this as reflecting the "essential tension in modernity. This is the tension between the normative and the real, between what should be done and what is actually done. Understanding this tension is crucial to understanding modern democracy, what it is and what it could be" (210). Foucauldian 'power analytics', however, presents a more plausible account of *ever-present power*, rather than simply wishing it away, as Habermas tries to do (see Flyvberg, 2000). Thus the Habermasian goal of public consensus based solely on the force of the "best argument" is naïve. It is surely not surprising, however, that the notion of 'public deliberation' in mainstream democratisation discourse is idealised in this manner. It is dominated by Western-derived "enlightened" messages – communicated powerfully via state development agencies and NGOs – about democratic deliberation as the means for the whole of society to form public opinions on issues of national concern, without state interference. Malawian private media enthusiastically take up this notion in their self-stylisation as the "voice of the people". This appropriation of democratisation discourse occurs in other African countries too (see Hasty, 2006; Avle, 2011). In contrast, the Foucauldian approach cynically undermines the conception of *Homo Democraticus*, It is concerned more with resistance to diffuse power, first and foremost through a thorough understanding of where and how it operates.

But there are two points to note:

1) Due to the fact that rational debate, guided by the "force of the better argument", is the model upon which public deliberation is implicitly based in Malawi, it is worth examining how this imagined rational public sphere in itself shapes public discourse.

2) The implication of Foucault's power analytics is that individuals are completely *subjected* to discourse. This portrayal of inevitable entrapment is paralysing, and has to be circumvented. It means that even liberal norms of autonomy and equality are "themselves normalizing and instruments of domination" (Pickett, 1996: 463). For this reason, Foucault himself does suggest that resistance can take the form of movements that challenge prevailing mentalities and naturalised discourses, turning them into something problematic and potentially dangerous (Flyvbjerg, 2000: 11). Discourse can therefore be both "the means of oppressing and the means of resistance" (Mills, 2003: 55). The implication is that public deliberation will never, and should never, be completely free of conflict and contestation. As Young points out, "the exchange of ideas and processes of communication in a vibrant democracy take place as far more rowdy, disorderly and decentred processes" (Young, 2003: 118-119, in Gaynor, 2008: 133). This is not a study that prescribes means of resistance and participation, but it helps to see how these things actually work, rather than idealising the process.

2   Critical discourse settings in the urban public sphere

Discussions about the political affairs of Malawi occur everywhere in public life, to the point where some even complain about it:

> All we care for is politics, politics and more politics. When so much of our time and resources is spent demonstrating against, and praying for, arrogant politicians, it is about time we channelled our energies elsewhere.[62]

Someone similarly complained on *My Malawi My Views* when a young Malawian female contestant who was evicted from the "African Big Brother" reality TV show wanted to become a Malawian MP: "What's wrong with young people and politics. Is politics the only way one can help develop his or her country?" (July 20, 2013). Comments such as these allude to the centrality of politics in people's lives, and the perception that politics is the only domain where national problems are created and resolved. Thus, the attribution of so much influence to leaders shifts the bulk of responsibility to them as well. A Blantyre barman reflected melancholically on the habit of blaming politicians: "People keep accusing JB, but we must not forget the past suffering. We are all on the same boat, the same wreck, but instead of finding a solution, people just accuse.

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[62] *Rise, mother Malawi, rise!* Sunday Times, July 17, 2005

We cannot just sit and wait for JB to fix everything" (pers. comm., 15 August, 2012). Clearly, this preoccupation with politics, and leadership in particular, shows a public that is very eager to engage in discussion on national issues. This section examines the institutional character and identity of three discourse settings where such engagement occurs.

2.1   The Independent Press

Malawi's press history goes back to the 1880s. For 130 years publications have appeared and disappeared in a non-cumulative fashion, until today, where we still see only two daily newspapers in existence. The history of the press can be divided into three periods – colonial, post-colonial (under H.K. Banda), and democratic. The colonial press was born with the pioneer missionary publications, such as *Kalilole* (1881) and *Life and Work* (1888), which updated the Foreign Commission in Scotland on missionary activities, and also sometimes defended natives against excessive taxation, labour and land shortage issues; the vernacular publications imparted Christian values and increased literacy (Chitsulo and Mang'anda, 2011: 2-4). Many of the colonial-era publications contained content that was racist or counter to native interests. The *Bwalo ya Nyasaland* (est. 1953), for example, was full of pro-colonial propaganda and antagonistic to the anti-Federation Movement (Kishindo, 2009). During the world wars the papers were used to woo natives to enlist in the colonial army. Activist John Chilembwe wrote in the *Nyasaland Times* (formerly the *Central African Planter*) in 1914 that "…In times of peace everything [is] for Europeans only. And instead of honour we suffer humiliation with names contemptible. But in time of war…we are needed to share the hardship and shed our blood in equality." (Shepperson and Price, 1958). The Government was in uproar when this letter was published. Until then, the newspaper had never given a native voice, and was more likely to contain letters such as this one, in 1897:

> The African…is undeniably inferior to the lowest of the brute creation – an animal who is the typical personification of indolence, sloth, slovenliness, filthiness, and the one thousand other detestable features so foreign and repugnant to the white man…a miserable specimen of manhood, whose highest ambition is servility (Semberaka, 1980, n.p.).

The literate natives who read such rants must have felt outraged and resentful, and as the nationalist movement grew, new publications such as Aleke Banda's *Mtendere pa Ntchito* ("Peace at Work") and the *Malawi News*, emerged in 1959. The latter served as an independence fighting tool for the Malawi Congress Party, and still exists today as a weekly paper. H.K. Banda took over *The Times* (formerly the *Central African Planter*, then *Central African Times* (1897), then *Nyasaland Times* (1908)), which he combined with *Malawi News* under Blantyre Newspapers

Limited (BNL). The Times is today called the *Daily Times*. All the BNL publications are analysed in this thesis.

In Kamuzu Banda's time, BNL publications were mouthpieces of the MCP:[63] All other publications were 'safe' in their thematic content (business and sports). They had low and erratic circulation because they were so blatantly propagandistic, endlessly hailing the nation's achievements "due to the wise, dynamic and far-sighted leadership of the Ngwazi" (Chitsulo and Mang'anda, 2011: 10). Advocates of multi-partyism in the late '80s/early '90s expressed their views in photocopies and faxes circulated in the underground. After the Bishops' critical Lenten Letter *Living Our Faith* had broken the silence in 1992, John Tembo (Minister of State) announced on August 20, 1992, that the press would be free from censorship (Ibid, 220). Following that, 20 new publications popped up, including *The Nation,* exhibiting a more varied menu that included alternative political views.[64]. Most publications folded, however, soon after the multiparty Banda-bashing euphoria and the transition in 1994, because they were owned by journalists who lacked capital and business acumen. Today, the only publishing houses still standing with any significant circulation at all are Blantyre Newspapers Limited (BNL) and Nation Publications Limited (NPL).[65]

Nation Publications Limited was founded by Aleke Banda, a seasoned journalist, businessman and politician, in 1993. The company has since introduced the *Weekend Nation* (1995[66]) and the *Nation on Sunday* (2006) to its Monday-Friday publication, *The Nation* (About NPL, *MW Nation online*, n.d.). Its success is attributed to its access to capital and professionalism, with an independent editorial policy (Chitsulo et al., 2011: 14).

Blantyre Newspapers Limited, founded in 1895, has had the *Daily Times* (albeit through several incarnations) since its inception, and *Malawi News* since 1959, and introduced the *Sunday Times* in 2005. Its extensive history has made it successful. BNL is wholly owned by Chayamba Trust and is governed by an independent Board of Directors. Its papers have a reputation for being independent and professional like those of NPL.[67]

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[63] Job applicants went through an interview process which concluded with the following personal message from the BNL Chairman: "Speak well of Dr Banda, the party and the government… and of diplomats and the president's friends" (Chitsulo et al., 2011: 9)

[64] Because several publications had untrained staff, donors were invited to hold a Media Ethics seminar which took place in Blantyre in October, 1994 (ibid.: 12, 13)

[65] Some past party publications, such as UDF's *UDF Weekly* and the DPP's *Sky News* were blatantly partisan, non-competitive and therefore low impact. In the realm of radio, there exist many independent and respected stations, but the government-run MBC, which has historically exhibited bias towards the ruling party, has remained quite dominant. Its main competition comes from Zodiak, which reaches approximately 2 million listeners and broadcasts mainly in Chichewa. The radio is a mass medium and the only one that reaches the rural areas, where 84% of the population live. Television Malawi broadcasts nationally but of course television ownership is comparatively low outside urban areas, and state-run media are "strongly biased in favour of the government" (Freedom House, 2012 http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/malawi)

[66] Originally *Saturday Nation*

[67] Accurate and up to date circulation figures for the print media are hard to come by. According to Kondowe (2008: 6) *the Nation* had a circulation of 14,000 in 2003; the *Daily Times* had 10,000. In 2003 the *Weekend Nation* had 36,000;

The NPL and BNL publications are similar in format, writing style, and reputation,[68] and many of their employees have worked in both media houses. A large proportion of the papers' news reporting is devoted to politics. Additionally, there are often full pages devoted to an interview with a prominent person (an academic or politician) examining political issues, and also sometimes 2-page centre-spreads with debates on political issues. Letters to the editor, columns and editorials are almost invariably political in nature, in the more obvious sense of discussing political events or referring to the conduct of politicians, while poems and stories are often political allegories. The newspapers can therefore potentially be saturated with politics from front to back. Whereas in many countries a prominent state press counters the private press, for example in Ghana, where, "through an apparatus of state newspapers, radio, and television, the state composes the high drama of development and redemption, redundantly inventing its own heroic persona while interpellating readers as grateful political subjects in the national narrative (Hasty, 2006b: 73), in Malawi the state does not have this option in the print media. This leaves a significant state-influence gap in a domain of the media that is powerful in terms of agenda-setting for all other media. Professor Kanyongolo of the University of Malawi sees this as a significant feature of Malawi's public sphere:

> Politicians…take the newspapers seriously; more seriously than others would. But perhaps the reason the politicians take them more seriously is because they know that unlike in other places, for example where you have many newspapers (so somebody will read the Sun, somebody will read the Mail, it's kind of more diversified) here you know that every literate member of the middle class will read *The Nation* and the *Daily Times* today. So what is there matters. It begins to shape how people think. And as a politician, if you are a clever politician, then you are paying attention to that.[69]

Indeed, most columnists have been personally contacted by politicians. Some confided their typical interactions with the powers that be:[70]

> I sometimes get telephone calls on various topics, where some politicians would want us to discuss or laugh about what I had written in the column.
>
> Several [politicians] have contacted me with feedback and sometimes they release press releases to refute. The last president directly refered to my stories at rallies.
>
> Judging by correspondence that hits my inbox…politicians read my articles.
>
> Many politicians do not miss reading my articles as evidenced by the phone calls and emails I get from them all the time. The feedback is both positive and negative.
>
> I get a lot of feedback from politicians, including ruling power executive members and cabinet ministers.

Malawi News had 27,000. According the *Nation on Sunday* editor, it is estimated that copies are shared by on average 10 other people.

[68] NPL has a slight edge over BNL in terms of popularity and winning media awards.

[69] Author interview, 20 Oct, 2012

[70] Information acquired through face-to-face interviews and email responses to a questionnaire.

2.2   The Public Affairs Committee (PAC)

The 'parameters of the political' in Africa are broad (Schatzberg, 2001: 72); they include the domains of religion, sport and business – domains which "political science tends to see as being outside its proper purview". This means that religion and the occult play important roles in people's understandings of political causalities and rational behaviour. Many (e.g. Geschiere, 1997; Chabal, 2009) see witchcraft as an adaptation to the demands of modernity, defying the predictions of modernization theory. "Witchcraft in Africa has 'mutated' in a way that has made it entirely germane to 'modern' politics. [It has] adapted to the capitalist economy, electoral politics and even the spread of new technologies in communication," and provides convincing explanations and remedies for political and economic events (Chabal, 2009: 75). But in the dominant discourses of the Malawian urban public sphere, the occult is rarely mentioned except sometimes to interrogate or ridicule it; in general, political causalities and remedies are framed within the logic of social science. Nevertheless, religious leaders play an important role in national politics. But this has not always been the case. The churches complied with the MCP regime in the one-party era:

> Every Sunday in churches of all denominations leaders prayed for the long life and prosperity of the dictator who was ruthlessly exploiting and brutally oppressing the people. At every national occasion the church leaders were present to provide religious legitimation for the political status quo (Ross, 1996: 38).

It was only with the winds of change that they decided to take daring action in 1992. As a powerful moral conscience (despite previous silence on the regime's abuses), the Catholic Church was able to inflict irreversible damage to the legitimacy of Kamuzu Banda and the MCP with its (March, 1992) Lenten Letter. In June the Church of Central African Presbyterians (CCAP) also broke their silence and wrote a letter entitled 'The Nation of Malawi in Crisis: The Church's Concern', calling for structural reform of the political system, fair income distribution, an end to detention without trial, etc. (Newell, 1995: 257). Other social groupings – the Catholics, Anglicans, Muslims, Law society and business fraternity – joined the Presbyterians in demanding that government form a Commission to deal with all the issues listed. This umbrella civil society group became the "Public Affairs Committee", set up to conduct dialogue with the government. It was the first open political pressure group since 1966 (Ibid: 258).

Religious leaders could fulfil a very important civil society function at the local level, as "micro-level agents of political change", given their status in local communities, but it appears

that most have shown little interest in grassroots activism, which "should clearly temper any overly romanticised notions that the clergy will be the champions of grassroots civil society" (VonDoepp, 2002: 136). Since their pivotal role in inciting mass movements for reform in the early 1990s, they have remained more active on the level of national politics, teaching civic education and often acting as a moral conscience chastising irresponsible elites. While PAC was originally an umbrella body for religious groups, it has morphed into a 'quasi-religious' organisation, with its conferences comprising a heterogeneous group. The second all-inclusive stakeholders conference, 2012, which I attended, comprised a group of "the media fraternity, political parties (both the Opposition and the Government), the academia, representatives of the Malawi Defense Force, the legal fraternity, Malawi Congress of Trade Union, representatives of Civil Society Organizations and Non-Governmental organizations, faith leaders, the Private Sector, and observers from various sectors of the Malawian Society including some key donor organizations" (PAC conference communiqué, 8 Nov., 2012).

PAC has played a prominent and symbolically powerful role in civil society since the transition, maintaining a certain authority to read the "signs of the times" while censuring the country's leadership. Thus "the role of PAC in the process of building and consolidating a democratic culture in Malawi cannot be overemphasized" (Immink and Chigona, 2004: 149). It has been more than a mere voice of the people. It has actually successfully curbed abuses of power by the executive that have seriously threatened Malawi's democracy. Its meetings are always covered in the newspapers and cited throughout the public sphere; its pronouncements are authoritative and influential.

2.2.1   PAC's 2012 "second all-inclusive stakeholders conference"

Held at Blantyre's Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel from 30-31 October, 2012, this conference was entitled *"Time to restore democratic and economic governance"*. Given their history of convening in circumstances of particularly strained relationships between the government and the masses, the meeting signified foreboding. While religious leaders led prayers and the opening and closing address, the three conference speakers were professors of politics (Dr. Blessings Chinsinga), law (Dr. Edge Kanyongolo) and economics (Dr. Matthews Chikaonda (also former finance minister and now a company CEO)) – clearly demonstrating how the role of religious leaders is more symbolic and less instrumental in shaping PAC's views. Certainly, the articulate and educated religious leaders engaged with the scientific discussion about Malawi's problems presented by the academic trio. But as they and others remarked humorously, Chinsinga, Kanyongolo and Chikaonda were like "superstars".

2.2.1.1 Discourse and deliberation

It was a gathering of mostly Malawian elites. They arrived in expensive vehicles to the plush hotel where it took place, outside which some bystanders commented on the number of influential public figures whom they witnessed arriving and entering the building. The discussion topics over the two days were based entirely on 3 presentations. Following each was an extended debate amongst the whole audience. The three presenters took it upon themselves to read the signs of the times, capture the national mood and outline the fundamental political and cultural problems underlying the nation's woes. Despite the presence of some ministers and MPs in the room, the discussion was dominated by the theme of poor leadership – a nation held back by the collective failure of political elites. Several politicians (from different parties) who were present joined in with the accusations; yet they were perceived to be hypocritical in doing so, and their comments provoked mockery.

Amongst the attendees of the conference, there was a high level of concurrence with the basic assessments of the 3 presenters. Opinions varied on which issues were most salient, and which solutions (from a limited range) were most feasible. But aside from these points of mild contention, there was unanimous indignation at the fact that 48 years of independence had seen nothing substantial in the way of national development, largely because of *failed leadership* (aid dependence was an important factor for which donors themselves were seen as partly responsible, but it was ultimately a dependent variable on bad domestic leadership). The prevailing view was that politicians, especially presidents, were primarily responsible for the nation's hugely disappointing developmental trajectory.

The PAC conference was a forum for deliberation about issues of national concern (autonomous of the state). Status, gender and age did not obviously affect the confidence with which delegates and even guests spoke out, nor the degree to which their points of view were taken up for discussion. Dominated by the language and concepts of social science (introduced by the three presenters), and in the spirit of rational, evidence-based argumentation, the PAC debate was for the most part guided by the 'force of the better argument', and was therefore conceived as a primary site of public opinion formation in the interests of the nation.

2.2.1.1.1   Perpetuating the dystopian narrative

At the same time, the conference debate re-presented and reinforced the dominant perceptions and assumptions that pervade the wider urban public sphere; it was subsumed by the dominant urban political discourse, in which poor leadership is ultimately responsible for national failure. Moreover, the three presenters, who were undoubtedly among the most academically qualified in their respective fields, possessed significant power to influence the conference outcomes, since

their main ideas and insights were effectively rubber stamped by the delegates at the end of the day and drafted into resolutions at night. Kanyongolo reflected on this influence over public discourse through PAC:

> It's frightening; it is frightening; it's frightening, I'm telling you, it's frightening! Because I'm beginning only to realise this now, to some extent, and I think that it is frightening, and I don't say this lightly. I think it is frightening in the sense of how much responsibility it gives one to be very, very careful in terms of what you say. You cannot be like a student any more, where basically you say what comes to mind, because the consequences of what you say are now much greater (author interview, 20 Nov., 2012).

Last-minute changes to his presentation at 11 o'clock at night became conference resolutions that were sent directly to State House and quoted all over the media. The audience was impressed and convinced by the legitimacy of the social scientific and legal assessments, and went along with the corresponding prescriptions, which were very much in line with the diffuse notion that leadership is the fulcrum upon which national success or failure hinges.

2.3   An online political forum: *My Malawi My Views*

Malawi's intellectual *Lamp Magazine* published an article entitled: "*Social media: its impact on Malawian youth,*"[71] claiming that Facebook has the potential to transform the Malawian public sphere, with many people engaging in citizen journalism by posting breaking news on social forums. A local journalist advises young people to make use of this opportunity:

> Most definitely, freedom of expression is flourishing via the social networks. Social networks are a key to the dispensation of information and youths are proudly championing this. Fellow youngsters, it is high time we apply the same energy depicted in social media activism to practical reality and help fueling engines of the country's democracy and fresh dynamic views as well as ideas. [72]

The impact of this sphere of public debate has evidently been felt at the very top. In 2011, Mutharika directly threatened users of social media sites who disrespected his authority, claiming that they were being monitored. *My Malawi My Views* is one of the most prominent of these Facebook groups, with 14800 members in July 2013. As with all forums, members post comments, links or pictures, and others can comment beneath them in what becomes a discussion thread. Despite occasional partisan arguments, name-calling, and accusations of baseless claims, the atmosphere is usually harmonious. What is interesting is the way *MMMV* group administrators and participants explicitly define the parameters of discussion in accordance

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[71] *The Lamp* magazine, reproduced in http://pamtengo.com/?p=99 (accessed July 16, 2013).
[72] Malawian journalist quoted in *The Lamp* (http://pamtengo.com/?p=99 , accessed July 16, 2013)

with the conditions of communicative rationality, as well as setting the agenda at the level of national issues. For example, an administrator brought all members' attention to the nature and conditions of debate as follows:

> This group is called "My Malawi My Views". This however does not mean any and every view is allowed, as long as a Malawian holds it. This forum seeks to be a place where Malawians from different backgrounds share their aspirations for the nation; a place where they express their ideas on how to make Malawi better. It is a place where members of the group examine present realities in their nation; pointing out positives and encouraging them, and identifying shortfalls and constructively suggesting ways to improve. It also seeks to be a conduit for discussions and suggestions that might be used for action on the ground, or make policy suggestions to government or bodies that affect the lives of Malawians. It will help provide that conduit.
>
> As Admins of this group, we note the quality of conversation so far achieved owing to recent reforms that have been instituted. We thank you all for your compliance and cooperation. However, it is obvious that the group is still not as vibrant, objective, accommodative, respectful and informative as it could be. Our greatest challenge remains to ensure that we have posts that encourage intelligent, objective, fair and progressive discourse. Towards this end, we have tried to sensitize members on the rules of posting, we have tried discouraging partisan politicking and political zealotry (evidenced by posting of empty political statements and photos of political candidates and rallies; and harassing of more politically neutral and impartial members by flooding posts with comments by party supporters) but these calls have gone unheeded.
>
> We believe that MMMV can become a greater platform for genuine national discourse of the issues that affect us and the aspirations we hold for our beloved country… MMMV is for all of us. Admins are simply the custodians of this great platform for interaction and change. We wish all members an enjoyable and truly beneficial MMMV membership.
>
> *MMMV Admins.*

Usually debates begin spontaneously with people's comments on others' posts, and they may fizzle out inconclusively, as well as turn to trivia, humour, and other features of a relaxed, informal sphere. But occasionally debates are more determinedly pursued. For example, one debate was introduced as follows:

> Welcome to the debate titled "How can Malawi come out of the perennial economic problems?" The debate will start with the moderator's views. Then all people will be welcome to debate objectively with facts backed with evidence where necessary. This is NOT a time to hand-clap for parties. Any views contrary to the topic are not welcome. Tough questions will be asked to any claims, so be ready to take them. The debate may take days to finish.

The debate that ensued in this particular case, on Malawi's economic problems, was informed, cordial, and constructive, involving several dozen members. It began with an extremely detailed overview of several thousand words on Malawi's economic situation, entirely in English. Most comments, however, code-switch between English and Chichewa phrases.

The difference between the *MMMV* forum and the newspapers or PAC meetings is that it is imagined as an *alternative public*, though not as a *counter-public* (see Fraser, 1990). It is outside of "the" national public sphere, in the sense that it does not directly address the whole of society

and the state, but rather a group of youthful, educated citizens who want to see change. Yet it interlinks with other public discourses, sharing their assumptions and oppositional positioning vis-à-vis the state. The fact that this sphere of discourse is imagined as alternative to the main public sphere is also evidenced by the content – often representing "youth" interests as coinciding with the group's interests – and commenters on *MMMV* never address the state directly. On the contrary, newspaper columns, letters and editorials frequently address politicians or the government directly. This does not mean that ideas shared on *MMMV* are not intended to effect real policy change. However, as one commenter pointed out: "every day patriotic Malawians share good ideas on this forum. I am not sure if any of the good ideas reach our leaders" (July 15, 2013).

3 Interlinking Discourses: Newspapers, PAC and Facebook

The newspapers, the PAC and the Facebook forum as 'discursive planes' are very much interlinked, with discourse flowing in all directions between them – they cross-reference and cross-fertilise, constituting, together, a significant portion of written discourse in the urban public sphere. The Public Affairs Committee's ideas about transformative versus transactional leadership, for example, were disseminated through the newspapers (as are all of the PAC's statements), and thereafter became discursive memes, appearing again and again in analyses of Malawian leadership. Many of the PAC members are interviewed as experts by newspapers. Newspapers are frequently cited on *MMMV*, and photographs of newspaper articles are often uploaded to the forum. Some of the newspaper journalists and editors are also members of *My Malawi My Views*. Additionally, online newspapers and blogs are often linked on *MMMV*. This interlinking means that common discursive strategies, myths and ideologies have become established across written discourse in the urban public sphere.

3.1 Prominent figures in the public sphere

Certain individuals have become key figures in the public sphere, due to their prominent appearances across several public domains. They appear to be regarded as producing "authoritative speech", which makes them "more persuasive, more convincing, and more attended to" (Philips, 2004: 475, in Reyes, 2011). In the Malawian public sphere, a fairly small pool of academics have come to wield significant influence over certain domains of public discourse, giving them the power to *represent* power i.e. to interpret the behaviour of politicians and the meaning of political events.

One common characteristic of many of these key figures is what could be called their cosmopolitanism. Here I broaden the conventional sense of the term (which suggests a state of

being at ease in many different countries and cultures) to incorporate elements of Ferguson's (1999), Werbner's (2004) and Hasty's (2006) understandings of the notion. Ferguson describes as cosmopolitan those people who are not so much "at home in the world" as seekers of "worldliness at home". They will not be "bound by the claims and proprieties of the local" (1999: 212). While he sees this phenomenon at all socio-economic levels (therefore as irreducible to cultural expressions of class), it is often found amongst those with "middle-class, professional, and elite status" (ibid., 213). Werbner describes Botswana's cosmopolitan elites as the sort of people who will fulfil their social obligations to their rural home community, but at the same time be "a very active Rotarian, who very much enjoys that organization's inclusive sociality, proudly wears the Rotary Club badge, and strongly supports its broad causes, irrespective of ethnic difference" (2004: 65). In her study of the press in Ghana, Hasty refers to the very notions of culture and politics as being "at once distinctly African and assertively cosmopolitan", meaning they incorporate worldly discourses (2006: 28). All of these senses capture something of the cosmopolitanism I would attribute to many of the key figures in the Malawian urban public sphere and the utterances they produce. The combination of foreign experiences (especially being educated abroad), access to global discourse, and their conscious, specialist analyses of Malawian culture (gender attitudes, deference, conservatism, passivity and so forth) leads them to transcend the local, or to straddle the local and the foreign. They are cultural innovators and introducers of exogenous discourses into domestic spheres, in a strategic process not unlike the "extraversion" described by Bayart (2000) (see the conclusion for further discussion of this). A brief description of some of these individuals will clarify and substantiate these claims[73]:

Dr. Blessings Chinsinga is a professor of political science and public administration at Chancellor College (University of Malawi). He completed his higher education abroad – Masters at Cambridge and PhD at Mainz. Chinsinga appears frequently in the newspapers, quoted as a "political expert" passing sober judgment on political events, often accompanied by a large photograph.[74] (He claims, however, to have more influence on public opinion through his

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[73] 1. There is no such thing as the wholesale importation of global discourses into the Malawian public sphere. Extraversion, as used here, involves a complex articulation of Western notions with local ones. 2. It should not be assumed that all those who, in the public domain, so passionately defend the principles of democracy and vehemently denounce contrary behaviour, necessarily live by such principles in their private lives (as the phenomenon of young politicians "selling out" attests to (Chinsinga, author interview)); 2.

[74] For example, when Joyce Banda backed out of Malawi's commitment to host the AU summit, because of Al-Bashir's war crimes charges, Chinsinga was asked to give his verdict on the decision. He was said to have "hailed government for making the bold decision", and was quoted giving sound reasons for why it would not hurt Malawi. (*Nation on Sunday*, June 10, 2012). On another occasion, a front-page was splashed with a picture of a perplexed Joyce Banda next to the headline: *FAILED: Survey shows Malawians feel JB has not delivered as President*. An article with a large portrait of Chinsinga asked for his interpretation of the survey results:

> … Chinsinga said the results of the survey do not come as a surprise. He said in many cases, the coming in of a new leader is accompanied by excitement which soon dies down when reality sets in…"Despite reversing the late Bingu wa Mutharika's bad policies, Banda's government has not made a 'wow decision' which people can point at and be proud of the government. Malawians are also disappointed because they expected a break from the politics of the previous administration, but they realised that things were unlikely to change, especially with the PP convention that brought in people that were in the past administrations that caused the current problems Malawi is facing."

conference appearances). Additionally, he writes columns, such as "Talking Political Economy" for the *Sunday Times*. With themes such as, "*When the African chief invades the legal-rational sphere*",[75] Chinsinga introduces specialist political science discourses into the 'interdiscourse' (i.e. non-scientific discourse) of the public sphere, often to highlight the deficiencies of Malawian mindsets that undermine the proper functioning of legal-rational bureaucracy, as he did in his presentation at the 2nd Public Affairs Committee conference of 2012. He is somewhat cynical about the prospects for change in the country, citing prevailing political culture as slow to change (author interview, 12 Oct., 2012). Chinsinga is also a member of the Zomba Gymkhana Club, an old former colonial club in the former capital city, where he talks about politics with middle-class Malawians (although he sees this as being "of no consequence", because it is not "an open public sphere, in which those discussions can catch the imagination of a critical mass" (ibid)).

He plays down his influence over public opinion, but suggests that he may have some impact through his speeches at various high-level forums, including the AGMs of The Malawi Congress of Trade Unions, the Employers' Association of Malawi, the Economic Association of Malawi, and of course the high-profile conferences of the Public Affairs Committee: "Through those high-level meetings, I should think I've been able to influence how some of the people think about the future of this country…[and] the way some think about the political processes in this country." But he bemoans the fact that Chancellor College does not hold more public forums so that the expertise of its economics, law and politics staff can be utilised in national policy-making.

Dr. Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula is head of the English literature department at Chancellor College, having obtained her PhD in Birmingham. She has also lived for several years with her family in New York. Aside from full-time lecturing, she is a human rights and feminist activist, appearing frequently in the newspapers and writing a column on women's empowerment in a patriarchal society. Kabwila-Kapasula claims to have always been somewhat rebellious, refusing to fit into societal expectations. Many people I spoke to implied that she had become a household name in urban spheres after spearheading the academic freedom saga campaign in 2011. On her influence in the public sphere, she says:

> The few of us who are educated, happen to be very influential because of our background, that educated people "know things". The town people "know". There is a large part of the African psyche that has given up the running of this country to the few of us who are educated. It's unfortunate, but that's how it is. We're very powerful here. Being an academic in Malawi, and who does research, it actually inundates you with responsibility. It's not a power that we celebrate, because trust me it comes with a lot of responsibility. It's a big big weight, you know? Like when I went to Chikhwawa village, I had people who are poor, who have no shoes, they've nothing. But they just heard that Jessie is coming, and they said, "I don't care what you are talking about, but the fact that I can just hold your hand, and I know that when I see you everything will be

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[75] Sunday Times, May 1, 2011

okay." That's enormous, I mean you are like, what have I got? I just have a piece of chalk, and that's it, you know? I don't even have money to my name (author interview, 11 Oct., 2012).

Dr. Edge Kanyongolo is a constitutional law professor at Chancellor College, who obtained his Masters from Cambridge and PhD from the University of East Anglia. He was a politically active student under Banda's regime and was consequently jailed without trial. He has been active in PAC since its inception in the early 1990s, and has written newspaper columns on and off over the years, on the law and constitutionalism. He is also quoted in the papers from time to time as a "constitutional expert", which makes him very noticeable when the contentious issue of section 65 (MPs crossing the floor) looms. As noted earlier in reference to the PAC conference, he is aware of the significant influence he may have over public opinion through the dissemination of his ideas in such high-level forums.

Rafiq Hajat was an underground activist for democracy at the end of Kamuzu's reign, then part of the constitution-writing team, and then a minister in the UDF government, until he made an impassioned speech criticising Muluzi's attempts to amend the constitution to allow him a third term, for which Hajat was "ignominiously ejected from the party" (author interview, Oct 2, 2012). He is now a prominent civil society activist, and features periodically in the newspapers and radio discussion forums (for example on the meaning of democracy[76]). He was instrumental in organising the July 20 demonstrations against aspects of Mutharika's regime in 2011, which resulted in his organisation's headquarters being burned down. Hajat went into hiding until his Norwegian connections, with whom he had co-written a book on governance and politics in Malawi, helped him gain refuge in their country until Mutharika died. Despite his high profile, Hajat has found it difficult to be accepted in society as a politically engaged citizen, because this does not fit the stereotype of Asians: "Asians are supposed to be businessmen, and profit-oriented. That's a box which I've tried very hard to break" (ibid.). He is inspired by Ghandi, and high principles of integrity and sacrifice:

> I'm an old man, and I have no wish to sully [my life's work] by compromising at this stage, especially not for something as ephemeral as material gain, which would basically make a travesty of everything I've worked for (ibid.).

He makes social scientific assessments of Malawi's problems: pointing out excessive neopatrimonialism, a lack of ideology, a split between the civic and primordial publics (i.e. Ekeh, 1975), etc.

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[76] Though he prefers to "delve into applied research, where you investigate an issue, dig down, and then feed the information to policy-makers as well as the public, and try and influence policy from that angle, rather than screaming polemics from the rooftop" (author interview, Limbe, Oct 2, 2012).

John Kapito, once head of Malawi Human Rights Commission, and now head of the Consumers'
Association of Malawi, has "kept both Bakili Muluzi and Bingu wa Mutharika on their toes and
has also stood up to remind President Joyce Banda whenever she gets off track", according to a
columnist[77]. He has organised several demonstrations against the PP's currency policies
(devaluation and floatation) without any mitigating effects for the poor and in September, 2012,
he asked Joyce Banda to step down. Kapito epitomises the verbally confrontational stance that
many middle class urbanites have taken, especially via the media, towards the perceived
intransigence of elites. This makes him a specific type of democratic hero, as this comment
captures:

> John Kapito is a prototype of a citizen and an activist which every Malawian should strive to be
> like for the sake of our democracy and holding our political leaders under check. We may not
> agree with some of his ideas and methods of doing things but I'm of the belief that if Malawi had
> just some ten John Kapito-type of activists, the story of our democracy would have been
> different.
>   Malawi needs more John Kapitos as proactive citizens and activists who never sit back
> and watch while the country is being poorly governed and ripped off by politicians. Even if it
> means doing it alone, John Kapito has always spoken and acted against ills of any government.
> He is so daring and courageous to the extent of risking his own life for the sake of Malawi. While
> many of his civil society colleagues, who were along with him at the forefront of speaking against
> bad governance during both the Muluzi and Mutharika eras, have been swallowed by the present
> government through public appointments, Kapito has remained one of the last men and women
> standing.[78]

These are a few individuals, amongst others in a fairly small pool of public figures, who have
become prominent political commentators in the public sphere. Apart from bringing worldly
experience, inspiration and *specialist* knowledge into public discourse, they display a strong sense
of national pride – affirming the country's potential even while lamenting the status quo; a lack of
'unnecessary' deference for authority; and a professed solidarity with the ordinary, poor
Malawian.

    Another influential group of opinion-makers in the print media is columnists. The
number of political columns has increased since the early 2000s, and a clear narrative style and
content about politics and leadership has developed through their texts. Most journalists have
trained at the Malawi Institute of Journalism or the Blantyre Polytechnic. But columnists are
often more established journalists. For example, Gracian Tukula is both a Sunday columnist and
editor of the *Nation on Sunday*. He has been working with NPL since the early 1990s, when he
was 19 years old[79]. Some of the other regular columnists have been newspaper owners since the
early 1990s. But the average age of 8 prominent columnists I asked was 34, and one of the most

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[77] John Kapito is my 2013 grand national achiever, *Daily Times*, July 9, 2013
[78] ibid.
[79] Author interview, 21 Sep. 2012 + 6 Dec. 2012

provocatively critical yet eloquent is just 23 years old, a graduate with distinction in English from Chancellor College[80]. Most are men.

These columnists (since 2003 when newspapers became non-partisan) take an oppositional stance to the state, and speak unanimously of high democratic principles and the need for a complete overhaul of the established political culture. Therefore, they are important contributors to the critical discourse strand on leadership.

3.1.1   Academic Freedom Saga and the Public sphere

The academic freedom saga of 2011 – a stand-off between Chancellor College lecturers and the President himself – provides a fascinating case study of how a ground-breaking act of resistance to the ultimate power-holder gripped the public sphere, especially because the resistance was headed by Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula, whose notable attributes in this regard were that she was decades younger than Mutharika, and a woman. It began on February 12, 2011, when professor of political science at Chancellor College, Dr. Blessings Chinsinga, was summoned by the Inspector General of Police to be questioned over a lecture he gave about the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, in which he compared some conditions that sparked the uprisings to the conditions in Malawi[81]. In response to this summoning, several lecturers began to boycott classes at both Chancellor College (Zomba) and the Polytechnic (Blantyre), citing restrictions on academic freedom. Mutharika accused Chinsinga of "teaching revolution" and ordered the lecturers to return to work (Cammack, 2012: 377). With Kabwila-Kapasula as their figurehead, several academic staff members marched daily around Chancellor College campus with their mouths gagged in red cloth to symbolise the state's attack on academic freedom. Sometimes these resulted in heavy-handed police responses. For example, the *Daily Times* on March 9th describes "Chanco" as a "war zone" that day, dedicating an entire page to detailing the hour by hour events as they occurred, including police invading halls of residents throwing tear gas, a lecturer charging at a pack of 23 policemen demanding that they leave the campus, villagers from nearby approaching with panga knives and stones to yell insults at the police, and some students dressed in ruling party regalia protesting against the stand-off.

The colleges were closed indefinitely on April 6 after several such disputes. On May 28th, the lecturers celebrated the hundredth day of the academic freedom movement with a large march, having won an injunction against Zomba City Council's ban of the march. As the Academic Staff Union Secretary announced: "We are giving out leaflets to all citizens seeking to support academic freedom and indeed defend the Republican Constitution".[82] Four of the lecturers who were central to the academic freedom movement, including Blessings Chinsinga

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[80] Author interview, 22 Sep. 2012
[81] *Chanco lecturers agree to teach, but cautious*, Nyasatimes, October 26, 2011
[82] *City Council stops lecturers' demo*, Daily Times, May 27, 2011

and Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula, were fired for not returning to teach, and Chancellor College remained closed for several months due to the stand-off, causing a serious disruption to students' study programmes. In August, when classes still had not resumed, the Chancellor College Student Union decided to camp outside the University Office, complaining that, "We have resolved to make ourselves heard because we are the ones suffering. All we need is for the concerned parties to agree so that we return to class"[83]. After 8 months, the impasse was finally resolved when Mutharika caved in and agreed on October 25th, 2011, to reinstate the fired lecturers without conditions, which they accepted, claiming they had always been willing to teach, so long as their freedom was guaranteed[84].

This saga attracted a lot of media attention, where the virtues of academic freedom were carefully explained, and it inspired the use of red cloth to symbolise defiance in the face of state oppression, especially during the July 20 riots of that year. A Facebook page called "Support Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula and Academic Freedom in Malawi" had been set up at the beginning of the saga, on which numerous media updates on the stand-off were constantly posted. The movement even enjoyed international solidarity; for example, 28 students at the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg were photographed holding a Malawi academic freedom banner next to an Amnesty International banner. This made it to Malawian newspapers and the Malawian National Assembly. A year later Kabwila-Kapasula was invited to Germany to give an update on the state of academic freedom in Malawi[85].

Kabwila-Kapasula became a prominent national figure during the saga, primarily through the media.[86] In an interview (11 October, 2012) she talked about her own criticism of Bingu and the impact of the academic freedom saga. It is clear that she refuses to be deferential to the head of state:

> …That made Bingu very mad. Because I wasn't only talking about the way he's rude to us as an executive member of the government, but the way the bloated executive, the bloated powers of the executive, they are just pretty much ego. They just thought they could run this world…

According to Kabwila-Kapasula's interpretation, the episode gave people an added confidence in expressing their anger, with the mentality that…

> … "We are not going to be voiceless again." And that's why Joyce Banda is in serious trouble because she is taking over…the administration of her people, who have just awakened to their power and they know this is their thing. Nobody can take it away from them. So now this whole

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[83] Chanco students to camp at Unima Office, *Daily Times*, August 17, 2011
[84] Chanco Lecturers agree to teach, but cautious, *Nyasatimes*, Oct 26, 2011
[85] Kabwila celebrates Malawi's academic freedom at Martin Luther University, *Nyasatimes*, June 12, 2012
[86] Even after Mutharika's death, newspapers have featured her authoritative opinion on various matters of public concern. One newspaper published a full double page spread on "Who is Jessie Kabwila?" She writes a regular column for the women's section, invoking global liberal feminist discourses on the patriarchal society and the empowerment of women, although she insists that she does not want to reproduce "Euro-Western thinking", and is conscious of how colonialism shaped her identity (author interview, Zomba, Oct 11, 2012).

thing of, "Yes bwana, yes amayi" [yes Sir, yes Madame] … No no no, that's not going to happen. People like me – I don't have time to be a sycophant, or to be a hand-clapper. It can't happen.

As an insider in the organisation of protest marches, she acknowledged the mutual support of academics and media:

> I think the media played a large, large role. Because you look at the coverage, they took a lot of risks, and I think part of it is, Bingu was so stupid that he squeezed the media. He squeezed *The Nation* [newspaper] – now you don't do that! Because they will come and fight back. If you look at the Bills that he passed…which was just pretty much shutting down shop for the media…And because the media already had its own bone to grind, they were very willing partners. In the academic freedom struggle, you find that the media and the academics had a very close partnership.

Kabwila sees the academic freedom saga as a critical juncture that to some extent united the country and included rural participation:

> It was very significant. I'm not trying to say nothing had been done before, but as a collective, as a country, it was significant. The way Bingu reacted made it a galvanising point for the whole country… We worked a lot on networking. We made this thing a rural issue. We did not make it about us. For example, we were walking with villagers. We had a walk every day for 250 days, and villagers were joining us. We had an eighty something year old man, who came to say, "I need to defend this constitution. This is crazy." …We would go to a market and we would start explaining: what is academic freedom, what does it mean? What did Mukhito do? How did he break academic freedom? And why we are not teaching?

Chinsinga, however, is more cautious about overstating the symbolic significance of this struggle, for which his lecture was the initial spark:

> I think we cannot particularly single it out as THE moment that signified that change in our political culture. I think the point should be that there have been moments in our history since 1994, that people have risen up to challenge the authorities. But the problem is that these moments are not sustained into a process that really fundamentally alters our political culture (author interview, 12 Oct. 2012).

4   Contestation between the state and the urban public

Mbembe characterises the state-society relation as one more of connivance than resistance. Such a characterisation may have seemed wholly applicable in the era of tyrants, but democratisation has clearly changed the engagement of citizens in public space. Public discourse does more than reveal abuses of power; its struggles bring about shifts in the meaning of legitimate authority and appropriate norms of deference for authority. After the excessive displays of power through

ceremonialism and hegemonic constructions of reality under Kamuzu Banda[87], testing of the limits of discursive freedom and negotiation of new social norms has required both courage and improvisation, given the relatively short time-period of less than two decades of the free public sphere. Strategies and struggles to modify the prevailing social, political and cultural structures through discourse is where the agency of people can be located.

4.1   Lack of Deference for Authority

For a society that only 20 years ago had a disciplinarian government demanding and enforcing respect for authority, especially by controlling the practices and discourse of youth (see van Dijk, 1999), it is surprising that democratic Malawi's public sphere sees even the youngest commentators effectively ignoring norms of deference and decorum that would likely pertain in interpersonal communication.[88] Mockery and criticism can occur usually without significant risk of retribution. But these norms are still negotiable and unstable, evidenced by the many conflicts that have arisen, when either the state or members of society overstep the vaguely defined and shifting mark of acceptability. The newspapers, for example, as Mchakulu (2011: 46) observes, "have struggled to redefine their role in a multiparty society".

Lack of deference is reflected in rhetorical devices that deflate and thereby undermine the symbolic power that deference is supposed to acknowledge. These devices include tones of scorn, mockery and contempt, oppositional decoding of authorities' statements, and direct address. These strategies of disempowerment, or at least diminishment of power, are justified by the democratic principle that elected leaders are servants of the people. Humorous ridicule is one favoured style of writing for newspaper columnists. Sometimes it is dark and cynical, but often it defuses highly tense political moments, by simply reducing political power struggles to comic buffoonery, as this columnist did during the build up to Bingu's imminent legitimacy crisis in 2011:

> Malawi is an exciting place to be at the moment…Journalists are no longer struggling for headline grabbers as our comedians that pass for politicians continue to entertain the masses when they should be working. So fluid is the situation that it is difficult to keep track of events. In one moment you see the oldest party, MCP, maintaining its slow but steady course to oblivion and in the next instance you see the UDF doing everything in its power to claim an existence that is

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[87] Exemplifying what Mbembe calls the postcolonial state's "tendency to excess and a lack of proportion" (1992: 3).
[88] Even in unmediated spaces, lack of deference may be an increasing trend. For example, during a demonstration by students of Chancellor College in Zomba, an intimidating rowdy mob of several hundreds young adults wielding branches marched down the road from campus. When they reached a billboard featuring a picture of Joyce Banda, the crowd began to yell all manner of sexual obscenities at it in Chichewa. In another example, at the opening of the first Youth Parliament at the National Assembly in Lilongwe in September, 2012, the ceremony was attended by mostly teenage students (several hundred of them) and young adults. It included several speeches by dignitaries (among them Cabinet ministers). It was surprising to note how ministers' speeches were accompanied by much tittering from the young audience, burlesque clapping, and howls of laughter when there were technical faults (source: author participant observations).

largely a mirage. The DPP, on its part, appears so determined to ensure that its moment of glory is as short as humanly possible[89].

'Direct address' as a rhetorical device is used by newspaper editors, letter-writers and columnists of every age and social standing. It has become more prevalent with the increase in political columns and 'opinion and analysis' sections in the newspapers over the last decade. Direct address may be polite or unapologetically rude, even to the point of being condescending. For example, a column written "*to Joyce and country*" by a 23-year old journalist, reads:

> I am writing hoping that my August letter to you found you in good health. November is folding her mat ready to go to give room to December, yet you have not responded to my letter. Unrequited friendship hurts so much dear Joyce but, knowing that friendship must survive trials, I have gathered courage to write you again… Dear Joyce, people out here are angry with how your government is splashing out in these economic hard times. I will take it that you are not aware of what is happening because you are too busy gallivanting to petty rallies instead of being at the office to sort out national issues…[90]

One columnist audaciously impersonates Mutharika in all his columns[91] (thus the narrator is the voice of Mutharika), uttering statements to the nation, such as: "You think when I say I am made of steel I play jokes or what?"; "…You have no options at all – you either deal with me: at my own terms, taking my orders, or you completely close your mouths and wait for 2014…"[92]

Even when articles criticise an authority in the third person, their titles are often designed to be punchy direct addresses, such as "*Stop twisting Bingu's arm*"[93] (addressed to Muluzi); "*Deal with issues; Leave Banda alone*"[94] (addressed to Mutharika); "*Bingu, tell Malawians the truth*"[95], and there are ways to create the same impact even in 'neutral' news reports by using a direct quote from the article as an accusatory title e.g. *"Feel ashamed about your lies, Mr. President"*[96]. In some instances, direct address can begin with flattery, congratulating leaders before getting to the critical point. But it is indeed rare to see unreserved praise for anyone in authority, without some qualifying remarks, warnings, criticisms, at least since the newspapers gained significant political neutrality. For example, this deferential address to Bingu wa Mutharika carries a warning:

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[89] No dull moment, *Nation On Sunday*, April 3, 2011

[90] *Daily Times*, Nov 30, 2012

[91] Adding a strange twist to this column, however, was the way in which the columnist simultaneously impersonated the harsh, intolerant voice of Bingu, while putting forward strong arguments in defence of Bingu's policies, as they might have come from Bingu himself. Thus, the column attempted to get "inside Bingu's head" and empathetically understand both the autocratic tendencies and the self-justification for these from the president's perspective.

[92] Let's redefine our governance, sovereignty, *Nation on Sunday*, July 31, 2012

[93] *The Nation*, Aug 25, 2004

[94] *Nation on Sunday*, July 17, 2011

[95] *Nation on Sunday*, March 11, 2012

[96] *Malawi News*, June 12-18, 1999

> Mr President, it appears you have many people who are against your policies and laws. I am not one of them, Sir. But I would love to see my president change gears. Not because you are wrong in your thinking and directives, but because you are dealing with a growing angry public.[97]

All of the 8 columnists I spoke to included political leaders amongst their imagined or target audiences. For example, two columnists described their imagined audience as follows:

> My audience is mainly politicians: the President, her cabinet and the ruling party clique. I also consider Malawians and the donor community just to get their attention and support to issues that I raise.[98]

> My audience is the general public, anyone who reads the *Sunday Times*, young or old, rich or poor. Sometimes the articles address the politicians and key decision makers directly, i.e. it serves as a conversation between the common man and the powers that be, hence the name Mouthpiece, for it is a mouthpiece of thousands of invisible people who cannot address our leaders.[99]

The lack of deference has greatly antagonised heads of state. From time to time outspoken individuals have been arrested on various charges. But more often, there is an attempt by the offended politician to defend him/herself. In March 2012, Bingu wa Mutharika's bemused face graced the front page of the *Nation on Sunday*, next to the headline "*UNDER SIEGE: Mutharika attracts rebuke for threats on media, CSOs*". State House had issued an angry press release complaining about the media and CSOs "attacking and demeaning" him. It was reported that:

> The State House statement [was] couched in a language bristling with anger and paranoia…Mutharika stated that he is fed up with criticism, arguing that he deserves respect because the law protects him. The president says phrases such as the 'Big Kahuna' and 'Moya'[100] – flagship terms used by two of the country's leading columnists – are disrespectful to the presidency…
>   …The State House also disclosed that government is conducting surveillance on comments posted on some social networks. "The State House monitors such networks that are hostile and probably careless in demeaning the State President", it said.[101]

Mutharika's complaints reflect the way many in positions of authority still expect to be treated with due respect, including being addressed in a deferential manner, and not with ridiculing nicknames that deflate their power. Mutharika's direct reference to columnists and social media (such as *MMMV*) reveals the impact that irreverent criticism in the relatively small urban public sphere has on leaders. In fact, the president felt so provoked that he threatened to use the

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[97] What is academic freedom, Mr. President?, *Nation on Sunday,* April 3, 2011
[98] April 10, 2013 via email correspondence
[99] May 15, 2013 via email correspondence
[100] The term "moya" referred to in this report was used by the columnist who impersonated Mutharika (mentioned above).
[101] Mutharika intimidates media, CSOs, *Nation on Sunday,* March 11, 2012

Protected Flags, Emblems and Names Act to "punish those who ridicule him".[102] The Act was so old that it still quoted the fine as "1000 British pounds sterling", which…

> …elucidates the fact that this piece of legislation remains stuck in the time warp of colonial and repressive tradition, and also proves the urgency with which legal reforms must take place in Malawi, fourty-eight years after independence.[103]

Countering Mutharika's threats by portraying them as colonial and traditional, and therefore stuck in a "time warp", shows how the right to criticise is very much associated with social progress in a new era, symbolising a break from the past culture of unconditional respect for authority.

Interestingly, the PAC actually responded to the president's complaints, by invoking the spirit of democracy and in particular will of the people principle: "As part of the sector working in the field of democracy, we believe that we do not belittle our Head of State. To criticise the administration is not to hate it. It is for our common good…We will continue to pursue advocacy as long as [government's] critical policies are not for the benefit of the masses".[104] Aside of civic education, *PAC's* most symbolic public function is to present direct statements and resolutions to presidents, enjoying as it does the legitimacy of a righteous, symbolically powerful censurer. It's audacity in the 1992 stand against Kamuzu has only increased in an era of free speech, allowing it to address politicians bluntly if need be. It remains a constant thorn in the side of autocratic authorities, and produces statements on leadership that explicitly challenge deference to authority, calling for a change of mindset so that leaders are seen as servants.

4.2   State-society antagonism

In Malawi's democracy, like any other, citizens' rights to criticise government are tempered by their duties to be truthful and genuine. Government's right to defend itself is tempered by its duty to heed criticism. These rights and duties have been very much under negotiation in Malawi over the last two decades, with tensions arising when, as seen above, criticism oversteps the mark, or vice versa, when wounded authorities react angrily to criticism. This has led to what can only be called "communication problems", as the government seeks to establish its authoritative, legitimately powerful right of response in the urban public sphere, while the "voice of the people" maintains its democratic right to criticise without constraint.

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[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Threats earn Bingu condemnation, *Nation on Sunday,* March 11, 2012

4.2.1 Media and PAC positioning: Voices of the people, critics of power

Bratton and Mattes (2001) distinguish between *intrinsic* and *instrumental* evaluations of democracy. The former is "based on an appreciation of the political freedoms and equal rights that democracy embodies when valued as an end in itself"; the latter reflects "a more *instrumental* calculation in which regime change is a means to other ends, most commonly the alleviation of poverty and the improvement of living standards" (448). Supposedly, those who have undergone a lifetime's socialisation to democratic norms may have a "reservoir of favourable affective dispositions" to it (ibid), while those living in nascent democracies have not yet internalised these values. But attempting to establish how people feel "deep down" about the democratic system is difficult practically, not to say theoretically. One could instead shift away from institutions to ask a slightly different question: how useful is *democratic discourse* as a system of powerful ideas and statements that can be used by the public to monitor and censure politicians' behaviour, hopefully thereby constraining excessive power? Can the self-imagined "progressive public" (being studied here) utilise the image of a worldwide democratic movement, and the power of worldwide discourse, in its localised strategies to keep leaders in check?

In the 1990s Malawian media took it upon themselves to be the "fourth pillar" of the new democracy. Freedom of expression enshrined in the constitution was coupled with a reconceptualization of the media and civil society as the guardians of democracy, rather than the voice of state power. They were to thwart potentially undemocratic and illegal behaviour. Since the media "watch-dogs" became autonomous, they naturally aligned with "ordinary citizens", in opposition to "the powers that be."[105] Deuze (2005) argues that, across the world and over the 20th century, journalism has developed an "occupational ideology", meaning a "collection of values, strategies and formal codes characterizing professional journalism and shared most widely by its members", which serves to "self-legitimize their position in society" (446). The adaptation of this ideology to local conditions involves a process that Wasserman and Rao (2008) call the "glocalisation of journalism ethics". Contrary to the expectations of globalisation as cultural imperialism, countries of the South employ strategies to resist homogenisation, resulting in a "two-way relationship between global and local epistemologies and practices" (164).

Perhaps because of the absence of political party ideology, the Malawian independent media have not become associated with "left" or "right" leaning journalism. Instead, they side with "the people", as well as elites who break away from the norm by standing up to abuses of power. Democratic discourses are invoked to justify their oppositional stance towards the state (as Hasty describes with regards to the private press in Ghana: "Discourses of human rights and pro-democracy…reinscribe the political mission of the private press, inspiring the anti-authoritarian crusade that journalists themselves invoke" (2006: 164)). Across all news texts, and

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[105] Usually portrayed as the state and sometimes foreign nations or institutions; the small private sector remains largely out of view.

texts from other discourse settings as well, the image of Malawians – particularly the marginalised rural poor – being abused and neglected by politicians is ubiquitous, and it is through these revelations that the whole national public is imagined either as being "given voice", or as receiving wise interpretations of political reality, in a tone that could sometimes be described as pedagogical, though not condescending. PAC and even online forums and blogs also claim to speak on behalf of the ordinary i.e. poor, Malawian, and like the newspapers, this usually involves graphically depicting poverty as a national shame. The identity of these platforms – media, civil society, social media – as institutions (partially defined and defended in global democracy discourses), has given them (and the autonomous public sphere in general) the legitimate right to discipline authority. There is no shortage of NGOs such as Freedom House or the Media Institute of Southern Africa, reinforcing ideological notions of journalism and civil society as the "Fourth Estate", "guardians of democracy", "watchdogs", etc., that circulate constantly in the local public sphere. The public sphere has been both shaped by, and re-shaped, the norms of deference to authority which structure public discourse, in a context of fairly unstable, shifting communicative conventions.

Transnational discourses exalting "civil society", "the media" and the free public sphere have influenced the perceived inviolability of these public domains, but it is unlikely that the conventions and function of public discourse have not also been shaped by longer-term Malawian cultural practices. One could perhaps trace in contemporary public discourse (even in more formal settings) elements of what Schoffeleers and Roscoe (1985) identify as the underlying *rationale* in the poems, riddles, folk tales and proverbs of the region:

> If however one had to suggest what, fundamentally, was the single basic rationale behind them – behind the plots and metaphor, the imagery and song, the personification and jesting, the warnings and strictures – one would probably have to say the survival of the group, survival of course in its fullest sense. (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985, 11, in Lwanda, 2008: 74).

The imagined Malawian public sphere is filled with a disillusioned but patriotic discourse about how poor leadership threatens the unity and sometimes very survival of the national community. In this the quintessential "poverty-stricken, neglected Malawian" is a ubiquitous image, injecting pathos into the narrative.

As seen in chapter 4, a narrative genre of criticism is prevalent in the public sphere. This is not uncommon elsewhere, but perhaps in the Malawian context it could be traced in its *mode* to the long-established tradition of criticism through orality and later verse in south-central Africa, a mode of expression that allows "opinions that would otherwise be in breach of other social conventions…a medium of dissent preserving readings of history alternative to the official one"

(Vail and White, 1991: 319). This mode of criticism was practiced most notably by the songwriters and poets whose counter-discourses to the MCP's hegemonic myth of national glory and success bypassed censorship, and provided an escape from the endless singing of "the monotonous story of [Banda's] achievements" (Zeleza, 1995 in Chirambo, 2007: 149). Educated English-speaking elites would have appreciated, for example, Jack Mapanje's ironic poem *On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala*:

> I know I too must sing to such royal happiness
> And I am not arguing. Wasn't I too tucked away in my
> Loin-cloth infested by jiggers and fleas before
> Your bright imminence showed? How could I quibble
> Over your having changed all that? How dare I when
> We have scribbled our praises all over our graves? (Mapanje, 1981: 57 in Chirambo, 2007: 149)

Others would have appreciated subversive song, with its "mine-field of metaphors, unwittingly or wittingly contradicting Dr Banda's concept of a secure, well-fed and disease-free Malawi" e.g.:

> Death is not the only problem, problems!
> Be without food; that is a problem!
> Be homeless; that is a problem!
> Your children are ill, that is a problem!
> Everywhere, there are problems...! (Lwanda, 2009: 144)

This is not to say that, when inveighing against authority, the democratic public sphere explicitly invokes this tradition, but it may be that, as a composite of 'institutions' (media, civil society, social media) of privileged discourse, imagined as the site of public opinion formation about "national" i.e. "group" concern, speakers in this sphere are culturally licenced in a similar manner as the oral performer, to criticise power on behalf of the group, alongside the *alangizi* (counsellors or communal singers) who, as Lwanda notes, have re-emerged in the multiparty era (2008: 89). Like court jesters, these *alangizi* singers speak the truth about power with relative immunity (ibid). One could say that, in a not entirely different fashion, columnists, conference speakers and dominant participants in social media, etc, attempt to capture in their (sometimes quite figurative) narratives the mood and meaning of life under each administration, or, in the case of PAC, to "read the signs of the times". These narratives (as well as the fictional stories and poems that often appear in the newspapers) portray the administration and specifically the president of the day as the determinants of the national mood – usually one of malaise, rarely progress. An example was the implication in various public utterances in 2012 that a rise in crime was an essential quality or dimension of life-under-JB. The omnipresence of the leader(s) in discourse naturalises this sense of leaders' essential responsibility for the nation's (mis)fortunes. (But this is done subtly.)

These hypotheses of a 'continuation of a tradition of criticism' and a 'general discourse on group survival' are put forward cautiously, because it would be easy to lapse into speculation, if not banality in making such observations. But in defence of them: it is not self-evident that democratic public discourse should be so relentless and irreverent in its trenchant narrative of the suffering national community under the misguidance of self-serving leadership, in an otherwise deferential culture.

4.2.1.1 Embracing the Rebel

Interestingly, the mission to stand up to authoritarianism has aligned discourses in the urban public sphere with those elites who do the same. Two clear examples of this are Mutharika's defection from the UDF in 2005, and JB's stand against Mutharika's autocracy in 2011-12. Both of these instances saw the leaders portrayed as rebel-heroes. In the first case, Bingu wa Mutharika had been hand-picked by Muluzi, whose efforts to gain a third term had been thwarted, and the inevitable perception of Mutharika as a puppet of the discredited former president led to the initial luke-warm reception to his presidency. All throughout his election campaign, in fact, the charismatic Muluzi had given hour-long speeches about his appointed successor, while the main man himself would speak quietly for 5 minutes at the end. Nevertheless, when Mutharika defected from the UDF to form his own Democratic Progressive Party in 2005 and used a heavy hand to deal with corruption, opinions in the public sphere showed unusually strong support for him, especially when the irate opposition sought to obstruct everything he did. In Bingu's second term, however, when he was perceived as aloof, indifferent and arrogant, a veritable war of words began between him and the urban public.

Joyce Banda, as Mutharika's VP from 2009, was expelled from the DPP over a fall-out (she refused to support his younger brother, Peter, in becoming the president's successor). When she stood up courageously to Bingu's autocratic tendencies, Banda too became a rebel-hero, a "darling of the press", which gave her a significant amount of media coverage and public support. However, her occupancy of the presidential seat in April, 2012, saw her popularity in the suddenly wane, for, as a representative of state power, she was no longer a rebel, and despite the largest media team in the country's history, she failed to rekindle the favouritism she had formerly enjoyed. One letter writer decided to explain this phenomenon:

> Dear Editor,
> Through this letter, I would like President Joyce Banda to know that the worst mistake she will make in her tenure of office is to be at loggerheads with the media. Had it not been for the media she is now attacking, I do not think she would have been where she is now. The President knows how she was treated by the State-owned MBC [under Mutharika], but the private media houses provided her with the opportunity to be heard by Malawians. Therefore, now that she is in the

driving seat, she should not expect the media to praise every policy, good or bad, that her government is implementing.[106]

4.2.2 Autonomy and interference

The PAC has remained autonomous since its inception. But for the print media, legal and political constraints on critical publications, politically-involved ownership of the media houses, lack of experience and diminutive size of newspaper businesses, and behind-the-scenes threats and inducements to media practitioners have influenced the autonomy of this sphere of discourse. The first factor has largely depended on presidents' respect for civil liberties.[107] Muluzi was relatively lax on the press. Mutharika introduced certain harsh laws that made it more difficult for independent media to operate, and withdrew government advertising from *The Nation*[108]. Joyce Banda has repealed those laws, but certain defamation laws that she has refused to remove are still perceived to be an issue.[109] The second and third factors were highly relevant in the 1990s and early 2000s, but are no longer today. The fourth factor has been a challenge to the media's neutrality throughout, but not to the extent that it has eroded the overall integrity of the newspapers.

4.2.2.1 The Newspaper Ownership Factor

Nation Publications Limited (NPL), and Blantyre Newspapers Limited (BNL) were partisan throughout the first decade of democracy.[110] When the MCP lost the general elections in 1994, and the United Democratic Front took power, the BNL publications found themselves in alignment with the MCP as opposition (Mchakulu, 2011: 91). But in 2004, Kamuzu Banda's extended family trust gained control of BNL, and severed all political ties with the MCP. Thus ended all political alignments based on ownership (ibid., 173). NPL was owned by Aleke Banda who was in the UDF government. It was a pro-government paper until the 2002 Third Term Bid saw Aleke Banda quitting the UDF and forming his own party; after the elections of 2004 he quit

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[106] *The Nation*, Nov 7, 2012

[107] Legally, independent media have enjoyed relative freedom of expression since the Constitution of 1994 (article 36)). But a Freedom House (2012) overview sums up some issues: "The constitution guarantees access to information, but a draft bill to implement this right has been stalled in the parliament since 2003. Access to information has remained a considerable challenge for reporters. Powerful individuals have also used court injunctions to prevent newspapers from publishing damaging articles about them. Libel is considered both a criminal and civil offense. The Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), which is funded by the government and led by a presidential appointee… is regularly accused of political bias in its operations".

[108] As Patel (2000: 166) points out, government advertising is the most significant source of revenue for Malawian newspapers, which would otherwise operate at a loss.

[109] The media was in uproar when, in May 2013, Banda failed to sign the Declaration of Table Mountain that would have removed further constraints on press freedom

[110] However, Patel's assessment was that The Nation's content was better: "The Nation has more effort to professional reporting on issues other than on personalities, sources are accorded a chance to reply, with fair coverage and no exaggeration observed…Generally, the paper is more professional, factual and sets up a good precedent for a professional culture.(2000: 178)."

politics altogether, which severed the paper's ties with a political party (ibid., 2011: 91, 173). Thus, both media houses achieved autonomy in the early 2000s, and have been strongly oppositional to the powers that be ever since.

4.2.2.2 The Covert Interference Factor

Of the 11 newspaper editors, journalists and columnists whom I asked,[111] all but one confessed to having been threatened or offered inducements at some point in their careers. These covert and usually anonymous attempts at manipulation ranged from harmless to potentially life-threatening interference. One columnist explained how, at the height of Bingu wa Mutharika's authoritarian clampdown on all sectors of society, he discovered that the bolts had been removed on his car's wheel hubs, after a tip-off from the road-traffic directory, who had been contacted by the secret service requesting the vehicle registration numbers of all *Nation Publications* staff. But more often than not, threats are merely verbal. It is not uncommon for columnists to receive email "feedback" from those whom they have written about.[112] And, in a society where personal connections can be vital for career opportunities, those who hold power can place any number of obstacles in a journalist's path. Despite these various means for potential state interference in the media, today Malawi's newspapers position themselves firmly in opposition to the state and have a general reputation of integrity.[113]

4.2.3   Journalistic ethics

Implicitly adopting a "social responsibility" model of media regulation in Malawi gives the media the power to self-regulate, and therefore a certain right to criticise and scrutinise, without being criticised and scrutinised itself (see Krüger, 2009). The degree to which the media (and indeed other critical voices in the public sphere) enjoy the sacred right to express any opinions without constraint has not yet been harmoniously entrenched in Malawian society, in the sense that irresponsible journalism or backlashes from authorities create serious tension. All three

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[111] 5 were sent email questionnaires

[112] One columnist/editor was called by JB: "She called me up and she said, 'I know you hate me. But this is not about me, about Joyce Banda. This is about 14 million Malawians. So please, think about the statement.' And I was shocked. One, I never thought I hated her. If anything by that time I had very very high regard for her….But I was so shocked with her characterisation of me hating her" (author interview, Blantyre, 21 September, 2012).

[113] Constructing a clear division between the monolithic 'state' and the domain of 'society' becomes messy because of mutual dependency and transference between the two. For example, many staff from the early wave of newspapers went in to government positions, and this trend continues to this day. As Chinsinga notes, "the state is possibly the only mechanism for quick wealth accumulation in Malawi. So what usually happens is that almost every other person, even those who are publicly critical of government, privately they are looking for opportunities on how they can be part and parcel of the state" (author interview, Zomba, October 12, 2012). JB's whole press team, in fact, is comprised of distinguished media practitioners who used to furiously criticise government; she has hushed them by simply appropriating them into government.

democratic presidents have been hugely provoked by criticism. There has consequently been increased reflection in the media on responsible journalism based on the idea of "objectivity". A real case will illustrate this:

4.2.3.1 The case of Justice Mponda

On October 16, 2012, Justice Mponda, an online journalist, was arrested on charges of insulting the president, false publication and criminal libel. The immediate reaction of *The Nation* was to claim on its front page that Mponda "has gone down in history as the first media practitioner to bear the brunt of the Joyce Banda administration." Similarly, the knee-jerk reaction of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) was to condemn Mponda's arrest, invoke freedom of expression, and evoke images of past oppression from which, it claimed, Joyce Banda had promisingly moved on.

It transpired that Mponda had allegedly written a fake letter of resignation by the president, as well as false news that the Tanzanian ambassador had been declared *persona non grata*. Concerns about media freedom were soon tempered with reflective pieces on responsibility. One columnist issued a strong condemnation of the arrest, demanding that the charges be dropped, but for the following interesting reason:

> Arrests like these draw unnecessary negative attention to this country at a time when our precarious relationship with donors is in the process of being reset. Donors are quick to interpret such arrests as signs of bad governance.

His concern was for the government's own image in the eyes of the ultimate "watchdog" – the international community – showing the powerful transnational governmentality that sees the whole Malawian government being disciplined by an external monitor (see Ferguson and Gupta (2002) on transnational governmentality). The column then goes on to denounce irresponsible journalism:

> …The need for responsible journalism cannot be ignored. We cannot afford as a nation the calibre of journalists that create news instead of looking for news. CP Scott, longest serving editor in the history of the Guardian in England, wrote, in 1921, that in journalism 'facts are sacred'…It is not acceptable, therefore, that we should have so called publications that thrive on fiction rather than the truth. ….Journalism should not be the only profession to have a carte blanche to insult anyone, or to manufacture falsehoods, and cry for free speech when the government flexes its law.[114]

This column is another example of the frequent appropriation of exogenous notions of journalistic ethics. Both the sacred *rights* of autonomy and free expression, and the exalted *function*

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[114] *On free speech and responsible journalism,* Malawi News, Oct 20-26, 2012

of "guarding democracy", have provided many voices in the public sphere with powerful leverage. This unequal relation is exemplified in the fact that when the president reacts to criticism, it is labelled reactionary, but when the public is criticised, its explosive reactions are justified. The point to take note of is that communication between the state and the urban public is a negotiated and conflictual process with unstable norms, which shapes both the content of discourse and the discursive strategies employed in the transformative projects of the public sphere.

Chapter 3

The Symbolic Relation between Leaders and Citizens

The public sphere is where citizens engage in a process of endlessly re-defining the norms and meanings of legitimate leadership – not just how leaders should behave, but also how they should be conceived in relation to those over whom they exercise power, and how this conception should modify the way they behave. If a president is a father to the nation, then behaviour appropriate to that status is different from behaviour appropriate to a servant-leader. Thus, the norms of legitimate behaviour are based on assumptions about the meaning of leadership, which guide expectations that to some extent regulate and modify the conduct of elected political representatives. Clearly, in every society, politicians do more than simply carry out the functions of public office. Aside from laws and procedures that define their social-political role, it is also "through rhetorical performance, through verbal and nonverbal symbolic transactions" that leader roles are created (Fisher, 1980: 123). In 1994, Malawians were faced with a somewhat untested and confused symbolism around the figure of the head of state, where formerly an overwhelming personality cult had existed. It is in the subtleties of everyday language that one locates the shifting meanings and strategies in redefining these roles. But certain key themes emerge prominently across texts. This and the next chapter look at the way a specific discourse on 'leadership' has been formed, and continues its formation, as part of the on-going process of political cultural transformation in public discourse.

As has been noted, throughout the public sphere, in both mediated (newspapers, radio, social media) and unmediated (markets, minibuses, bars and social gatherings) public spaces, political debate and gossip is largely fixated on leadership. Both of PAC's conferences of 2012 revolved around leadership in reality and conceptually. In every section of the newspapers – news, opinion, letters, development, religion, youth, women, business, Chichewa supplement, and sports[115] – the theme is ever-present. Numerous blogs, and the passionate discussions that take place on *My Malawi My Views*, are heavily leadership-focussed.

The analyst's goal is not always to unearth what "local people" think; it can also be to unearth the very instability of meaning that locals themselves must cope with. This reflects what Ferguson encountered in his study of urbanites on the Zambian Copperbelt: "a set of situations in which unintelligibility was not a riddle to be solved but the riddle's solution itself…in the end, matters were as unclear to the "locals" as they were to me" (1999: 209). Having said this, the chaos of multiple meaning and the instability of public opinion should not be overstated. There is a significant degree of unstated public 'collaboration' – a common strategy and project within

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[115] For example, the sports sections may report a team laying blame for its lustreless sporting performance on the negligence of ministers, feeding into a general political discourse about failed leadership.

certain spheres – to replace prevailing social norms and cultural understandings with new notions of power and legitimacy.

1   Embracing Democracy?

Representative democracy as a political system is intrinsically connected to the "type" of legitimacy held by politicians. Believing in the legitimate authority of the *Father of the nation*, *Nkhoswe number 1, Ngwazi*, and liberator from colonialism, implies quite different citizen obligations than believing in the legal and constitutional backing of a democratically elected authority. It appears the new meanings of leadership accompanying the new "model" of governance are unstable (but are they "stable" in any society?), and indeed, many commentators show awareness of these "teething problems" in the country's "relatively short and turbulent democratic experience"[116].

With democracy being, by definition, the will of the people, the question is rarely asked whether the multiparty democratic system is, to Malawian citizens, actually more legitimate than a one-party system. The answer should not be self-evident, as the example of the Nyasaland African nationalists shows:

> The two-party or multi-party system is not a system at all. Rather it was forced on countries such as Britain by their own social, cultural and political diseases… In Africa, fortunately, this political ailment seems likely to be avoided. (The Editor, *Malawi News*, 1960, in Schoffeleers 1999, 22)

Whether the democratic system is intrinsically or instrumentally valued – embraced for all it stands for; or seen as merely the best means to material ends – is difficult to establish. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) point out that, during regime change in Africa…

> …people seemed ready to accept political 'change', however defined, provided it led them away from the political status quo, which had long been deemed unacceptable. As such, mass movements for political transition were generally 'anti-authoritarian' rather than specifically 'pro democratic'.

For this reason, "citizens could hardly be expected to have in mind a full set of democratic rules or to evince a deep attachment to them" (Bratton and Mattes, 2001: 450). After all, multiparty democracy is a system borne out of specific social, cultural and economic conditions; its origins are traceable to the transformation in Europe from an agrarian to an industrial society (hence, its affinity with industrialised capitalism) (Bratton and van de Walle, 1998: 21).

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[116] Examining the PP convention, *The Nation*, Sep 12, 2012

In Malawi, the arrival of democracy signified many uncertain changes, which is why it was perceived as "an uncertain something else" from the one-party regime. In Kishindo's (2000) explanation of evolving Chichewa political terminology over the last century, we see an interesting reflection of common understandings of the political world. In colonial times, "snarl terms" depicted political oppression; in Kamuzu's regime, people were provided with a "cosy family feeling" as kinship terms captured the relation between ruler and ruled, emphasising "traditional values of family" (28). At the same time, people exposed the negative aspects of the regime through the cunning use of double-meanings in language. During the transition to multiparty democracy, entirely new coinages reflected the dawn of a new era, and the term *demokalase* itself had many connotations (Poeschke and Chirwa, 1998). To some it was simply "the era of emancipation from the oppressive past" i.e. a historical break more than a political system.[117] But in a material sense, has democracy made life better? It has been accompanied by more destructive neopatrimonialism, less efficiency and respectability in the civil service, more regional fragmentation, and a perceived decline in patriotism. If it is embraced as the best and only legitimate system, this should not be seen as self-evident; it should be made evident.

There are two events that exemplify the extent to which democracy has taken hold over the course of Malawi's democratic era. One was a months-long process in 2002. The other was a single utterance in 2013…

1.1   Third Term Blues: democracy tested

As Muluzi faced the end of his second term and the prospect that he and many beneficiaries of his extensive patronage network would lose their access to state resources, he dared to challenge a sacred provision of the democratic constitution – the two-term presidential limit that was designed to avoid another 'president for life' at all costs. Muluzi's siren song was that "I have a lot of development plans that will benefit Malawians and I want to finish implementing them"[118], and the UDF propagated the myth that the Open Terms Bill was being tabled due to "popular demand" (ibid., 156). Also, Muluzi was portrayed as the only possible candidate for the 2004 elections because "there was nobody capable of assuming the reigns of leadership from him" (Chinsinga, 2003: 6). Any other potential candidates were referred to as *madeya* – "maize husks" – meaning they were deemed unfit for the presidency (Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2011: 806). The Open Terms Bill was audaciously tabled on July 4, 2002 without prior Cabinet consultation. A combination of enormous political pressure on parliamentarians and businessmen (threatened

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[117] Others included a 'government policy'; a mode of thinking and behaviour - something that determines people's actions such as freedom of speech, dress and choice; to have enough food, a source of income and to enjoy a decent living; a time or opportunity for revenge against those who were in the previous oppressive regime, etc. (Poeschke and Chirwa, 1998: 75-76 in Kinshindo, 2000: 24).

[118] *The Nation,* 29 April, 2002

with loss of contracts if they financed the opposition), and massive bribery[119] influenced the process. Opposition leader Chakufwa Chihana of AFORD came to the government side with half of his party's MPs. Nevertheless, despite intimidation, an attempted ban on demonstrations, and extensive bribery, the bill failed by the narrowest of margins (Morrow, 2006: 156).[120] Unrelenting in his efforts, a Third Term Bill was then introduced, accompanied by more bribery and intimidation, but seeing that it did not have enough support, it was withdrawn. In the wake of Muluzi's failure to extend his presidency, the UDF changed its internal hierarchy and made him national chairman – to whom any future UDF president would be a subordinate. He then handpicked Mutharika as his successor (ibid., 168).

Throughout this campaign to amend the constitution, the Public Affairs Committee played a pivotal role as a politically neutral "custodian of democracy"[121] (Ross, 2004). The organisation

Figure 2: Malawi News, 27 April - 2 May, 2002

appealed to the moral conscience of MPs to resist the lure of patronage and safeguard hard-won democracy:

> The PAC wishes to appeal to all Parliamentarians to vote against the proposed amendment to section 83(3) of the Constitution. . . . You may receive all the gifts from those who support the Bill but we call upon you to reject the amendment. Demonstrate to the nation that you can stand for the values of Democracy. Say no to the proposed amendment. God is with you.[122]

When the Third Term Bill refused to die even after it had formally been withdrawn, PAC issued an irreverent statement:

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[119] Allegedly 1 million kwacha for opposition MPs and 2,5 million for opposition leaders (Morrow, 2006: 156)
[120] Failure to secure the support of 22 MCP MPs who demanded higher bribes (5 million kwacha each) may have contributed to the bill's failure (Morrow, 2006: 157).
[121] Meinhardt and Patel (2003: 17) identify religious in-fighting as another motivation for the Christian-dominated PAC to limit the power of Muluzi (a Muslim).
[122] PAC statement in *The Lamp*, No. 36 (July–August 2002), p. 1, quoted in Ross, 2004: 97

> [We] wish to appeal to the Committee to dispose of the undesirable Bill as a matter of urgency. We do not want greedy politicians to abuse the situation by reverting to the third-term bid in the forseeable future.[123]

As an indication of the role of civil society and the press in informing the public during this third term saga, a letter-writer in the newspaper expressed his gratitude, saying, "Well done PAC for coming out in the open against the third terms bill. Thanks to all the papers that had the courage to print such facts as laid out by PAC"[124]. Still to this day, the third term struggle is recalled as a pertinent lesson from history, a symbol of democracy hard-won and hard to maintain, that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. It provoked discussion about the basis of legitimacy, and the dangers of being seduced by charismatic leaders who expect loyalty and love.

1.2   Stirring a hornet's nest

Questioning the multiparty system, as Kamuzu Banda and his fellow nationalists so confidently did at the time of independence, is now evidently taboo in the urban public sphere. Yet, on July 8th, 2013, the People's Party secretary general, Henry Chibwana, did just that. With his ill-fated statement that he and his party "wish to see the country going back to a one-party state" because "opposition parties oppose just for the sake of opposing"[125], he managed to "stir a hornets' nest,"[126] and within days his resignation was announced. Professor Edge Kanyongolo told *The Nation* that it was "the most outlandish statement I have heard over the years"[127], and activist Vera Chirwa said it was "a betrayal to Malawi's freedom and democracy fighters"[128]. Both party and public were in uproar. A commenter on *MMMV* quipped:

> KUDOS to Chibwana for resigning as PP Secretary General over wishing remarks for Malawi to become a one party state. Lessons, lessons, lessons!!!!!!! (July 15, 2013).

Why is it that, from the perspective of social agency, Bingu wa Mutharika faced nationwide protests against his rule in 2011, leading to a PAC ultimatum in March 2012 that he should introduce massive reforms or resign within 90 days, that Joyce Banda faced calls for her resignation, just 7 months into office, despite reversing most of the unpopular reforms of her predecessor, and yet Kamuzu Banda successfully remained at the apex of power, controlling every aspect of society with almost no significant resistance, for 30 years? Aside from the obviously incomparable conditions under which these presidents operated, how and why has such openly critical discourse on leadership emerged, when in the recent past it was almost non-

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[123] PAC, 2004: 6, 22–7, in Morrow, 2006: 162
[124] Third Term Blues, *Malawi News*, Oct 5-11, 2002
[125] *The Nation*, July 11, 2013
[126] *Malawi's ruling PP SG under fire over one-party remarks*, Nyasatimes.com, accessed July 18.
[127] Ibid.
[128] *Daily Times*, July 11, 2013

existent? And in terms of their societal significance, are these discourses merely hot air coming from a coterie of detached urbanites? Do the newspapers merely provide "an escape valve for discontent in urban areas", as Tim Neale described them in 2004 (183)? The fact that Joyce Banda publicly announced in 2013 that, "The media killed Bingu" would suggest otherwise. And it is not just the opposition media that holds high democratic ideals. Democracy, especially as a power-constraining system (less as a minority rights-protecting system) has been enthusiastically adopted by much of the urban public. When someone defended JB on *MMMV*, against public calls for her resignation, saying, "it is wishful thinking and disrespectful to speculate that she can just resign effortlessly like that", another replied:

> …The power in a democracy like Malawi belongs to the people. Read your constitution again. Sustained trust is what keeps her there and not the power you claim she has. I am not sure if you realise that Malawi today is not the Malawi of yesterday. Things have changed. Democracy is dynamic. This is why the leaders are supposed to always be ready to adapt to the prevailing culture… (Feb 22, 2013).

Clearly, Malawi's democratic system has come to be, to a large extent, intrinsically valued by the urban public. The institutions of the judiciary have proven themselves fairly independent and useful as a means to constrain executive power (Gloppen and Kanyongolo, 2007; Brown, 2008). Yet, leaders in the democratic era continue to conduct themselves in a manner that, to many, is seen as incompatible with a real democracy. Meanwhile, other sectors of society appear to endorse and encourage such conduct. This has created the problem of contradictory standards of appropriate and legitimate codes of behaviour held in different social spheres of Malawi. But more than that, it reaches down to the level of the very conception of the relation between rulers and ruled, a relation at the heart of the notion of "legitimate authority".

2   The Performance of Power

Max Weber defines legitimacy as "belief" in authority: "The basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber 1964: 382). Those invested with such authority also expect compliance (Kluver, 1997: 49). Geertz (1973) claims that legitimacy resides in the "collective conscious" of society (316). It is established through a discursive process that incorporates the core values and beliefs of a culture. Since belief in authority regulates and stabilises society, the concept of 'legitimacy' has proven an indispensible explanatory category in social science. Schatzberg (2001) uncovers what he sees as a middle African moral matrix of legitimacy, wherein the nation is imagined as a "father and family",

which structures the way citizens assess the legitimate behaviour of their presidents. The rights and responsibilities of presidents as father figures are inscribed within this matrix. Rights to "pardon and punish" are balanced by responsibilities to "nurture and nourish". Corruption must be kept within limits and power must alternate periodically (conceived as generational alternation) (ibid.: chapters 5&6). To keep unity within the national family, the "political 'father' must be firm and rigorous, yet at the same time understanding and compassionate" (ibid., 160). Such notions are not exclusive to Africa, but supposedly more prevalent there. While this notion of the father figure certainly captures elements of Malawi's postcolonial authorities, notably Kamuzu Banda, it reifies legitimacy as a matrix that gives leaders a specific quality (see Lentz, 1998). This study finds that it is best to conceive of legitimacy as a strategic on going process that never quite concludes with an articulable "matrix", or a "fully legitimate" leader.

It is therefore useful to complement this father-family idea of legitimacy with Max Weber's universal classification of three "types" of authority – traditional, charismatic and legal-rational – to conveniently classify the different *strategies* by which Malawians leaders seek to gain ground in the on going public contest over their legitimacy; in other words, the different symbols and rhetorical registers that they employ in their public 'performance' before the electorate. None of these ideal types are embodied in their pure form, of course.

2.1   Traditional-charismatic versus rational-legal authority

Traditional authority as an ideal type is legitimate "by virtue of tradition, custom, and veneration of previous generations", with traditional leaders seen as the "supreme guardians of tradition, the defenders of the age-old institutions that they control" (Sylla and Goldhammer, 1982: 13). Charismatic leaders, on the other hand, display divine qualities or simply "extraordinary personal talents" (Sylla et al., 1982: 13). Kamuzu Banda's authority would be a blend of 'tradition' and 'charisma', creating together a very powerful symbolic figure. The "father of the nation" and "Nkhoswe number one" familial metaphors of authority brought significance and legitimacy to his cornerstone virtues of "unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline", because citizens would naturally be obliged to behave in such a virtuous manner to their father. Many Malawians expressed their relation to the MCP as one of children to parents, where, "we are supposed to listen to what a parent says" (Women's League member, in Gilman 2009: 48). Banda exhibited archetypal paternalistic interference in every aspect of society, applying his disciplinarian attitude particularly to the civil service, which certainly kept it in line. Throughout his reign, official rhetoric portrayed him as the nurturer of the national family (his fatherly care

duties). But at the same time, he ruthlessly punished dissenters[129]. Yet, in occasional displays of fatherly forgiveness, he also pardoned prisoners. During the transition, the MCP's mouthpiece newspapers portrayed Banda as the nation's true father in contrast to the reckless, childishly insolent UDF. An MCP election campaign ad at the time proclaimed: "Only one man has won the right to be our President…Kamuzu, the father of Malawi" (*Malawi News*, May 14-20, 1994).

Meanwhile, Banda also took the role of chief, ruling over a 'good village', not unlike a king of the Maravi Kingdom (Forster, 2001). He adopted traditional Chewa models of legitimate authority, claiming they were "ideal for the post-colonial political order" (van Dijk, 2000: 194), and raised up Chewa cultural traditions as though they were the soul of the nation. In fact, by neglecting other cultures, he effectively equated Malawianness with Chewaness (Vail and White, 1989). But at the same time, he complemented traditional elements with charismatic qualities. A charismatic leader is said to be obeyed "because of his charm, his prestige, his influence, his personal magnetism and power to sway crowds" with "pomp and ceremony, mob passion, ritual, the cult of personality", etc. (Sylla et al., 1982: 13), all of which were used to great effect by Banda. From the very beginning, he had been built into a messianic figure by the nationalist movement, and later reinforced this divine authority with heroic praise-titles – *Ngwazi* (conqueror), *Mkango* (lion) and *Moto* (fire) – with which he "projected himself as invincible and courageous in his political conduct" (Chirambo, 2009: 87). He must have been keenly aware that "among the Ngoni and indeed in Malawi in general, bravery and valour are cherished qualities for a leader that makes him the protector of his own people" (ibid., 2009: 86-87). Chirambo (2007) describes this personality cult as "Kamuzuism"; it "imbued Banda with the aura of possessing supernatural or divine wisdom" (140).

To complement populism, tradition, charisma, he also established legitimacy with substantial material delivery through economic growth and by "disseminating an ideology of development" with his Annual Crop Inspection Tour, "when he travelled the length of the country over many weeks meeting farmers and inspecting their crops… The peasantry were promised basics (food, clothes etc.) but not allowed to learn how their standard of living compared to their neighbours" (Booth et al., 2006: 12). Thus, the overall power of his hegemony seems to have been based on a combination of a traditional father-chief status, so that his authority was more natural and unchallengeable, charismatic qualities that added vitality and drama and created a glorious national myth with him at the centre, and pragmatic developmental management of the economy which brought economic growth to Malawi, especially in the 1970s. In addition, of course, was a substantial element of coercion and oppression.

The democratic transition signified an important shift from personal rule to rational-legal authority. It seems to have been generally assumed that Malawians would be happy to be rid of

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[129] It is interesting that Banda maintained traditional courts for the purposes of punishing any dissent, implying that the Western statutory legal system was inappropriate for the judgment of disobedience to the leader (Forster, 2001 Law and Society under a democratic dictatorship).

their tyrannical leader, and, following his exit, would immediately embrace the new perfectly legal-rational system for legitimising presidents i.e. fair electoral procedures. This unwarranted assumption failed to account for the many factors beyond procedure that undergird legitimate authority. Fatherly symbolism, extravagance and ceremony were all supposed to be toned down, if not eliminated from Malawian political culture altogether. But this proved to be unrealistic, since societies and cultures never change so rapidly, nor predictably. One of the main challenges of leaders in the democratic era, therefore, beyond winning elections, has been "how to establish their own legitimacy and popular support from the people without being seen as being merely political populists" (Chirambo, 2009: 79). The conditions of free(r) expression give people space to publicly undermine, subvert or reject the intended enthralling, intimidating, and dazzling effects of ceremonial displays, traditional titles and other forms of symbolism. Yet, these well-established practices have continued unabated through the democratic era.

Muluzi's promise to end the practice of *mbumba* dancing, his rejection of Kamuzu's personality cult, and refusal to live in the $100 million palace that his predecessor had built (describing it as "obscene opulence"[130]) were all initial gestures of change. It was politically expedient at the time for him to diminish the symbolic hold that Kamuzu had over the country by, for example, removing the dictator's name from public places – including Kamuzu International Airport, Kamuzu Football Stadium, Kamuzu Highway etc. – and replacing them with the names of Banda's victims (Chirambo, 2010a: 6). Muluzi did so because his main source of legitimacy was the fact that he had freed Malawi from tyranny and brought it into a modern democratic age where symbolism was not necessary to prove one's worth as a leader.

However, these gestures were not to last for long. Having evidently decided that it would enhance his symbolic power to have *mbumba* dancers like his predecessor, Muluzi soon reinstated the practice (Gilman, 2009: 6). He also broke campaign promises not to continue with extravagant ceremonialism in the manner of his predecessor. Eventually, he engaged in full on demagoguery (Lwanda, 2008: 96). Towards the end of his second term, he began to court the MCP and the central region with rhetoric about how it was only the one-party system that he had opposed, and not Banda personally. He even put forward the idea of building a mausoleum for Banda, but when he failed to pass the Third Term Bill, the plan was shelved (Chirambo, 2010: 7).

In contrast to Muluzi's "lost decade", which saw progress in terms of a freer society, but failure on the development and poverty alleviation fronts, Mutharika was seen to be hugely successful in boosting the economy, but experienced problems in terms of powerful parliamentary opposition from the UDF and MCP to his new breakaway DPP party. He thus sought legitimacy and empowerment by other means. With his crackdown on corruption, especially in the civil service, it made sense for him to revive the pragmatic, authoritarian style of the late Kamuzu Banda (from whom he had ironically fled the country in fear five decades

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[130] Ghosts scare off Malawi leader, *www.bbc.co.uk*, March 17, 2005, (retrieved: July 30, 2013)

earlier). Thus, Mutharika reinstated Kamuzu Day (May 14th), renamed some public buildings in honour of the great founder, built a statue in Lilongwe in 2009, and actually went through with Muluzi's (shelved) plan to build the enormous Banda mausoleum, at a cost of US$620 000, which was inaugurated on May 14, 2006 (ibid.). At the unveiling the president evoked a sense of recuperating Malawi's lost history and traditional respect for elders:

> Previous attempts were made to obliterate the name of Kamuzu Banda from the minds of the people of Malawi and from history. I disagreed with this policy and my government will continue to honour this true Malawi hero…Today is a day when history for this nation is written anew. It is a day when we are affirming that as a nation we respect our elders. [131]

Activist Rafiq Hajat's comment at the time, that it was "another sign that leads me to believe that we are on a very slippery slope downwards" (ibid.), reflects the deeply negative connotations that many people still associated with Banda's authoritarianism. Well-known poet dissenters who were imprisoned under the MCP regime expressed their dismay at the immortalisation of Banda as a glorious leader, with the building of the mausoleum, such as in the following poem by Jack Mapanje (2007: 22):

A Million Ways of Re-burying a Despot

There are many ways of re-burying a despot that
don't need a mausoleum; a contraption of

grass, reed, bamboo; a puddle of grave like
the ones his crocodiles dug for his presumed
political enemies, and the vultures can handle
the rest.

Despite these contradictory historical narratives, Mutharika clearly saw instrumental value in promoting the nostalgic glorifying narrative of Banda, as it enabled him to revitalise the symbolic power of those cultural "resources" that had been so expertly harnessed by the founding father. He assumed the title of *Ngwazi* (conqueror) and declared himself the new *Nkhoswe number one*, which by tradition made the women of Malawi his *Amayi a Bingu* (i.e. his *mbumba*), earning him praise and flattery from various quarters, such as the following open letter in the *Sunday Times*:

> We write to sincerely appreciate and thank you Bwana [Sir] President for accepting our plea to make women in Malawi your mbumba…. We feel loved and appreciated from the Man of the

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[131] Malawi: Mutharika pays Banda a US$620 000 tribute, *IRIN News*, May 15, 2006

High Office here in the land…As your mbumba we now accord you the honour that was accorded Dr. Kamuzu Banda who was our first Nkhoswe Number One.[132]

But these attempts to gain legitimacy by mimicking Banda were undermined by the fact that Mutharika was neither a Chewa, nor was it very original to imitate a past leader. They thus appeared to many as phony and illegitimate. Some people reminisced about the good old days when Kamuzu would always dance with his *mbumba*, instead of remaining static at public ceremonies, which Muluzi and Mutharika tended to do. Clearly, charismatic/traditional leadership is more than mere words and titles; it is a *performance*. But, most importantly, times had changed, and people were free to subvert and mock self-adulation, which they did (Chirambo, 2009). Joyce Banda has likewise sought to balance her rhetoric of "moving away from the established ways of doing things", with the need to display the People's Party's power visually through ceremony. Yet this latter strategy of legitimation rarely goes down well with the critical urban public.

3   The conduct of leaders

The focus shifts here from elite strategies of legitimation that attempt to straddle different social spheres and harness different cultural resources, to citizens' strategies to deflate power and devalue floating symbolism without substance. It is a discourse about leadership, the aim of which is to cut excessive power down to size. As shown in the last chapter, lack of deference for authority in the public sphere is commonplace. In an otherwise deferential society, such utterances displaying audacious irreverence towards the powerful, or deflating their pretensions, could be described as acts of "performative resistance" (Kulynych, 1997). In Malawi's urban public sphere many engaged citizens take up the slack where the democratic institutions have failed to hold excessively powerful politicians to account. It is where norms of appropriate and legitimate behaviour are constructed in accordance with democratic ideals. It is indeed a far cry from Kamuzu Banda's silencing of such debates, and Mbembe's (1992) characterisation of popular endorsement of the excesses of the postcolonial *commandement*. Quite the contrary: excess and extravagance are relentlessly criticised, not only as power-as-consumption *par excellence*, but also extravagance for the purpose of majestic displays of power, thus disempowering symbolism and pulling leaders closer to the level of ordinary people. Particularly when Malawi is going through austere times, it is seemingly intolerable that political elites display lavishness. Some behavioural traits appear to be of central importance in the leadership strand of discourse. They have been separated for analysis but are naturally interlinked i.e. *excess* is the unwillingness to

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[132] *Sunday Times*, May 21, 2006, in Chirambo, 2009: 84

show *sacrifice*, which is perceived as *arrogance*, which in turn shows an unwarranted attitude of *paternalism* and *superiority* – both associated with traditional and charismatic forms of authority – which *ceremonialism* is seen to reinforce.

3.1.1   Arrogance versus Humility: "swallowing pride is non-fattening"[133]

Writing during Kamuzu's Banda's time, Vail and White pointed out that "both the colonial rulers and the post-colonial ruler have assumed that paternalism – the landowner dealing with his peasants, the chief with his subjects, the master with his servants, the President with his people – constitutes the form of government best suited both to the economy and the general temperament of Malawians" (1989, 181). It seems this paternalistic attitude has to some extent endured until the present, and it is particularly irksome to the critical urban public. The excessive power of the executive in Malawi has allowed presidents to act without constraint, often displaying a demeanour portrayed as "arrogance".

Muluzi suffered criticism for his paternalistic attitude, especially during his Third Term bid, where, for example, a columnist described him as just like other African leaders who "suffer from delusions of grandeur, and because of their vain glory, are puzzled by a sense of rejection… They have to feed their egos by telling themselves there is no one else capable of doing their job"[134]. For Mutharika, despite having already provoked criticism by appropriating Kamuzu-esque praise titles, it was the landslide election win in 2009 that saw him beginning to "act more brazenly in his second term" (Dionne and Dulani, 2013: 113). For example, on the political front, at first he pledged support for his VP, Joyce Banda, as the 2014 DPP presidential candidate, but then broke his promise and promoted his brother Peter instead (ibid). Serious economic problems also began to emerge when he worked with a less experienced finance minister, which led to many destabilising shortages of fuel, forex, etc. (Cammack, 2011: 3). In this context, to many sectors of society, the president's legitimacy began to erode.[135] Perceiving this, Mutharika tried to entrench his administration's control, yet his powerful gatekeeper status with regards to foreign aid (providing patronage opportunities) dwindled along with the aid supply due to concern about the restriction of civil liberties. Here it is important to note the relevance of Malawi's dependency on foreign aid. Establishing autocratic control paradoxically requires a "flow of aid whose conditions fundamentally militate against its completion" (Wroe, 2011: 143). Thus, just like Kamuzu Banda at the end of the Cold War, Mutharika "appears to have found

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[133] Article heading in *Malawi News*, Sep 15 -21, 2012

[134] Politics of Vain Glory, *Malawi News*, Oct 5, 2002

[135] In Mutharika's first term, between 2005-2009, "the old and new elite aligned with foreign capital and promoted construction and trade, benefiting a burgeoning middle class that has become used to a higher standard of living mostly based on imports" (Cammack, 2011a.: 5). It could well be that members of this middle class, who tend to be more vocal in the public sphere, were dismayed that their rising affluence had come to a halt.

this contradiction too difficult to manage successfully" (ibid.). It appears that the relentless criticism in the public sphere at this time, by those who refused to watch the country deteriorate under his political machinations, put immense pressure on him, leading to his increasingly erratic, autocratic behaviour, including angry complaints about being disrespected by the people, and "arrogant" rejections of citizens' and donors' advice.

Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula, the outspoken presidential critic who claims to have introduced the phrase "executive arrogance" into the Malawian public sphere (where it is now common), was particularly vocal on this point during Bingu's second term. She said that:

> …Above all I think he really had a problem of arrogance. He just was an arrogant person. Because he would just get on the radio and give it to you people. Like honestly, "You people are dull!" He called us "chickens". This was turning into a police state, where we were just pretty much being told, "You don't get to do what you want, I tell you what to do." There was a lot of control of the citizenry, and a lot of patronage…just too much, you know, where…everybody in any high place was from his village, or from his ethnic background, which is crazy (author interview, 11 Oct., 2012).

Bingu's arrogance was something that many people refer to when they recall his presidency. The repeated use of the word to describe Mutharika shows how it has become a discursive meme and a standard way to frame his character. One of his main political shortcomings was surely his apparent unawareness of the provocation caused by such arrogance. For example, when he was pushing for the unpopular and expensive change of the Malawian flag, he tried to infuse humour into the debate by laughing at his opponents, "saying they were busy drinking alcohol when consultations were being done, reducing the serious discussion of this matter into beer banter. Most Malawians felt utter revulsion at this show of arrogance"[136]. Many people complained that Mutharika's regime made no attempt to even hide its licentiousness. As one columnist wrote:

> Our leaders behave as if they are the most important people around whom the whole world revolves. As far as their actions will feed their insatiable egos, they will go ahead regardless of the consequences on "their" people. But I have grown up seeing them at least pretend…to care for others… What is different about the current crop of politicians is that they do not even have the decency to pretend that they care about you and me. I am not just talking about Ngwazi II [i.e. Bingu] here, although he is the epitome of intransigence. I am also talking about those that surround him… (*This is a collective blunder*, Nation on Sunday, May 1, 2011).

Particularly infuriating to Malawians was Bingu's increasingly bellicose reactions to criticism, instead of displaying requisite humility by heeding advice. In a speech in March, 2011, he urged DPP members to deal with his critics in the same way that previous ruling-party 'strong arms' (e.g. Kamuzu Banda's Young Pioneers) had done. This implied licence to brutality was met with consternation by the people (and frantic damage-reduction by the president's spokespeople). But the damage had been done. There was widespread anger in newspaper columns:

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[136] Standing for nothing, *Sunday Times*, June 3, 2012

You cannot defend the indefensible. The President said what he meant. And he meant just that. You cannot now begin to concoct different meanings for what he said.[137]

It would be painful and insensitive to recount here what the youth arms of the Malawi Congress Party…did to innocent Malawians in the name of enforcing discipline, which our President currently wants to instil in his people[138]

Kabwila-Kapasula also alluded to this incident in an interview:

The real thing that most Malawians are angry with Bingu for, was the fact that he was taking us back to Banda days…He gets crowned *Ngwazi*. And then he goes to his party and he says, "I need you to protect me. In the times of Kamuzu Banda the people used to get beaten in the streets. It wasn't Banda who beat them up, it was his party," which was pretty much: "Get up and beat these people", and we had people flying with pangas all over… Banda was a nightmare, but Bingu gave him a good run for his money. If he had not died, I do not know what was going to be happening.

Mutharika's arrogance exhibited a lingering (traditional?) paternalism in his way of ruling, which from his perspective justified the repression of those who sullied his reputation. Some commentators sought to diminish the intimidating effects of such posturing, not through direct challenges but rather by reducing the whole display to "pettiness":

Listening to …Mutharika's speech last Sunday…I was hard-pressed to believe it was a leader standing at the podium, let alone a whole State President. In both tone and content, the speech was a throw-back to the tragic era gone by when intimidation and violence were the stock-in-trade for all politicians…When the president, the one you expect to stand above the pettiness of partisan politics, mobilises his minions to exact vengeance on those who don't agree with him, you shudder with apprehension and wonder whether the country is in safe hands.[139]

It was after Mutharika's horrendous second term that public discourse appears to have become particularly sensitive to political behaviour that displays arrogant tendencies. Derisive statements such as the following have therefore become commonplace:

If you want to know to what degree politicians believe that we are such a daft and docile nation, you should just observe the arrogance with which they address us and ostentatious manner in which they carry themselves wherever they go.[140].

These scornful blanket characterisations of the class of political elites, as visibly displaying superiority, aloofness, and condescension in their engagement with the ordinary person, reinforce the image of leaders as caught up in traditional displays of power, trapped in out-dated

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[137] (Defending the indefensible, *Malawi News*, March 12-18, 2011).
[138] (*The bitter aftertaste of the speech on Sunday*: Malawi News, March 12-18, 2011).
[139] (*Bingu could do without pettiness,* Nation on Sunday, March 13, 2011).
[140] *We need a revolution*; Daily Times, nov 23, 2012

assumptions of the "daftness" and "docility" of the people, and thereby widening the perceived state-society gap. Abundant lessons from the past provide standards against which to assess how far current leaders have changed political culture and the nation's trajectory. For example, Joyce Banda's refusal to cut down on foreign and domestic travel or to immediately halt her personal distribution of maize were set in the context of past leaders' similar defiance. This explains the overwhelming furore that to an outsider seems disproportionate. A columnist addressed her directly on this matter: "Dear Joyce, I and many others have with dismay noticed that, *just like your predecessor*, you have developed some arrogance" (my emphasis).[141]

It is evident that humility and arrogance are also equated with listening and not listening to the pleas of the populace, respectively. Turning a deaf ear to such pleas, as many politicians apparently do, provokes harsher and more persistent criticism on key areas of concern, backed by the implied assurance that "the people" have the knowledge and the right to give advice to their political representatives. For example, an editorial entitled: *Will government listen one day?* points out that:

> Most Malawians hope that the government they put in place will one day see sense in sitting back and reflecting on all the statements coming from different angles… Surely all these individuals cannot be motivated by malice and jealousy? Surely something must be wrong somewhere?[142]

When Joyce Banda struggled with the plethora of voices criticising her after just 8 months in office, a columnist advised her that "the best response would be to re-examine the merits and demerits of what is going on and address the concerns positively. The last thing Banda can afford is to be labelled as arrogant."[143] Citing authoritative "expert" opinion in the public sphere is a way to give credence to the claim that, as representatives of the people's interests, civil society and the media have valid and informed contributions to make, and to demystify the complex issues of economic and political governance so that politicians cannot claim to be the only ones capable of comprehending and therefore controlling these issues, as Kamuzu Banda did. Many ordinary people feel that authorities fear academics, because they direct their penetrative gaze on the powerful pretensions of elites. This fear goes back to Banda, who felt more at ease with traditional authorities than the younger educated nationalists who soon fell out with him. More than ever, today's leaders have to face outspoken academics like Kabwila-Kapasula unreservedly demanding humble 'servant' leadership:

> I think we are yet to get a president who understands that they are supposed to be a servant leader, not to be the boss, you know? But I still see downright up to now where Joyce Banda can get on the TV and practically talk down to everybody (author interview, 11. Oct., 2012).

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[141] To Joyce and Country, *Daily Times*, Nov 30, 2012
[142] Will government listen one day? *Nation on Sunday*, March 13, 2011
[143] President Joyce Banda, so far, *Sunday Times*, Dec 9, 2012

3.1.1.1 The dilemma of political representation

If arrogance is a problem of not listening, then the question is: to whom *should* leaders listen? This raises the issue of political representation in democratic Malawi, a notion which appears deceptively simple. But the shift in the type of legitimate authority relates to the tension between two types of representation: do elected political representatives have a mandate to make decisions in the nation's interests based entirely on their own judgment of how this can best be achieved? Or must they consult and cave in to the majority view on every issue? Both of these stances taken on their own are unsatisfactory. The first relies exclusively on the capabilities of the Malawian leadership, and would be considered dangerously aloof; the second would require a Habermasian sphere for everyone to participate in, and robust communication channels for the resultant "public opinion" to reach the leaders (since referenda on every issue would be totally unviable). The balance between these two extremes has proven very difficult in Malawi. It seems that the shifting political culture – with politicians torn between different registers of legitimate behaviour that seem appropriate in different domains – is the source of the problem.

The *urban public sphere* – the domain of discourses such as those being studied here, where the "imagined community" of the nation is imagined to be deliberating rationally on issues of national concern to reach some sort of legitimate "public opinion" – is dominated by mediated discourses produced by journalists, columnists, politicians, expert analysts and otherwise educated people, creating a discourse of complex (economic and political) ideas (to a large extent in English) in the national interest, and very much in the spirit of rational-legalism. Yet these discourses are often presented as the *voice of the people*.[144] As Fraser points out: "however limited a public may be in its empirical manifestation at any given time, its members understand themselves as part of a potentially wider public, that indeterminate, empirically counterfactual body we call "the public-at-large" (1990: 67-8). Malawian political representatives who ignore these critical discourses on national issues – however small the 'empirical manifestation' of such discourses – do so increasingly at their peril, as Mutharika and JB both found out, because they get labelled as arrogant.

But there are domains of more localised politics, notably (but not only) rural constituencies, where politicians face other demands that force them to transgress their rational-legal mandate e.g. to illegally appropriate state resources for patronage, or to perform tasks outside the duties of office. Thus, they may be obliged to be unaccountable to the rational-legal bureaucracy so that they can perform acts that are *accountable* to clientelistic or home-district or ethnic reciprocal relationships (recall the MP complaining about her unfeasible obligations to her constituency, cited in chapter 1). This problem of incompatible demands coming from different

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[144] I asked several key figures in the public sphere how they perceived the print media, as well as a few journalists and columnists about their imagined audiences, and while many claimed to speak to, and for, all Malawians, some also realised that there was a signficant communication gap in terms of accessing rural citizens.

registers of legitimate behaviour is the crux of the matter. Generally, wherever they go, politicians remain in the spotlight of the "watchdogs of democracy" – both local and international. They must juggle these different domains of political life simultaneously. Furthermore, there is no legitimate discourse with which they can defend actions that fall outside the rules of the rational-legal bureaucracy or their restricted duties of office. "Inappropriate conduct" frequently attracts the ire of commentators/journalists/formal civil society in the mainstream public sphere, and when it does not cease, it shows "pure arrogance" on the part of the accused, for failing to heed the criticisms of "the people". Yet, ironically, it is a significant proportion of "the people" whose expectations of such behaviour actually perpetuate it. It is interesting that the moral blame invariably falls on politicians for "political gimmicks", "populism", "vote-buying", and so forth, and *never* on the electorate who are equally part of this clientelistic system.[145] The focus is only on manipulative political elites who are seen to tap state resources for personal financial gain or vote-buying tactics. One columnist in 2004 even suggested indulging in the receiving end of clientelism as a means to access one's rightful share of the national cake:

> When politicians are more than ready to dish out money to induce voters – it is my advice to the electorate that they should not hesitate to receive the money and maize. Get them and do not be ashamed to ask for more. Especially if they are from the UDF…That is your money extorted from government. That is one of the reasons this country is poorer now than in 1992.[146]

A classic example of such tensions was Joyce Banda's personal distribution of maize in 2012, which she no doubt deemed to be politically expedient, for she persisted with it despite endless criticism of her wasting time and "politicising hunger". In the national public sphere this personalisation of a bureaucratic task was called irresponsible populism; and failure to cease thenceforth was labelled "arrogance". On the other hand, the constituents who no doubt welcomed the delivery of food (and may or may not have seen the act as symbolising the compassion and legitimacy of their president[147]) were invisible in the urban public sphere. With no voices defending her acts, JB was unable to rely on rival groups in the public sphere to deliberate on the value of personal distribution between themselves. Instead, she was portrayed as defiant in her continuation of the practice. This perceived defiance invited ridicule for trivialising the presidency.

Kamuzu Banda did not face this dilemma of representation. He oversaw every aspect of policy and governance without needing to heed anybody's advice (except from technocrats), because his traditional and charismatic authority gave him the mandate to do so; he was the

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[145] Discourses on the need to change Malawian culture are becoming more prevalent, addressing the unsustainable behavioural patterns that have depleted state resources. But the moral censure of elites is never applied to the common man, who is depicted merely as vulnerable to exploitation. For this reason, Dr Chinsinga sees the "magnitude of poverty" in the country as a great inhibitor to change (author interview, Zomba, Oct 12, 2012).

[146] *Weekend Nation*, 6-7 March, 2004

[147] Many urbanites spoke of the way all Malawians, "even" the rural ones, are learning to take money from all and sundry while supporting their preferred candidate on the basis of an independent assessment, and not inducements.

father-chief who looked after the national family as he saw fit. Furthermore, he is usually regarded as having been highly competent in his role as the ultimate judge and decision-maker. But in the democratic era, the idea of electing representatives through legal procedures shifts the meaning of political representation towards the enactment of the exact wishes of the people. Nevertheless, due to his first term successes, Bingu wa Mutharika earned a degree of trust in his competence which he tried to strengthen symbolically with the adoption of the *Ngwazi* and *Nkhoswe* praise-titles. But in the democratic era this charismatic-authoritative status is precarious: in Mutharika's case, as soon as the economy slumped, his perceived 'superior judgment' on how to run the country became unacceptable 'arrogance'; he once again was told to listen to "the people", because his mandate was to carry out their will, and not just paternalistically decide what was probably best for them (as he tried to do in 2011 by begging Malawians to "trust him"). His increasingly autocratic behaviour and absurd public utterances, such as calling Malawians "chickens", unsurprisingly won him no favours in the urban public sphere.[148]

This problem of political representation reaffirms the importance of context in trying to understand criticism of illegitimate behaviour. Rather than simply looking at what notions of political legitimacy seem to be prevalent within public discourse, we have to analyse the wider social structures and fractures. It is questionable how rapidly notions of legitimacy can change in society, but it should not be assumed that there will be a gradual slide, as Weber argues, from a traditional to legal-rational bases of authority across all or any sectors of society, which tends to be the presumption in democratisation discourse.

3.1.2   Excess versus Modesty and Sacrifice

It would seem to be a banal truth, universally acknowledged, that societies in times of austerity must want sacrificial leaders. But in Malawi's urban public sphere such expectations are not expressed hesitantly. Excess in times of austerity is met with public outrage, reflecting the supposed middle African moral premise that "conspicuous consumption – especially during a period of general economic hardship – would be perceived as excessive and wrong" (Schatzberg, 2001: 172). This means that "austerity has to be shared or legitimacy will diminish markedly" (ibid.). Schatzberg connects this sentiment to the father-chief relation. Fathers are allowed to eat so long as they know when it is inappropriate. As has been shown, the father-chief authority of the president has been replaced over the last two decades to some extent by a more legal-rational

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[148] There is another reason why leaders often ignore the criticism that comes out of the public sphere. The rise of political opinion pieces in the papers, blogs and social media since the early 2000s allows more opinionated discourses to circulate around certain key issues and form a fairly widespread consensus. But, just when such significant "critical public opinion" could actually sway authorities, opposition parties predictably jump on the bandwagon and further stoke the criticism. The opposition parties are then seen as the original source of critical public opinion, thereby undermining the sacred autonomy of the latter (and given the endless political machinations, the accusation is not unwarranted. Recall that in Chichewa politics is perceived as *ndale* – a contest to trip the opponent).

public servant authority, but the moral principle of shared sacrifice in solidarity with ordinary people is still strong, as this letter to the paper reveals:

> I expected this government to lead with real commitment and sacrifice. And this should have started at the very top. My type of committed cabinet could have slashed their salaries by at least 10%, frozen all foreign travel, and stopped importation of all luxury goods.[149]

All democratic presidents have been accused in like fashion for their excessive travel. The oppositional *Malawi News* lambasted Muluzi for his extravagance in 2002, with a large front-page headline: "MULUZI'S EXTRAVAGANCE: He has blown K200m in four months on travel"[150]. The Minister of Finance was unable to account for the extra money that was spent, beyond the budgetary allotment to presidential travel. The PAC then criticised the president for "spending millions of kwachas on useless trips instead of addressing the hunger crisis and prevalent poverty", to which Muluzi responded that he needed to see all of the country's problems first hand so as to fix some of them there and then, and that, in any case, he was not visiting his critics' homes (meaning that it was none of their (PAC's) business)[151]. In response to Muluzi's indifference, an editorial pointed out that his travel expenses could certainly be used to alleviate some of the starvation that the president must witness wherever he goes. It concluded emphatically: "Stop the trips, Mr President, we just cannot afford them".[152] Mutharika was similarly accused of behaving as if he was the exception: "From what we are seeing on the ground so far, everyone is tightening their belts except the citizen number one. Only he has the luxury to travel anywhere he wishes…So much for leading by example".[153]

Fast-forwarding to 2012 brings déjà vu. Just like both of her predecessors, Joyce Banda soon found herself under fire for "excessive" travel. It was her trip to the UN with a 42-strong delegation, at significant cost, that caused an immense furore (exactly like Bingu's trip to the UN in 2004). The travel expenses scandal became a significant strand of discourse, reverberating through all the newspaper columns, online forums and resulting in condemnation from PAC. When Joyce Banda sustained further criticism while travelling domestically with her VP, Khumbo Kachali, he went on the counter-attack by saying, "we do not visit your mothers' homes", thereby snubbing the tax-payer (whose concern it certainly was) in exactly the same manner as Muluzi had done 10 years previously. Kachali's "arrogance" provoked the same style of guilt-tripping articles in which Muluzi had been lambasted a decade earlier, such as "JB travel costs can rescue hospitals". Looking at public discourse diachronically gives historical context to the evident frustration of those who rail against the conduct of their elected representatives, often to little avail. The impotence and inability of citizens to influence the behaviour of their

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[149] My type of government, *Daily Times*, Nov 21, 2012
[150] Nov 23-29
[151] Such a comment is insulting in ChiChewa.
[152] *Malawi News*, Nov 23, 2002
[153] President should lead by example, *The Nation*, December 6, 2004

own political representatives explains the increasingly brazen, obtrusive attempts to shame leaders in the public sphere. Sometimes this shaming does effect behavioural change, such as the cacophonous condemnation of JB's foreign travel – by civil society, media, online forums, etc. – to which the president eventually caved in, abandoning a planned trip to Belgium citing "public pressure". Thus, public "deliberation" is a struggle both to define and naturalise norms of legitimate democratic behaviour, and to effect behavioural change at "the top" in compliance with these norms. The emphasis on sacrifice, humility, and modesty, shows that the fundamental rationale of this discursive strategy is to *diminish power*.

3.1.2.1 Beyond symbolic sacrifice

On coming to office Joyce Banda made gestures to symbolise her break from the norm, by, among other things, committing to the sale of the presidential jet which Mutharika had purchased at great expense with foreign aid (although her dithering on the matter for so long diminished its impact), reducing the presidential convoy, and in September, 2012, taking a 30% pay cut with her VP. These gestures were deemed newsworthy internationally. British and US newspapers published stories about the selling of the jet and the pay cuts, and foreign donors applauded JB for shattering the African leader stereotype. But domestically, the reaction was unenthusiastic. One columnist downplayed the cuts as "a drop in the ocean", only newsworthy because of the very fact that "politics is actually synonymous with extravagance and abuse of state resources"[154]. Another columnist simply called for further cuts (but despite this, he still gave "a thumbs up to the president and her vice for this *symbolic move*"[155] (my emphasis)). Politics the world over involves symbolic displays; some even call it theatre (see Apter, 2006). But how effective is symbolism in Malawi's democratic era? The public discourse tends to interrogate the strategies behind political theatre, in their own counter-strategy of exposing the lack of substance, such as the following columnists' dissection of the pay-cuts gesture:

> It is obvious that the message the presidency wants to send out is that they have taken heed of the deafening plea from various quarters that they should share in the suffering of most Malawians. Until this announcement, there was no practical move by those in power to show that they were willing to be affected by the austerity measures they themselves were asking everyone else to live with. The inevitable question from this announcement is whether it has gone far enough to show commitment to austerity from the very top…People question the sincerity of our leaders who seize the opportunity to make a quick buck from allowances while the rest of us wonder where our next meal will come from[156]

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154 Salary cuts a drop in the ocean, *Daily Times,* Oct 1, 2012
155 On salary slash and political lavishness, *Daily Times,* Oct 2, 2012
156 What are we really talking about? *Nation on Sunday,* Sep 30, 2012

Clearly, showing a willingness to sacrifice as a gesture of humility and empathy is not enough; symbolism is easy to get away with. JB's pay reduction was deemed insubstantial because she continued to enjoy large perks. The implication coming out of discourse on symbolic sacrifice is that it should have tangible effects on the experiences of power-holders, just as the austerity measures dictated by the IMF have tangible effects on the daily experiences of the masses living on the breadline. From the extravagant to the mundane, the prevailing subtext is that leaders should be pulled down to the austere world of the ordinary person, which seems reminiscent of what many people in the country call the "pull him down (PHD) syndrome"[157], whereby success is resented if it is not shared.[158] On the other hand, as a once prominent politician[159] in Muluzi's government explained, the most important basis of legitimacy in his experience was rapport, established by showing *empathy* with the electorate – being close to them, sharing emotionally in their happiness and suffering. In his experience with peri-urban townships and rural communities, ideologies or abstract issues were less important than this trust-relationship (author interview, 20 Sep, 2012). It appears to be in this same spirit that leaders are accused, at the national level, of being aloof and uncaring if they do not share in the suffering of ordinary people. There is a strong egalitarian ethos permeating these discourses on the relation between people and rulers. The endorsement of excess and extravagance portrayed by Mbembe and others is nowhere to be found. On the contrary, what *is* endorsed is any example of the opposite behaviour. For example, a columnist uses an example of a foreign politician to demonstrate what, to him, humble leadership looks like:

> Do you know how Andrew Mitchell travelled to Malawi…to restore…diplomatic relations? The guy not only flew commercial but also in the economy class section… But our ministers and government will not allow 'devaluing' themselves in that manner… Is it not immoral for a Malawian minister to travel like some prince…while those from whom we beg money travel like everyday people?[160]

3.1.2.2 The strategy of nitpicking

In a country that sees significant sums of public money disappear through corruption, calls to reduce petty expenditures may seem disproportionately frugal. But they reflect a determination to de-normalise the attitude of easy money and unaccountability that came to characterise elite

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[157] Lentz (1998: 51) finds this PhD syndrome in Ghana as well; allegedly coined in the Nkrumah regime.

[158] A Zomba townsman told me that his half-constructed village house had been pushed down overnight by jealous villagers. He complained, "Us Malawians, we all have a PhD, even when we are uneducated". People with whom I spoke sometimes mentioned "jealousy" as a reason for why some women criticised Joyce Banda, though reading too much into this could have many implications that can not be explored here.

[159] Ironically, he himself was discredited by corruption charges for massive embezzlement from a parastatal, and confessed to me that he had "amassed significant wealth". It is difficult to say whether it is rapport or his large patronage base in urban townships (sponsoring football teams etc) that endears him to youth, but as we drove through Limbe, he merely had to flick his hand outside the car window, and young men would come running over.

[160] Lessons from London, *Sunday Times*, June 3, 2012

culture under Muluzi, and has continued to some extent till today. There are numerous calls for extreme frugality in the public sphere, one example being a speaker at the PAC conference of October 2012, suggesting renting out parts of the president's Blantyre residence, *Sanjika Palace*, to earn a bit of cash for its upkeep. This proposal by a member of the public would have been unthinkable in Kamuzu Banda's day. Certainly, in a poor country like Malawi, demanding frugality at all levels of government is to be expected. But the persistent focus on minor concerns serves as a strategy to amplify the immorality of large-scale corruption and wasteful government schemes, the magnitude of which would dwarf the costs of keeping up *Sanjika Palace*.

The unfortunate reality of large-scale corruption was driven home by a front-page revelation in the *Daily Times* [161] in 2013, that between the time of his inauguration (2004) and his death (2012), Bingu's wealth went from 150 million to 61 billion kwacha (equivalent to US$180 million, spread across several foreign bank accounts)[162]. It is revelations such as these that put pettier concerns about wasteful expenditure in perspective, and profoundly impact the levels of trust and belief in the sincerity of leaders who make sacrificial gestures. This particular story became a very hot topic for weeks, with one commenter on *MMMV* pathologising leaders' greed, as follows:

> In 1994 it was Kamuzu's accounts being frozen. In 2004 it was Bakili dancing the tune! Now almost a decade later Bingu's accounts! The pattern is the same but the schemes are different! These events are cyclical and we don't seem to learn as a nation. How many accounts are we going to freeze? Why can't we just develop a vaccine to prevent the cause of this disease endemic in our leaders? (MMMV June 25, 2013).

3.1.3 Substance over Ceremony and Symbolism

Exemplary of what Mbembe calls the "self-adulation" of the post-colonial *commandement* was the praise-cult around Kamuzu Banda, an important part of which took place at national events. National holidays were always a reason for large ceremonies, such as on Kamuzu's birthday (May 14). The prime location for these events was a stadium in either Lilongwe or Blantyre, whilst every district held its own smaller scale event at the same time, "bringing the country together in shared activity, connecting the centre to the periphery" (Gilman, 2009: 46). They included much pomp and ceremony, including processions, *mbumba* dances and speeches, which always began with praise for "His Excellency the Life President Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the Ngwazi" (failure to use this form of address could result in dismissal) (ibid.). Banda's frequent touring of

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[161] June 13, 2013

[162] On July 18, 2013, the DPP issued an official statement to redefine the "revelation" as an "allegation", since the only evidence for it was a sworn court affidavit. The party expressed outrage at the whole story: "The continued use of Late Bingu as a political punch-bag for political ends is callous and evil. It is totally against our culture and traditions. It must stop! They should let his soul rest in peace like all civilized people do." (Gondonews.com, accessed July 18, 2013).

the country to carry out crop inspections and so on, always in the presence of dancing, singing, praising women, were opportunities to display his power through his physical glorified presence.

Due to the coercion that sustained the *mbumba* dancing practice (women were forced to practice regularly, as well as feed Banda and his entourage of officials wherever they went) it became a major issue of concern around the time of the transition. In the campaign of 1994, the opposition candidates promised to end the practice and even the tradition of large political functions (ibid., 78). As has been mentioned, Muluzi began his first term by rejecting Banda's personality cult and the associated political culture of ceremonies and praise. He proposed to free national functions from party propaganda. But it was already in his second year that he realised the value of Banda's ceremonial displays and made that clear to the nation. A huge and expensive Independence Day celebration was organised in 1996, despite criticism of Muluzi's about-turn on ceremonialism. This sparked off a trend of more public rallies, with dancing and praise, at all party functions, especially before the second elections of 1999. "By the time of the end of his second term as president [2004], Muluzi was notoriously associated with holding party and national functions with throngs of dancing women, not unlike his predecessor" (ibid.: 78). Praise singing at rallies sometimes used songs from Banda's era, or even songs shared by all political parties, with just the lyrics tweaked to fit in the name of the party being praised. In an anthropological account of one of President Muluzi's election campaign rallies in 1999, Gilman (2009) provides a detailed description of how power is displayed through monologic ceremonies that serve as important legitimising events. Everything, from the spatial arrangements – creating "visual and physical representation of power and class divisions" (130) – to the proliferation of UDF symbols, suggested a carefully *staged* display of power. And it is this stage-managed power that is subject to ridicule and demystification by the urban public.

But even in Kamuzu's time, after so many years it began to lose its thrall. Sweeping people up in monologic ceremony but never allowing them to speak their own minds, may have cost the MCP in the end, as a high-ranking MCP official confessed, "because when people are not allowed to criticise, they suffocate" (Nicholas Dausi interview with Lisa Gilman, 30 May, 2000, in Gilman, 2009: 70). Denunciations of *mbumba* dancing and other practices (still integral to displays of political support) have been common in the free public sphere. Some ridicule the enthusiastic dancing that traditionally welcomes politicians to a constituency, not because of what it traditionally means, but rather because it lacks meaning altogether:

> They dance because they have learnt that is the only way they can get a chance of being given k200 from the president to enable them to buy food. They ululate because they get paid.... Does he [Muluzi] need to wait until the dancers start dropping dead in the arena for him to realise that it is better to feed the people than to feed the helicopter? (Malawi News editorial, Nov 23, 2002)

Sarcasm and irony are popular rhetorical means to deflate the intended effects of pomp and ceremony. The *Sunday Times* (June 19, 2005) coverage of Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party launch was steeped in mockery:

> Thank goodness, Bingu's DPP was finally launched…The party's publicists and fanatics-in-chief had seemed to suggest that the day this party is launched, our lives will come to a standstill.

It goes on to mock the way the "anti-climactic" event had been built up beforehand by the DPP, who had subjected the nation to "torture by monotony" on TV Malawi, expecting Blantyre residents to be "drooling" over the event. The reporter inserts images of dismal reality into his sarcastic depictions of pomp. Thus, the launch by "His Eminence, the godfather, President Mutharika himself" of infrastructural projects that "may never materialise" was received with "applause, applause, applause" by Blantyre supporters "who, by the way, face severe water shortages". The writer denounces the "motor-mouth Dipipi Women's League", who should "know better than to sing for Mutharika when he is attending national functions" (i.e. not separating party from state). Crying out for real substance, the reporter writes:

> The situation at the DPP launch was made worse by the conspicuous absence of the party's manifesto. Malawians have suffered enough rhetoric for 41 years. What the people want now is a political party that has a clear vision and a plausible blueprint for the future.

The writer also evokes the *Malawian problem* – "infrastructural problems", "perennial hunger", and "a dying national culture" – to bring a shadow to the image of the colourful political ceremony. Joyce Banda's People's Party carried out their first convention in August, 2012. It was hailed as a step towards intra-party democracy and transparency, but did not escape extensive scrutiny and negative assessments.

> It turned out to be an occasion of petty talk and petty action, to reward minions and beat personal drums, all at the expense of the need to articulate vision and strategy. Where in the world do people go to national conventions only to come back with free mattresses? (*Of failing to run a convention*, Nation on Sunday, September 2, 2012).

The Nation dedicated 2 pages to "examining the PP convention", with the help of Dr Chinsinga of Chancellor College. The lecturer congratulated the president and party for promoting intra-party democracy, which was a "milestone" in Malawi's "relatively short and turbulent democratic experience", but hopefully "not a one-off practice for political window dressing to secure electoral mileage". Ultimately, the verdict was that the convention lacked substance: no electoral agenda or broad policy framework came out of it, let alone answers on key policy areas.[163] Increasingly, such acts of public scrutiny with the help of a specialist cast a spotlight on rituals

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[163] Examining the PP Convention, *The Nation*, Sep 12, 2012

and motions, searching for substance. One columnist described the People's Party's "marketer-in-chief" as "playing the clown", getting "shepherded to every function to entertain crowds with his warped logic that passes for charismatic oratory".[164] In this way, charisma is often portrayed as contrived and self-serving, inauthentic.

In these discourses, 'progressive behaviour' in terms of moving away from ceremonialism is lauded. When Joyce Banda decided to forbid female civil servants from leaving their work to attend political rallies, a columnist wrote, "I have to publicly applaud Mama Joyce's decision to stop the nonsense of having women civil servants leave their duty stations just to wriggle their waists before the president."[165] But despite showing a few progressive tendencies in this regard in her first months, Banda's 'honeymoon period' was foreshortened by her failure to deliver materially. The critical urban public sphere is harsh in this regard; even sympathisers may have a strong word to say. A well-known advocate of gender equality and women empowerment, who was happy to see a female president, showed typical reservations in showing premature praise:

> We are yet to see the real JB. Right now there is a lot of firefighting: reversing Mutharika's costly mistakes and that I understand she has to do. But may the real Joyce Banda stand up? What is this orange [her party colour] all about? Is it about the self-praise that our presidents usually engage in?… I think a president ought to rise above [that] and engage in serious business of crafting policies…rather than singing the same old tune.[166]

Whereas Kamuzu Banda relied very much on ceremony as an integral part of legitimating his traditional and charismatic authority, democratic era leaders cannot get away with this strategy so easily. Members of the urban public, claiming to speak for all Malawians, generally denounce symbolism and cry out for substance e.g. "Politicians do not make a real difference on the ground merely with rhetoric…Politicians make a real difference…when they match rhetoric…with tangible action on the ground. Actually if there was a choice, *most people would prefer action*".[167]

4   (Dis)trust and (Mis)communication

If political legitimacy in Malawi's democracy is about a satisfactory relation between rulers and ruled, involving humility, shared sacrifice and modesty, not simply about displays and big promises, then communication and rhetoric would be a key component for grounding leaders'

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[164] Tukula and his Loud Mouth, *Nation on Sunday*, Dec 9, 2012

[165] Lessons from London, *Sunday Times*, June 3, 2012.

[166] May the real Joyce Banda stand up, *Weekend Nation*, June 23, 2012

[167] Editorial, *The Nation*, Dec 6, 2004 (my emphasis).

legitimacy. As Fisher points out, "from involvement in such communications, one not only perceives what behaviour is required by a role, one also constructs the norms by which the enactment of a role can be evaluated" (1980: 123). Yet there appear to be serious gaps in this regard, not just in communication but also mutual trust. The combination of the public's perception that communication from the top is insincere, and the elites' perspective that criticism from below is disrespectful and excessive (or orchestrated by the political opposition), undermines this vital legitimation process.[168] Activist Rafiq Hajat alludes to this problem:

> We've got a dysfunctional hierarchy and very little communication between the hierarchy and the grassroots. And the avenues where this would happen, like the convention and the district meetings and so on, are stage-managed. They're not forums for free speech (author interview, 2 Oct., 2012).

This is reminiscient of Mbembe's depiction of the postcolonial "simulacrum" (rulers trying to "remythologise" power, which, when demystified by the laughing people, only leads to "mutual zombification") or as Karslström (2003) sees it, insubstantial monologic ceremony. The difference in the democratic era is that people no longer laugh, but criticise ruthlessly. PAC issued a communiqué in 2012 highlighting this problem of communication, both vertically and horizontally:

> There is a serious lack of dialogue on contentious national issues and this has negatively affected the feeling of patriotism among professionals and the citizenry in general. Malawians tend to avoid hard issues in both the socio-economic and political sphere of life (Nov 8, 2012).

Additionally, the urban public sphere, as has been noted, is interestingly set up in that print media consists of only two independent media houses, both critical of state. State-owned publications that have popped up and disappeared have had negligible impact (Chistulo and Mang'anda, 2011); and savvy urbanites are aware of, and criticise, state influence over MBC radio and TV.

Since the consolidation of the oppositional print media around 2002-4 (Mchakulu, 2011), the significant increase in political opinion spaces (columns and special political analysis), radio stations like Capital Radio addressing educated (mostly business sector) audiences on political issues[169], and extensive online platforms/blogs for expression, spaces for mass horizontal communication and collective demystification of political rhetoric in the urban public sphere have increased, which if anything puts politicians increasingly on the back foot, a position that has clearly intensely provoked leaders.

Mutharika's belligerent reactions attest to this. Withdrawing all government advertising to choke *The Nation* newspaper was one of the more coercive solutions when rhetoric failed to stem the tide of criticism. With little substantive (economic) improvements to boast of since

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[168] See also "communication problems", chapter 3.
[169] Author interview with Alaudin Osman, owner of Capital Radio, Blantyre, Dec 6, 2012

taking the reigns, Joyce Banda's press team has also found itself on the defence, struggling to advance to a proactive rhetorical establishment of its legitimacy. Public sphere discourse, as an institution, enjoys a tactical advantage in the battle of words due its sacred watchdog status, validated by the ultimate international watchdogs (Freedom House, MISA, donors, etc.) whose gaze over Malawi's government is ever-present. Alaudin Osman, a radio station owner, former newspaper publisher, and former State House press secretary for Bakili Muluzi, warned Joyce Banda of this challenging communicative situation:

> I sent her a note of congratulations when she was elected, just a couple of days later…I gave her a 10-point issue trying to point out that she's going to face huge challenges in terms of public relations…I tried to point out that democracy is a messy business. People are highly disrespectful to the leadership. But you don't operate by threatening the media or keeping quiet and hoping the problem will go away. You engage the masses and especially the media in a conversation – *daily* ongoing conversation. So one of the things I had advocated for, is a revamp of the State House media sector…have a good public relations system in place. State House, government ministries, and government departments should be proactive and not reactionary. (author interview, Blantyre, Dec 6, 2012)

On April 23, 2013, Joyce Banda made headlines when she stated that, *"The Media killed Bingu"*. She had met with several media practitioners at the presidential palace, who were trying to persuade her to sign the Table Mountain Declaration. In the meeting she confessed:

> You have been irritating me, now you want to me sign what? When I became the president, I thought the media were my partners. But I have serious problems, especially with our newspapers… At first I thought Bingu [wa Mutharika] was wrong. But I have now realised that you have no compassion and you can kill a sitting president…Bingu tried to fight the media and you killed him.[170]

The distrust that compounds this communication problem between State and Society can go both ways. Those at the top often question the sincerity of public protest and criticism, accusing it of being politicised, rather than a genuine expression of civic concern. The tendency to make this accusation has existed throughout the democratic era. Muluzi had good reason to suspect the insincerity of criticism from the oppositional BNL papers because of their (MCP) political ownership. During Mutharika's legitimation crisis, as Cammack (2012: 386) notes, "No complaint could be raised by church leaders, civic activists, donors or analysts without their being accused – by Mutharika or his smooth spokesman, Dr Ntaba, or his vociferous minister of information, Ms Kaliati – of fronting for Joyce Banda and her People's Party."[171] Similarly, when Joyce Banda was overwhelmed by unexpected criticism and strikes due to her economic policies, she accused the opposition of stoking this dissent. In July, 2013, when a feminist activist accused JB of preaching to rural women to respect their husbands, but failing to mention husbands' respect for their

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[170] *Daily Times*, April 23, 2013
[171] Note that at this time Joyce Banda had been expelled from the DPP and formed the People's Party, and was seen as the main bulwark against Mutharika's autocracy.

wives, Joyce Banda reacted by criticizing the activist for having been divorced three times. At this point academic Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula stepped in and "took on" the president, accusing her of "mediocrity":

> When we speak, especially those of us who are women, it should not be read as women speaking or shouting at each other. It should be read as Malawians raising issues with their Head of State.[172]

Kabwila-Kapasula clearly alludes to the communication problem of leaders "reading" critical public statements in an unsympathetic way. However justified leaders' claims about politicization of public criticism may be at times, they have the unfortunate consequence of undermining the perceived authenticity of public consensus on key issues, even when this consensus is reached autonomously of direct political influence.[173] In summary, if the legitimacy of leaders is mostly established through public discourse/dialogue between leaders and ordinary citizens, the problematic communicative set up in Malawi seriously impacts this process.

4.1   Oppositional code: tearing apart the gods

An aspect of Stuart Hall's (2006 [1973]) theory of mass media communication can be usefully applied to this analysis of how political rhetoric, communicated through media, is interpreted by citizens in the public sphere. The intended ideological power of politicians' messages can be subverted when receivers make an "alternative" reading of the message. To understand the notion that no message can be transmitted absolutely transparently and "raw", the analytic distinction between 'denotation' and 'connotation' has to be dissolved. Denotations are usually taken to be literal transcriptions of reality, and thus distinct from connotations, which are associated meanings. Thus, the former appear fixed (a "natural sign"), while the latter show variability. But linguistic signs are arbitrary and always require a code to give them meaning, so the only difference between denotations and connotations is that the former are simply those signs (e.g. words) that appear to be very stable (universal consensus about what they signify), whilst connotations are less naturalised, more fluid, and therefore more susceptible to *ideological transformation*. Most signs have both stable (denotative) and fluid (connotative) meanings. Polysemy on the connotative level of signs allows their various meanings to be altered.

But connotative codes are not equal: "any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested" (Hall, 2006: 169). This dominant cultural order creates 'preferred meanings', or ways to map social reality,

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[172] Jessie Kabwila takes on Malawi President Joyce Banda, *Malawi Democrat*, July 24
[173] Of course, making a clear divide between state and society is impossible, even if in the popular imaginery it is quite stark.

which are experienced as a common sense, practical understanding of 'how things work' in a culture – including its social structures and power relations. Dominance requires working to "enforce, win plausibility for and *command as legitimate* a decoding of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified" (ibid., 170 (my emphasis)). Here we are not concerned with mainstream media representations representing the dominant cultural order, as Hall was, but instead the hegemonic rhetoric produced by (representatives of) the state, trying to enforce a certain interpretation of political phenomena (reality). One finds that the *preferred* (connotative) meaning of the politician-speaker is usually not conveyed to the urban public sphere, where discourses tend to engage in *oppositional decoding* of political rhetoric. Despite understanding the preferred meanings of the political speakers, the public interprets messages in a "*globally* contrary way". According to Hall, this means that as receivers, they "detotalize… the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference," just as someone might, for example, listen to a political debate about lowering workers' wages in the "national interest", and interpret every mention of "national interest" as "class interest" (ibid., 172).[174]

In Mbembe's depiction of the postcolony, laughter at the "official fictions" of state power is sacrilege from the government's perspective, because it attacks the cosmology of the rulers and "unpack[s] the officialese and its protective taboos and often, unwittingly, tear[s] apart the gods that African autocrats aspire to be" (1992:11). In the Malawian democratic public sphere, discourse very wittingly belittles, deflates, and drains the potency from government rhetoric with oppositional readings of speeches and ceremony. Of course, one could say in simpler language that public discourse simply contradicts messages coming from the state, but that would merely imply opposition at the level of rational argument (on policy issues, for example). Rather, what the notion of 'oppositional interpretation' can do is capture the way discourses in the urban public sphere completely change the colouring of messages from government; so that arguments in the "national interest" are interpreted as being "elite self-interest" (or in the case of JB's economic policies, "Western interest"). More generally, this means that political arguments are often taken as deceptions, and those who fully endorse a politician's statements can easily be labelled "hand-clappers" (i.e. suckers for self-serving rhetoric).

This distrust of leaders is so diffuse that it makes oppositional interpretations of their speeches and displays commonplace. Exchanges on *MMMV* are interesting because there is more frequent occurrence of clashes between oppositional readings and the sympathetic

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[174] Hall's mention of an "alternative framework" evokes the "frame theory" that Mchakulu (2011) applies to the way newspapers in Malawi frame post-election political discourse. The idea of media framing is more than agenda-setting, which simply makes certain issues salient and others not. It refers to "an abstract principle, tool, or schemata of interpretation that work through media texts to structure social meaning" (Reese, 2001: 14, in Mchakulu, 2011: 26). It could be argued that framing is simply another way to explain, like oppositional decoding, the *active meaning construction* involved in the representation of political phenomena.

interpretations of party loyalists. For example, a commenter who was clearly a DPP supporter posted an extract from a speech by Peter Mutharika,[175] which he found particularly touching: "…and we need a national character in which love for one another is deeply part of our humanity". Beneath it, someone responded: "a hyena remains a hyena even after 2 years he will remain one. Peter mutharika is one and shall remain one," to which the initial poster of the extract rebutted: "I don't think that hyena image is the right image for this man. I think those who don't agree with him should learn ways of challenging the real him and his ideas instead of creating a false image of him and selling it like you are doing." This "false image" alludes to the framing that so often turns politicians' words into those of a hyaena, inviting unsympathetic interpretations of their utterances. In another instance, Banda's press secretary tried to defend her foreign travel as a rebuttal to the heavy criticism in the public sphere: "It is difficult to over-emphasise the need for Malawi to have strong external relations with other governments, donors, international investors and Malawian investors…" (etc). A commenter interpreted his arguments as a defence of elite self-interest, since 50 years of independence had seen vast amounts of external money going no further than politicians' own bank accounts, and asked rhetorically, "can anyone mention a country that developed by going around the globe begging?"

With mudslinging and backstabbing perceived to be the mode of political survival, success in politics almost presupposes compromises to one's moral integrity. It might be telling that the Chichewa word for politics is *ndale,* which originally referred to "a mode of wrestling in which one overthrows the other, the men grip each other, the one gives the other a fall by tripping" (Kinshindo, 2000: 27). The phrase *kutchera ndale* refers to "throw[ing] an obstacle in the path that your fellow may stumble". Thus, according to Kishindo, "*ndale* has a negative connotation… Despite the political changes that have occurred in the country, Malawians have a negative view of politics. They understand it as a 'dangerous game' in the literal sense of the word". Additionally, this game is perceived to be the prerogative of the party and its leaders. "For the ordinary person to engage in politics is regarded as an instrument of settling scores and punishing those that hold opposing views" (ibid.).

Metaphors commonly portray the moment of tasting "power" – an entity with sinister connotations – as exposure to a corrupting, transforming force (though not in a supernatural sense). For example, a columnist laments the way his former colleague, Steven Nhlane, transformed from a critic of power to a government mouthpiece when he joined JB's press team:

> People…change drastically when they taste or sit close to the seat of power. Almost every time I hear from Steve these days… I have to pinch myself. The man is not recognisable from the gentle and accomplished scribe I saw in the newsroom... He has become so shockingly petty...I blame the system for making him say things he would ordinarily not be proud to be associated with…I get the impression that he is under heavy pressure to placate a very demanding and hard-to-please hierarchy.[176]

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[175] Peter is Bingu wa Mutharika's younger brother, who took over as head of the DPP.
[176] *I want my Steve back*, Nation on Sunday, Dec. 9, 2012)

When Lucius Banda, a prominent musician and vocal critic of government, joined the UDF party, Chancellor College students rioted as an expression of their disappointment. It is no exaggeration to say, then, that the reputation of politicians in general is diabolical. Cynicism seems to fuel the perception that politicians are guilty until proven innocent, or at best *suspect* until proven innocent. These may seem like broad generalisations (and there are exceptions), but exceptions tend to prove the rule: on the odd occasion when politicians are praised unreservedly in the public sphere, such praise is comes across as an anomaly. While praise for Kamuzu Banda and his MCP was the only conceivable mode of political expression until 1992, since then it is condemnation of "politics as usual" (whether directly, or by highlighting exceptions to prove the dismal rule) that has become almost the only conceivable mode of political expression. Therefore it is a common complaint that there is "too much politics" in the running of things, or that "politics got in the way", implying that politics is synonymous with obstructive self-interest. Consequently, there has been a clarion call by those perceptive of the underexploited economic potential of the country for technocrats to replace obstructive politicians in the cabinet, e.g.:

> With the enormous challenges that the country is facing, Aunt Joyce needs a cabinet comprising some realists including technocrats and not just a pack of politicians and praise-singers…I am advocating for a cabinet reshuffle because I know that old habits die hard…They keep on milking the government through crooked ways they have mastered over the years, and expecting them to change just because PP is in power is a pipe dream.[177]

4.2 The cycle of distrust

> The bottom line is that Malawi is in serious need of leaders we can trust. I am apprehensive about the future.[178]

Given the extent to which many politicians have switched parties, formed unholy alliances, enriched themselves and shirked their professional responsibilities up until the present (see Cammack, 2012), a prevalent sense of distrust in the public sphere is unsurprising. But, in a cyclical fashion, distrust may perpetuate the problem that is its original cause. The combination of insincere democratic rhetoric from above, and caricatures such as "politics is stupid, especially Malawian politics" from below, has undermined the integrity of politicians in general. The inevitability of this perception provides little incentive for politicians to *actually behave otherwise* – it may be more politically expedient to simply go along with it. Operating within a political culture where patronage remains the principle *modus operandi* for establishing a support base in many constituencies (Gilman, 2009: 115), there is little incentive to change this culture by being

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[177] *Shake up the cabinet!* Daily Times, Sep 13, 2012
[178] *Bingu could do without pettiness*, Nation on Sunday, March 13, 2011

"accountable" to the state bureaucracy, since the political pay-offs of a clean reputation will be in doubt, given the incredulous attitude with which the urban public sphere receives any such claims.[179] At the 2nd PAC conference, 2012, one politician made an interesting comment on the Malawian politician's paradox: that, as a politician, it was unfeasible to expect him to go to his constituency and say, "Sorry, I will no longer supply you with subsidised fertiliser and free maize because at the national level it is inefficient and financially unsustainable", since he seeks votes, and failure to deliver those things would not go down well with the electorate. The most rational course of action in terms of national interest may therefore be politically inexpedient in local contexts. (To some extent, this dilemma is surely faced by politicians everywhere.)

On June 24, 2011, Mutharika pleaded for people to trust his good intentions for the nation, a plea that, to one commentator, symbolised the sorry state of distrust between leaders and people: "I felt sad when the father of this country…had to ask the nation to trust him and believe that he always meant good for the nation. I say sad, because…we should know that he means good".[180] This comment was atypical, however. Typically, the president's message was interpreted in an oppositional code, deliberately subverting the connotations with which the message was encoded i.e. connotations of fatherly authority and expected trust and obedience from his citizens/children. The following exemplifies the oppositional reading which distorts the fatherly connotations to portray aloofness instead:

> President Bingu wa Mutharika provides a classic and familiar illustration of what it means to fall from the dizzying heights of glory and popular adoration to the depressing depths of disgrace…a man…who is…failing to understand why everyone seems to have turned against him… The bottom line is that Mutharika has failed to grasp a simple lesson that trust must be earned, not commandeered.[181] [182]

5   Crisis of legitimacy and the need to break from the past

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[179] It is unwarranted to assume that those who demand accountability in public, even if it's "the common man", will themselves be accountable in private life e.g. the involvement of civil servants in *katangale*, described in chapter 2.

[180] To trust or not to trust the president?, *Nation on Sunday,* July 3, 2011

[181] ibid.

[182] It is important to note that, despite the inherent distrust and disillusionment with politics, this does not mean that political parties have no urban support base. While young adults on *My Malawi My Views* may rail against politicians and complain that they are not represented, some still have strong party affiliations. For example, one commenter showed his support for DPP but still made the general complaint that "No political party at the moment has shown seriousness in dealing with the challenges that the youths are facing." He exemplifies those who may perceive deficiencies in politics in general, but remain loyal to a party in an ambivalent, partial, hopeful or opportunistic way.

A prevalent strand of discourse is based on the powerful image of a break from the past/present.

Since the present is perceived as stagnant, it is an image of overcoming inertia and moving forward, but along an entirely new trajectory. Joyce Banda's unexpected presidency is an ideal political moment to analyse, in terms of how this diffuse cynicism towards the prevailing political culture and the existing crop of politicians profoundly shapes the specific hopes and expectations that a leader must address in seeking legitimacy. Shortly after JB took office, an editorial wrote of her "golden opportunity" to "redefine the relationship between the leader and the people she leads", thereby becoming a "true democrat." At the same time, however, it warned that, "a fish rots from the head. Once the leader of a country assumes an air of

Figure 3: Nation on Sunday, 20 May, 2012

arrogance…then there won't be telling of how far the cancer will grow".[183] The tensions between sentiments of hope and scepticism generated an attitude that Chinsinga aptly describes as "guarded optimism".[184] Just a day after Joyce Banda was inaugurated, a *Sunday Times* column drew on the "*rise and fall*" of Mutharika as a warning:

> If Banda wants to have a legacy to be celebrated long after she's gone, she has to learn to sift pragmatism from flattery. It should be a new beginning of new things, not a case of same script, different cast…The course of history we all know too well…What we should be afraid of is where we are going… Malawians' major problem is that we tend to forget too easily…One can only hope it won't be another déjà vu.[185]

Ironically, forgetfulness is not one of the public sphere's shortcomings; if it often creates an uncanny sense of déjà vu, it is because the historical narrative is one of perpetual repetition. One columnist began and ended one of his columns with the same quote, stating that, "since our nation is going around in circles, I may as well end where I began".[186] This stagnation narrative provides major ammunition for critical urban discourses, as the above column attests to, in calling for a new cast and new script that does away with the discredited old. Thus, incessant warnings that JB might fall prey to the same patterns of conduct, the same sycophantic MPs who surrounded her predecessors, and the same old transactional politics, can only be understood from the longer-term perspective:

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[183] *JB's golden opportunity to make a difference, Sunday Times,* June 17, 2012
[184] This is how Blessings Chinsinga characterised the national mood at the time of her inauguration, in his presentation to the 2nd PAC conference of 2012.
[185] Same cast, same script, *Sunday Times*, April 8, 2012
[186] We missed our tide, *Daily Times*, 7 Sep. 2012

> You have got to feel sorry for the late Bingu wa Mutharika. It must have been excrutiating to work with cheats, tricksters and retarded praise-singers of the worst kind. These are the people who began to switch parties in midstream April, abandoning Bingu wa Mutharika even before doctors had certified him dead…As the falsehoods that were being perpetrated on the people [by the DPP regime] are being unveiled and it's becoming clear that we were sold a mirage, please don't forget that this Parliament was part of that fallacy…[The MPs] should shut up and spare us this sanctimonious charade. It is their senseless politics that brought Malawi to this decadence and we *surely don't want any more of the same*.[187]

This sense of tedious continuity behind the changing colours and chameleon politics inspires calls to fundamentally revolt against the cycle, and revolutionary utterances are therefore not uncommon. Even a senior delegate of the PAC uttered the words, "We need a revolution".[188]

As already noted, Joyce Banda's hero-rebel status was re-evaluated at her inauguration, as she entered a tainted presidential seat, ensuring that her "honeymoon period" did not last long. The new cabinet was criticised for comprising the "same cast", a tenacious label from which it proved very difficult for the PP to detach itself, due to the perception that "rotten fish" spoilt it from the start:

> Everywhere one looks, it's the same old failures, the same people who have plundered the economy, the same corrupt faces, the same myopic individuals coming forward to offer themselves as change. When you mix good fish with rotten fish and boil them together in the same pot, all the fish become rotten. Nowhere is this analogy truer than in the People's Party. Unfortunately it is now too late to change. Once again, Malawi has been let down.[189]

After only a few months of existence, JB's whole administration was also portrayed as running the "same old script", despite a few new policies, symbolic gestures, and *claims to be doing things differently*. This is the crux of the matter – the oppositional stance with which much of the public decodes messages from the top, means that leaders' claims to be doing things differently face heavily sceptical interpretations.[190] Widespread dismissals of the *sameness* of Banda's government, in terms of personnel and policy, clearly show that the script and cast of Malawian politics face a crisis of legitimacy. One columnist said quite frankly: "To me, Malawi can't go ahead if we continue to choose from this breed of politicians." He advocated an absolute break from the past, saying that the future depended on "destroying this old order through the same spirit that destroyed colonialism in the early '60s and Kamuzu's dictatorship in the early '90s".[191] A few

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[187] Standing for nothing, *Sunday Times*, June 3, 2012 (my emphasis).

[188] PAC 2nd all inclusive stakeholders conference, Oct 30-31, 2012

[189] When good fish are mixed with rotten fish: the case of PP, *Sunday Times*, Nov 25, 2012.

[190] (Unless these claims are backed by substantive and visible transformation. Bingu provided this in his first term – economic growth was supposedly at 7% per annum, and his agricultural programme converted a 43% food deficit into a 53 % surplus (Dionne and Dulani, 2012: 112-113). But the PP's endless reference to "inherited" problems and claims that quick economic recovery was unfeasible did not exempt JB's administration, in the eyes of the public, from ultimate responsibility once she had been in power for half a year).

[191] Malawi needs a leadership revolution, *Nation on Sunday*, Nov 18, 2012

scholars have noted this perception problem facing the Malawian political elite. Chinsinga made a point in his PAC presentation that, "it is not what the leader is but what people see the leader as that counts",[192] and even before Mutharika's fully-fledged crisis of 2011/12, Gaynor observed that:

> Trust in political leaders has fallen significantly. The media's ongoing exposure of abuses of public office has resulted in increasing public disillusionment with, and apathy towards, political institutions and their elites… In an era where much politics is played out in the media, citizens are acutely aware of the motivations and interests of their political leaders and it would appear that traditional loyalties and deference to authority among 'ordinary people' at least, may be weakening (2010: 806).

The significance of politics playing out in the media and media 'framing' of issues can be traced in other mediated and non-mediated discourse.[193]

Many a debate is sparked on *My Malawi My Views* by newspaper stories, which are often directly uploaded as photographs onto the social media platform. For example, a young woman on *MMMV* wrote of Joyce Banda:

Figure 4: Daily Times survey, 7 Nov., 2012

> IS IT COINCIDENCE? Whatever she constructs, be it roads or mere school blocks, comes out a mess and turns out substandard. Whoever she appoints…becomes a laughing stock and redundant. Wherever she goes…it's a sheer waste of resources and irrelevant. Whatever she carries to the people, be it maize or balls, is always illtimed and unnecessarily placed…What can we make of such a character? (Feb 18, 2013).

This observation shapes and is shaped by public discourse, of which the media has played a prominent role, framing Banda's rule as one of mediocrity and blundering. The apparent naturalness of representation, especially when it comes from authoritative sources, obscures the creative role played in the act of representation itself. Another very powerful type of media framing is in public surveys. Newspapers frequently ask members of the public what they think about policies or more abstract questions, and publish pie-charts showing public response. An example of a loaded survey question is: *Is Malawi short of leaders?[194]*. It came shortly after the PAC

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[192] PAC 2nd all-inclusive stakeholder conference, 2012.
[193] Certain phrases common in journalistic language are oft-heard repeated in daily conversation, such as, "Let's call a spade a spade"; "We need a change of guard"; "We are in the doldrums"; "We are tired of executive arrogance", etc.
[194] *Daily Times*, 7 Nov, 2012

conference had disseminated the notion of "transformational leadership", and this survey directly referenced the conference. In this way, authoritative voices like that of PAC have the power to disseminate potent ideas about transformation, which reinforce the common perception of the *status quo* being deficient.

Inevitably, discourses structure meaning, reality and action. Therefore, John Kapito's calls for Banda to resign in September of 2012 did not seem entirely out of context.[195] Compounding Banda's problems was the fact that even the procedural grounds of her legitimacy were shaky, given that she was never elected. But as Rothstein (2009) argues (citing empirical studies from many societies), the 'input' side of political legitimacy (elections) is not nearly as important as 'outputs' (quality of government), and certainly in Malawi – given the fact that both Mutharika and Banda were called to resign despite their constitutional mandate – outputs are clearly an important element. The law and electoral procedure provide a partial anchor, but this anchor is not where the process ends. Elections are not the sole grounds for legitimacy, but the beginning of an on going communicative process of establishing a suitable relationship between leaders and citizens.

Additionally, "legitimacy depends upon the ability of authority to maintain a perceived consistency between values and action" (Francesconi, 1982: 51; in Heisey and Trebing, 1986: 296). Operating in contradictory registers of appropriate conduct has clearly proven difficult for politicians under the surveillance of the critical urban public. Leaders' failure to reconcile democratic rhetoric with actual behaviour has made the public sphere a filtering project to separate hypocrisy from authentic statements – a filter that lets very little through given the inherently oppositional interpretation of political rhetoric. Thus, this study finds, in accordance with Lentz (1998), that legitimacy is "a conflict-ridden and open process, in which 'big men' and politicians as well as their audiences and 'judges' intervene" (47). It needs to be rhetorically established, yet the perceived "arrogance" of leaders, the use of pomp and ceremony over ideological 'substance', and not uncommon descent into demagoguery, are all portrayed by the urban public as conduct that undermines the communicative process.

Schatzberg's (2001) moral matrix of the "father and family" provides interesting insights into the way the relation of rulers and ruled may be influenced by "subjacent" familial metaphors, but only from a synchronic and therefore static perspective, which does not fully capture the way, in democratic Malawi, an ever-changing historical narrative absorbs new 'lessons' with the progress of time, so that even the recent part is integral to assessments in the present, making the notion of a 'matrix' of legitimacy seem too rigid. The symbolic relation between leaders and people is always being tested and contested through discourse, and the historically contingent impulses of rebirth and transformation that some sectors of society in contemporary Malawi are

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[195] As proof that this mood was palpable and appeared to have captured the national public sphere, I received a text from an 18 year old boy in September, with whom I had talked about JB a month earlier, saying, „Have you heard? People don't like JB any more".

expressing, also determines this open-ended process. Legitimacy is never fully anchored for a definite period, not even by democratic elections, as the PAC ultimatum demanding Bingu's resignation demonstrates. Indeed, not even the Life President was legitimate for life.

Chapter 4

In Search of Significance

Discourses on leadership do not merely reflect political culture; they constitute it. In this sense they can be described as "autopoeitic", i.e. self-creating, and are consequently analysable in terms of "the how of political culture, not simply what attitudes, beliefs, or assumptions characterize a political culture but rather how political culture, as an autopoietic discourse system, performatively operates to produce political knowledge and to regulate political action" (Kidwell, 2009: 553). The critical urban public sphere has become an important locus of knowledge production in Malawi. Public utterances give meaning and context to political life, and in so doing, create a discourse that structures the very ways in which this 'reality' is further perceived. Concretely, each political administration is given meaning, not just on its own terms, but in comparison to the past and the potential future. Political leaders have to contend with these representations of reality in their own ways, since they also aim to 'define' their own rule. Just like Kamuzu Banda (but not nearly in such a totalising manner), they have sought to give value and meaning to their respective administrations. In this endeavour, they have evoked various myths about the significance of their leadership.

Bakili Muluzi sought to portray his administration as freedom from tyranny, since the "lost decade" of his reign, in terms of poverty alleviation, meant that economic achievements were not so much of a selling point (Cammack, 2012). He had the advantage of being able to claim, "We were all learning", when fingers were pointed at his shortfalls. Bingu wa Mutharika started off by purging corruption, then throwing off his UDF shackles and charging ahead with economic development while the opposition bickered, obstructed and ganged up on him. Thus, he portrayed his leadership as the start of a new beginning, worthy of changing the national flag (at great expense) from a rising sun to a risen sun. Joyce Banda celebrated 100 days in office with the usual pomp and ceremony, a slightly ill-calculated attempt to commemorate a new style of humble, honest politics. Her administration is self-styled as a move away from the great charismatic displays that invariably descend into demagoguery (with Mutharika's regime providing the main reference point). In contrast, it is shown to be more caring and accountable. But this has only invited criticism that reference to a failed regime is no valid reference, and that solving problems does not provide any sense of direction. While the PP knows the point from which it is making a clear departure, it has not articulated the point to which it is headed (so say numerous commentators on Banda's government in the public sphere).

The last chapter looked at political conduct and communication in the process of establishing the legitimacy of a leader. This chapter goes beyond conduct, and focuses on both explicit and implicit/subconscious *strategies* in the public project of redefining political authority

in the democratic era, as well as the more general transformation of the 'cultural mindsets' to which poor leadership is seen to be intrinsically connected. Of course, strategies are always part of the communicative process of legitimation, as seen in the last chapter, but here they are revealed in their manifestation as a diffuse social process, ranging from statements that clearly articulate an argumentative objective, to everyday informal or trivial narratives in the public sphere. This chapter could be seen as an attempt to make sense of this statement: "Hate it or love it, but Malawi needs a leader and not a politician."[196]

1 The role of the outside world

The outside world is integral to the process of discussing domestic leadership. Most importantly, it is the dynamic relationship with the West that is exploited in the struggles of the public sphere. The historical colonial relationship with Britain, the contemporary trade relationship, the aid-dependency relationship, and the positions that these societies hold in the global field of power, all shape the varied ways in which the West interacts with and influences the 'local' discourses analysed in this study.

There appear to be two distinct ways in which this foreign influence enters Malawi's public sphere: through intrusion and appropriation. Direct foreign intrusion into local discourse is often highly resented. A good example is Western representatives taking political sides in local newspapers. In contrast, voluntary and enthusiastic appropriation of foreign ideas, models and discourses helps to advance strategies and tactical positioning in local discourse, to defend a confrontational stance vis-à-vis the state, bolster efforts to hold leaders to account, create a narrative of "falling behind the world", etc. The classic example is the media tactic of invoking global discourse to defend its sacrosanct institutional identity and right to keep politicians "in line". These distinct modes of influence have created an ambivalent attitude towards (primarily) the West in Malawi's urban public sphere.

1.1.1 Intrusion and Aversion

The public is sensitive to outside influence, usually displaying a manifest aversion to foreign intrusion or interference in Malawi's public affairs. Aid conditionalities, moral preaching and other direct statements to the Malawian public can therefore expect to invite serious rebuttals. We are concerned here specifically with 'interference' in leadership legitimacy discourse. From time to time representatives of donor countries or INGOs – ambassadors, UN country reps, etc.

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[196] Blind Loyalty, *Weekend Nation*, 8 Dec. 2012

– voice their personal or country's views on matters of Malawian national politics, usually in the newspapers. These public statements are invariably pedagogical in tone, often with barely any attempt to conceal the intention to preach. To well-informed readers of the newspapers, this might smack of condescension. But what appears particularly irksome to the Malawian public is foreign intrusion into local discursive struggles to decide on the legitimacy of leaders, especially when foreigners take sides with the state.

A very clear example of resentment to foreign interference was in the contestations over Joyce Banda's legitimacy in the second half of 2012. She had implemented IMF economic policies and repaired diplomatic relations with Western donors, and so was popular in the West. Several Western representatives decided to either publish their own articles or partake in interviews with the local press, explaining why Malawians should support JB, such as: *US envoy backs JB* (*Daily Times*, 4 Oct., 2012); *JB 'deserves credit' – German ambassador* (*Sunday Times*, 7 Oct., 2012); *Why Malawi should stay the course* (*Daily Times*, 2 Oct., 2012); *US remains committed to Malawi* (*The Nation*, 28 Sep., 2012). *Donors call for sacrifice* (*The Nation*, 21 Sep., 2012). These articles went directly to the heart of various grievances being expressed in the public sphere. The US ambassador defended JB's trips to the UN, at a time when she was being "heavily criticised for her 33 person entourage to the US which has cost the taxpayer about k308 million at a time her government is preaching austerity". The UN Resident coordinator to Malawi, Richard Dictus, explained to the public in a full-page opinion piece why they had to "stay the course" of economic reforms that Banda had implemented under donor pressure. He stated boldly that "the decisions that H.E. the President made with her team soon after assuming power were the right ones." A full front-page article on why donors were calling for sacrifice quoted the Norwegian ambassador stating that: "most donors are impressed with the bold steps Banda has taken to put the country on the recovery path…'I do not agree necessarily with those who are criticising government for not getting its act together'". Additionally, the article mentioned that, "Donors are also *monitoring* Malawi's performance in governance and human rights sectors before considering further budgetary support" (my emphasis), demonstrating the clear monitoring and disciplining practices of the international community, resulting from the unequal relations in the global field of power.

The Malawian public evidently often reads these preachings in an oppositional code, interpreting them as expressions of Western self-interest. And they could claim to have good reasons to do so: Mutharika's economic reforms were a direct snub to the IMF and contradicted its economic orthodoxy, yet proved to be (initially) highly successful. Furthermore, Malawi's history is replete with damaging IMF prescriptions in line with its free market ideology: more than two decades of economic liberalisation reforms, especially in the agricultural sector, has seen little growth and increased food insecurity, as well as impacts on education and health – problems for which the IMF has sometimes admitted responsibility (see Chilowa, 1998; Chirwa,

1999; Devereux, 2002; Chinsinga, 2012). The informed members of the urban public do not fail to point this out from time to time. (This is not to say that there is a wholesale rejection by the of the economic reforms that the IMF prescribes, rather that it is the way they are imposed by an unequal power relation that is acutely felt.) But the irony is that, in vocalising their support for Joyce Banda in the manner described above, Western representatives actually *undermined* her legitimacy in the eyes of the urban public, as their endorsements provoked numerous accusations that she was dancing to the tune of the West, and did not display independent sovereign leadership.

1.1.1.1 Local reactions to intrusion:

In reaction to the above public statements by foreigners in support of Banda, one person wrote a letter to the *Daily Times* entitled, "Hands off Malawi's internal matters", expressing strong resentment at the fact that Malawians were actually being criticised for holding their own leaders to account:

> Dear Editor,
> I want to agree with comments and views of other Malawians who have voiced out their concerns on the recent remarks in the local media by the United States Ambassador to Malawi Jeanine Jackson and her German counterpart Peter Woeste…. Let me remind the two envoys that Malawians do not want to be ruled by a Western puppet who do (sic) their bidding at the expense of poor Malawians. How would people in the West, especially Greece, Italy, Spain, feel if a Malawian ambassador stood on the podium telling them that they should…have patience with their leaders… I hope the two ambassadors will stop taking Malawians for granted and leave local politics to local Malawians… (Nov 28, 2012).

This letter states in no uncertain terms that the Malawian public sphere is very much a *Malawian* site of political deliberation, where the on going process of establishing legitimacy does not need outside interference. Another letter-writer makes an ironic attempt at reversing the unequal power and monitoring relationship between Malawi and the West, by judging the French elections of 2002 as neither free nor fair:

> Europeans and Americans always pontificate to weak countries like Malawi and Zimbabwe…*ad nauseum, ad infinitum*… I was not impressed by the latest French presidential elections. They were not free or fair. *Merde!* Next time… we must guillotine all French 'democrats' *en masse."* (Not free, not fair, Malawi News, May 11-17, 2002)

The colonial relationship and discourses on neo-colonialism are implicitly referred to in local responses to the teaching and preaching approach of foreign representatives.

1.1.2 Appropriation and Extraversion

Bayart (2000) takes a *longue durée* perspective in his analysis of African relations with Europe, Asia and later America, pointing out how they have "never ceased to exchange both ideas and goods" (218). He argues that local African actors have always taken advantage of these relations by employing strategies of "extraversion", which involves "mobilizing resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment" (ibid.). The "social struggles of subaltern actors" have also seen non-elites involved in this strategy (ibid., 219). The notion of extraversion is used here simply to connote the same sort of strategy, not to place it necessarily in a continual historical political process.

The respective power positions of Malawi versus the West in the global setting means that the Malawian state is effectively 'monitored' by Western disciplinary discourses on appropriate democratic behaviour, relayed primarily through NGOs. As vonDoepp (2005) points out, it is unclear whether Malawi's democracy has functioning liberal institutions keeping state power in check, or whether it is more a case of leaders "retaining the paraphernalia of democracy to achieve a minimum of presentability to international observers" (196). To the extent that the latter is true, local actors opposing the state can get leverage out of this external monitoring relation. This is where the ambivalence to foreign intrusion (if we think of the "watchful gaze" as a type of intrusion) comes to the surface. An example is the Western condemnation of Mutharika's autocratic behaviour in 2011-12. Rather than expressing resentment towards this external involvement in local struggles over legitimacy (as in the case of JB (see above)), this foreign interference was eagerly taken up by some local actors to bolster their own home-grown strategies. Foreign censure provided ammunition to local discourses shaming and chiding the president. In April, 2011, when the British High Commissioner was expelled from Malawi following a cable-leak to *The Nation* that revealing that the Commissioner thought the president was becoming ever more autocratic and intolerant of criticism,[197] Britain's consequent retaliation was fodder for the PAC and the media in their censuring of Mutharika's irresponsible leadership. They demanded that he repair relations with donor countries and heed their calls for him to respect Malawians. They did not buy the president's rhetoric about neo-colonial interference at this point. Thus, if foreign intrusion can prove to be of instrumental value to domestic strategies, it may be embraced.

On the other hand, leaders can be extremely resentful of the way foreign intrusion is exploited in local strategies, even if these do not directly confront the state. Undermining the state's "overseer of development" status is taken as a provocation. For example, when local NGOs' and the media use external financial resources and discourses (e.g. donation, human rights discourse, 'media as watchdog' discourse, 'democratisation' discourse) to enhance

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[197]UK and Malawi in tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions, *bbc.co.uk*, April 27, 2011

democratic development in Malawi, this is taken as a challenge to the naturalised spatial metaphor of the state as "above" society (in a vertical relation) and "all-encompassing" of the nation. This was exemplified in 2011, when State House lashed out at local NGOs and the media for working against their "parents" (the state) through their "subversive" human rights campaigns:

> Mutharika cannot be rated to have poorly governed this country as there is no evidence and basis (for this)…It is laughable that civil society organizations who should partner government in development can receive donor money to work against their own Head of State and government. This is a despicable shame. How wicked can a child be to work towards the divorce of his/her on parents?[198]

In this way, intrusion of discourses and financial support from outside the country can be viewed as a form of "transnational governmentality" by undermining the state's claims to have superior "generality and universality" (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002: 994), but it can also be seen as part of local extraversion strategies, exploiting an unequal relationship in order to mobilise foreign resources, including the very democracy discourse that portrays African countries as "behind", and in need of "catching up", with its high standards of political conduct (especially strict accountability) against which local 'miscreant' politicians can be held to account. This can be a set of abstract standards of conduct, and also real examples of it in practice. For example, in demanding humility and substance over ceremony, one columnist wrote:

> Just check how many vehicles make up our presidential convoy. Over 30! But have you seen how David Cameron travels? Three vehicles at most, but that does not make him less of a leader.[199]

The US presidential elections of November 2012 did not escape the attention of globally-connected citizens. It was inevitable that the elections were compared with local electoral procedure. However, the Vice President, Khumbo Kachali, sagaciously jumped on the opportunity to draw inspiration from the US elections himself, rather than let his public critics use these external events to their own ends. By hailing the American election process as a model of mature democracy in practice, Kachali proved his own party's commitment to Western-style "flawless" procedure, and that his party was unafraid to even be drawn into such comparisons.

Another area of global comparison is national progress and development. The image of Malawi's inertia in a context of regional and global progress is powerful, because it undermines the notion that the state is the eye of God and the decider of standards of progress, in the way Kamuzu Banda and the MCP's hegemony was able to do. Through censorship and hegemonic narratives of progress that forbade outside comparison, the nation had only its internal standards by which to judge its progress. But today, the imaginary placement of the state's national project

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[198] Mutharika accuses Malawi media, NGOs of 'causing anarchy', *Maravi Post online*, March 9, 2012, accessed 21.03.2012
[199] (Lessons from London, *Sunday Times*, June 3, 2012).

beneath the *global* project of development and progress belittles the state, makes it a contender with other nation-states in the march of modernisation. One columnist poetically captures this sentiment of missing the tide of progress:

> When William Shakespeare said: "there is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries," I wish he had called us as a nation to heed his warning because it appears like our country must have missed her tide…[200]

Discourses and images from the outside world have instrumental value in local discourse; they can be used to make some point or advance some strategy, often by working with local perceptions, prejudices and stereotypes of the foreign, and are therefore integral to the process of defining political legitimacy in a public sphere that is increasingly well-connected with the 'outside world'.

2 Political Myth: a strategic narrative providing significance

The notion that Malawi needs "leaders" with vision, and not just "politicians", seems to imply that, beyond the issue of corruption and incompetence, there is a symbolic significance in 'true leadership' that is being sought. One of the main characteristics associated with true leadership is "vision". How this "vision" would manifest itself, would be in a political/national myth that brings coherence to the historical narrative, and significance to the lives of the nation's citizens, by providing a convincing plan for future transformation. What has become ubiquitous in the absence of such vision, is a dystopian narrative of decay and regression. Interestingly, the (albeit contentious) rehabilitation of Kamuzu Banda is part of this dystopian narrative, serving to reinforce the image of regression, from a time when at least the nation had pride and a leader with vision.

Political myths are "historical narrative[s] that serve… to articulate the history, the values, and the destiny of a nation" (Kluver, 1997: 53). There is extensive evidence that leaders usually need to evoke a sense of unified national identity (based in cultural memory), shared values and ideological commitments, to strengthen their legitimacy. Studies of nationalism and political symbolism affirm that modern societies need myths. As part of a group's quest for significance, political myths are not interesting in terms of their truth-value. Cassirer writes: "To inquire into the truth of the political [=national] myth is…as meaningless and ridiculous as to ask the truth of a machine gun or a fighter plane. Both are weapons; and weapons prove their truth by their efficiency" (1979: 237).

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[200] We missed our tide, *Daily Times*, 7 Sep. 2012

Bottici (2007) describes a political myth as a type of ideology,[201] but with the further conditions that it has a narrative form, and that it gives significance to the experiences of a group: "political myths are narratives that put a drama on stage. And it is from the impression of being part of such drama that the typically strong pathos of a political myth derives" (196). Also important to note, is that the content of a political myth is not always intrinsically political; it is the relationship between the narrative and political conditions it addresses that make it political (Bottici and Challand, 2006: 317). The key idea is that myth is always a work in progress, adapting the basic pattern to changing political circumstances, a process the ultimate aim of which is to provide a sense of 'significance' to a group ("bedeutsamkeit" – an idea espoused by Blumenburg, 1985). According to Bottici and Challand (2006: 318):

> The need for *Bedeutsamkeit* is therefore the need to live in a world that is not indifferent to us. In this sense, it is not simply the need to live in a world which has a meaning, because something can have a meaning and remain nevertheless indifferent to us. On the other hand, the need for *Bedeutsamkeit*, as defined here, is not the need for ultimate meanings either, in the sense that something that is significant to a given group is not necessarily what answers their ultimate questions on the meaning of life.

The authors locate mythical significance in the space between the everyday meanings that science can provide and the ultimate meaning of life and death that religion can provide (ibid). A contemporary Western example is the myth of a "clash of civilisations" between Muslims and the West (Bottici and Challand, 2006). They serve not only a cognitive function as "mapping devices", but also an aesthetic-emotive function, providing ways to feel about reality. Political myth is more than a hypothesis about the constitution of the world. It has a practical function, inspiring a determination to act: it is "not simply a prophecy, but it tends rather to become a self-fulfilling prophecy" (ibid.: 329), as the clash of civilisations has become.

2.1 Kamuzu Banda's myth of the new dawn

The national myth propagated by the hegemony of the MCP regime, was that Nyasaland had been liberated from colonial oppression by Kamuzu, the heroic *Ngwazi*. Thereafter, Malawi progressed as a unified, peaceful, orderly nation – the "warm heart of Africa" – suitably blending aspects of modernity with respectable tradition, all of which were embodied in the nation's father, who always wore a black suit and homburg, yet at the same time carried a traditional

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[201] Not in the sense of a whole "cultural system" that makes human beings complete (Geertz, 1964) or an all-encompassing theory, but as a "set of ideas by which human beings posit, understand and justify ends and means of a more or less organised social action" (Bottici, 2007: 196).

chief's flywhisk in his hand. (He was even buried in this attire.) The MCP's rooster symbol and "kwacha" slogan, meaning *dawn*, all symbolised the awakening of the nation at the dawn of independence (Gilman, 2009: 45). Of course, it must not be forgotten that this regime had to be back up by censorship and coercion, and towards the end of the one-party era, oblique expressions of disillusionment shattered the myth of a "well-fed nation".

Kamuzu Banda's historical narrative was vivid, coherent and confident. But the vilification of Banda as a dictator during the 1990s by the multiparty advocates effectively challenged this version of Malawi's history. Thirty years of proud unified progress was re-imagined as a shameful and brutal era in the campaigns for multipartyism. But the immediate regional fragmentation in the 1994 election served to reinforce a sense of disunity occasioned by multipartyism. In fact, the MCP's main campaign rhetoric during the transition was to portray Banda as the preserver of peace and unity in the face of imminent chaos. One of their campaign advertisements read:

> The votes cast will determine who will lead our nation, whether we march forward, united, together, one people, into sunlight and a better future or slide backwards into darkness with those who would destroy our unity and deny us progress.[202]

Despite this attempt to portray multiparty democracy as "darkness", it was in fact the one-party advocates whose symbol was a black rooster, while the multipartyists had a lamp, and it was no doubt easier for the latter to be perceived as heralding a change from darkness (oppression) to light (freedom). But for most people the change only brought "an uncertain something else" (Von Doepp, 1998: 103) – a "transition without transformation" (Cammack, 2011: 2) – which meant a continuation of political elite networking and behaviour, but at the same time, incoherence in the wake of the MCP's destroyed myths. This, I would argue, left a void in terms of how to understand two very important things: presidential power and national identity. As Fisher (1980) argues, the social-political office and role of the president is a "rhetorical fiction"[203]; it is symbolically constructed in the minds of people. Yet the symbolism of presidential power in the democratic era is confused and contested.

It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse presidential rhetoric in detail, but clearly, while speaking the language of "mature, legal-rational democracy" to educated publics, leaders have also spoken in another register of large promises and monologic ceremonialism to display their power, and behaved in a neopatrimonial manner that contradicts their legal-rational bureaucratic rhetoric. But evidenced by complaints in public discourse, they have failed to articulate suitable myths of where the nation comes from and where it is going, preferring to rely

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[202] Malawi News, May 14-20, 1994

[203] (Fictional in the sense that it is empirically verifiable, yet it does require total suspension of disbelief, as in a "poetic fiction" such as a unicorn, nor acceptance as an immutable truth, as in a "dialectical fiction" such as gravity) (Fisher, 1980)

on endless promises of delivering development or at least a slice of the national cake, a discourse of which the public has become jaded. Thus, members of the public tend to mock the vacuous development rhetoric of "transactional leaders". Development certainly is still a key theme, but it does not provide *significance* and a motivating call to action. In a sphere where the nation as an imagined community is very much a potent image reinforced in daily discourse, evoking national pride but also a sense of tragic disunity since 1994, "vision" and "transformation" are called for because they fill in the symbolic void which the rhetoric of development does not fill. But these are not vague notions. "Vision" is often concretely linked to well-thought out policies and articulated ideology. "Transformation" is linked to the specifically problematic aspects of political culture. However, despite being grounded in modes of action, these notions are often invoked in a narrative that makes them at the same time symbolic, representing a break from the dystopian present; they are the utopian streak that counters despair about the *status quo.*

2.1.1 *Visionary Leadership* and the rehabilitation of Kamuzu Banda

This section attempts to explain what appear to be contradictory sentiments regarding the past. On the one hand, the dissatisfaction with aspects of the past (including the one-party regime) continuing into the present underlies a desire to break cleanly from it. Across the spectrum of formal to informal, literal to figurative language, this sentiment has been widely expressed. On the other hand, there is a historical narrative that portrays the democratic era as having lost something valuable that was present in the one-party era, namely: unity, vision, pride and progress. Certainly, many of those who survived Banda's dictatorship have not taken to wearing rose-tinted glasses when it comes to recalling human rights abuses, but there is a pervasive myth (whose truth-value is not of interest here) that Kamuzu Banda was at least a visionary who cared deeply about "his people". Professor Edge Kanyongolo, for example, who was imprisoned without trial as a student in Banda's time, notes that:

> There were certain things that were done better then. There is no doubt about that… discipline, order, obedience of rules, efficiency in civil service, and that you can't argue against. But the cost of that was actually extremely high. And unfortunately many of the people who lead the charge in this reconstruction, nostalgia, revision of Banda, I think are people who probably did not face the wrath of this directly. [This nostalgia] has two strains: one which doesn't even remember the dark side, but there's also another group, that remembers the dark side, but thinks that it was a worthwhile price to pay for the benefits (author interview, 20 Nov., 2012).

Kamuzu day continues to be celebrated, and newspapers occasionally publish nostalgic pieces about his time. Many commenters on *MMMV* refer to him positively, usually as a visionary, and the cover photos at the top of the forum have periodically shown images of him. Aside from the sense of national pride that can be derived from a positive historical narrative of

Kamuzu, how might the rehabilitation of his memory serve as a strategy in public discourse? The most plausible explanation is that nostalgic images of Banda serve to highlight the deficiencies of contemporary leaders. In an attempt to comprehend the purpose of this collective revival of Banda's memory, a Malawian social and political analyst wrote about "Kamuzu Day and Malawi's Festival of Forgetting"[204], in which he uncovered the underlying motives of this historical narrative:

> The point of celebrating Kamuzu Day is far more complex than celebrating his life. It is a leadership failure in Malawi that has created this day. It works as a kind of smokescreen, inhibiting critical engagement with our present as much as our past. Malawian politics is not about policies and there are no ideological fault-lines. It is about individuals outdoing each other. When politicians parade their attributes on a political podium, as they do, they are not only talking about themselves, they are contrasting themselves with their rivals. The formula is that of a beauty contest. In this game of personalities none of the Malawi leaders that have come after Kamuzu — Muluzi, Bingu wa Mutharika and Joyce Banda — can outdo him. He built infrastructure and could point to it, and they have not. Simply put: these leaders have failed to build on the foundation Kamuzu built…
>
> Tossing around Kamuzu's name and image as a political tool is making Kamuzu into a heroic saint that bears little resemblance to the historical record. He was a ruthless authoritarian that caused a lot of pain to many people… This is the side of Kamuzu that is slowly being erased from national history, deliberately or not, and as we blur the lines of our past, it becomes more and more difficult to understand our present. Airbrushing Kamuzu's legacy and creating false nostalgia that is only aimed at diverting the national psyche from current leadership failures is not only injustice for those that suffered during his reign, it also stifles national progress and development.
>
> Malawi will not develop if nostalgia and hero-worshiping are drivers of its leadership. The country needs visionary leaders ready for public service. Leaders with policies that can drive the nation forward; this has nothing to do with anybody's age, gender or tribe. Here the electorate have a role to pay: look beyond personalities and focus on their policies instead.

The apparent strategies behind the Kamuzu myth are clearly exposed here. The commenter denounces false memory but also advocates "visionary leaders ready for public service". Whatever the strategy employed to promote it, "vision" is clearly the utopian clarion call in public discourse. The rehabilitation of Kamuzu is just part of the strategy to make 'vision' a central quality of legitimate leadership. Chinsinga explicitly addressed this theme at the PAC conference, arguing that, "It is time to start investing in the cultivation of transformational leadership… Transformational leadership emphasizes higher goals of development and arouses followers' motivations by means of creating an inspiring vision of the future."[205] PAC's contributions to the leadership discourse are clearly traceable. A columnist writing a month after the PAC conference had issued its resolutions calling for "transformational leadership", was enthusiastic about the debate it provoked:

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[204] Kainja, J. in Africasacountry.com. 22 May, 2013 (retrieved 8 July, 2013)
[205] Presentation, 2nd PAC conference, 2012

> Since JB came into power, Malawi continues to experience a new level of debate of national issues, making parliament look like nursery school. The most important debate – pushed by the Public Affairs Committee and other economic pundits and experts, is what type of leaders does Malawi have – transactional or transformative. This type of debate tickles my fancy because it is shaped by public opinion, which other democracy experts say is an important controlling tool for politicians not to go into the wild. On this score, I think public opinion shows that Malawians are looking for leaders who would really change the way we do business. A new style of leadership, not perfecting the old systems and yet the citizens continue to get poorer and poorer… Where are your manifestos, your visions and ideologies?[206]

Vision, or the lack thereof, has become a standard notion with which to judge leaders. Mutharika clearly attempted to revive the cult of Kamuzuism so as to be associated with the visionary founding father, and his changing of the flag, in 2010, from a rising sun (part of the MCP myth of the "new dawn" (kwacha)) to a fully risen sun (costing MwK2.6 billion[207]), symbolised his transformation of the nation from a state of food-deficiency and stagnation to food-surplus and economic boom, as well as his vision to take it from aid dependency to true sovereignty. These were all attempts to create a national myth that brings significance to the people. Yet, in the urban public sphere, they did not have particular impact, in that the flag change was unpopular, and, as has been shown, the traditional-charismatic heroic myth was derided. This shows that vision and myth need to translate from symbolism to substantive transformation. Mutharika's economic successes in his first term were the first indication of that transformation, and around the elections of 2009, the sense of optimism in the media was highly unusual. One columnist even gushed, "The feeling among the majority of citizens in the country is that we are on the way to the promised land."[208] Today, however, there is public speculation as to whether Malawi ever did experience economic growth "second only to Qatar" in Mutharika's first term, or whether it was just a government-propagated myth. As one columnist vented:

> The lie of national success that we were subjected to ad nausea not long ago has been defeated and now lies dead, buried and never to rise again. If there are any lessons to be learnt from the 'dreaming in colour' mantra, it is the importance of the ability to clearly discern dream from fantasy.[209]

This excerpt reveals the sceptical realism that many still hold. It shows that 'vision and change' rhetoric may not easily hold water with all members of the public. Clearly, Mutharika accorded value to political myth in establishing legitimacy, but what he perhaps underestimated is the skill involved in sustaining convincing narratives that provide significance and transformation for the people, not just symbolic power to the leader. As a letter written to the paper at the height of Bingu's popularity in 2009, noted:

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[206] Public opinion matters in politics, *Sunday Times*, Dec 2, 2012

[207] DPP govt blew K3bn on flag change nyasatimes, May 30, 2012, accessed August 5, 2012).

[208] *What Malawians expect from new leaders*, Nation on Sunday, May 24, 2009

[209] *To rise again*, Sunday Times, June 3, 2012

…We need to wake up and smell the coffee. Let us stop being blinded by politicians who just want positions and recognition. It is time to make our country known for good policies and democratic governance… We all want political leaders full of vision and patriotism. Let us not forget that the future of Malawi is in our own hands.[210]

3   Dystopian and Utopian narratives

Newspaper columnists are authoritative urban story-tellers. They "capture" the present, evoke the past, envisage the future, rebuke leaders, and ask searching questions about Malawi's identity and mindset. One columnist wrote a piece entitled, "Are we a hollow nation?" concluding with the following poem:

There is a poem I always recite when I think of us Malawians. It was done by Thomas Stearns (TS) Eliot. It reads:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw
Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Are we not a hollow nation?[211]

This image of the "hollow nation" is powerfully evocative of the dystopia caused by neglectful leaders. If such a narrative is so pervasive, what could be its purpose? Looking only at "rational deliberation" from the perspective of traditional argumentative rationality severely limits the discourse deemed worthy of analysis, in terms of public opinion formation. It dismisses the more story-telling elements as perceptions and sentiments, rather than seeing an underlying purpose to these narratives, as strategies in the process of critiquing elite behaviour, shaming leaders, questioning the cultural obstacles to progress, and so forth. Public discourse therefore involves strategies and tactics that go beyond the rationality implicit in the Habermasian model.

A young weekly columnist for the *Daily Times* writes with dark humour and cynicism. His style is reminiscent of a not uncommon tendency in Malawian political discourse to mix self-

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[210] Malawians have a lot of potential, *Nation on Sunday*, May 24, 2009
[211] Addendum: A hollow nation, Daily Times, September 21, 2012

deprecating humour with enmity towards the state, conjuring an image of the country as a tragic-comic underdog. The subtext of utterances in this tone and style seems to be: *this is how things tragically are, but not how they should be.*[212] There texts produce a dystopian reality, in the sense of everything being deficient in the present. This columnist inverts the Malawian slogan "warm heart of Africa", calling it instead the "rotting village of Africa", and in an article entitled "*Be ashamed, be very ashamed*"[213], he captures many of the sentiments about leadership expressed in urban political discourse:

> Forty-eight years and counting as a nation, it is so disheartening but necessary to accept that we have only been given, or have given ourselves, leaders who only know how to exude arrogance, promote thievery and other tactics in the book of wrongs. Not long before April, many were sending their voices upwards in supplication so that divinity could intervene in bailing out this nation from what we thought was the worst kind of leadership. As per prayer, death and time – the twin ruffians – decided to take away the old man from Goliati… [T]he Constitution offered the then Lady-in-the-political-wilderness the sceptre of power.
>
> As a nation, we were all jubilant and full of hope that finally we would reach Canaan. But here we are now, almost stuck where we started from. Before she was poisoned by the chalice of power, JB was a source of hope to many Malawians who had been frustrated by previous regimes because, being a woman, many thought she would tenderly nurse our wounds from the past….But…just like her predecessors [she has] become adamant and arrogant. While the nation continues to cruise to economic hell, she has willingly abandoned ship and is busy performing mundane and trivial duties like maize distribution…[which]should be a task of government clerks, not the whole presidency.
>
> Unfortunately, the lady has vowed to continue playing beardless Santa instead of her role as the President. If we have to kick the PP out of government come 2014, it means we will have the mad man of politics (otherwise known as UDF), the lady with a butchered image (otherwise called DPP) and the granny with a soiled past (also known as MCP) as alternatives (forgetting about the other wallet parties.)

The column proceeds to humiliate each political party in turn, starting with a DPP rally which was described as nothing more than "some blubbering devoid of sanity" where politicians "took turns to swear at the incumbent leadership…as if they have a clean record". He mocks the embarrassing way in which "the flattering multitude … had to clap hands to every asinine statement made by the DPP leaders." Moving on to the UDF, the writer remarks at their "tattered remains" and "cartoonish behaviour". Their sham convention was staged simply to "elevate daddy's boy to the seat his father once owned…The party is devoid of any reasoning and maturity". It is a gathering of "crookedness and fickleness [that] is legendary." For the MCP he has nothing to say, because "to think they will ever be called ruling party until they put their act together" is a "waste of time". Finally, the column returns to chide the ruling party:

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[212] Perhaps not unlike the carnivalesque laughter in which Bakhtin perceives a strategy of exposing "the supposed naturalness of the social order as artificial" (Taylor, B., 1995: 22). (cf. Mbembe's (1992) application of Bakhtin's ideas on laughter to the postcolony.).

[213] *Daily Times*, November 16, 2012

Back to the blinding orange of the PP. They had a rally one day at Mangochi where they made us hide in shame with their savage speeches. It is so base that a party such as the PP should argue that Malawians should not vote for someone because he or she doesn't speak a certain language…I was so disappointed that [the President] got carried away by the frenzy of the moment and joined the foul mouthing… But having observed that even though we know we are so cursed as far as leadership is concerned we continue to praise them high and tell them they are some God given gift to us, we should be ashamed, very ashamed.

These extracts bring out many of the poor qualities (arrogance, corruption, nepotism, incompetence) attributed to leaders; the theme of wasted potential (48 years of no progress, a nation heading to "economic hell"); the cultural problem of excessive deference for authority ("the flattering multitude"), and the use of slightly hyperbolic imagesry, such as JB "willingly abandoning ship". Charismatic qualities of leaders who have not delivered substantively are ridiculed. A guest opinion piece describes, with incredulity, the absurd spectacle of politics:

Just what are you supposed to do when – as a law-abiding citizen of a country that is rapidly sinking into morass and turning itself into a banana republic – everything around you seems to be going horribly wrong and there seems to be no way out for neither you nor your country. What are you supposed to say about your country, when you suddenly realise that it is running without unity, common national vision and purpose? What words do you choose to describe the destructive tomfoolery and all the acts of political buffoonery that are so evident on your country's political landscape?[214]

Political discourses about the state of the nation in the urban public sphere typically portray *deficiency* with respect to both internal and external referents: a nation falling short of its own potential, and a nation falling behind its neighbours and the world at large. The first type of deficiency – wasted potential – was addressed very explicitly at the PAC conference in a captivating presentation:

Malawi is fast descending into a nation of mediocrity arising from the lack of belief and confidence in ourselves. People have descended into complacency, performing well below their true potential… This paradigm of insignificance only helps to ensure that we don't realise our potential, yet if we could even believe for a minute who we really were and how great our destiny, the balance would shift and we would emerge from this imprisonment.[215]

This vivid narrative of the state of the nation was met with much agreement in the audience. It carries in it a utopian vision of a "great destiny", and indeed many people at the conference confirmed their belief in what Malawi could be, if it resolved its leadership crisis.

In the second sense of 'deficiency', Malawi is perceived to be massively underperforming in comparison to its regional neighbours.[216] At the PAC conference, Malawi's per capita income

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[214] The troubled coughs of history's echoes, *Sunday Times*, Nov 27, 2005
[215] Chikaonda, 2nd PAC conference, 2012
[216] For example, just 215 KMs from Blantyre, Tete in Mozambique has transformed from a "sleepy town" into a "bustling city" (bbc.co.uk); its booming coal-mining industry will support the 8.5% economic growth projected for

ranking in the world was presented to a dismayed audience: it ranked 186 out of 190 countries, with only Liberia, Burundi, DRC and Somalia ranking lower. The presenter said:

> We can all see from these rankings that Malawi is only better off than four countries at the bottom of the list. The fact is that Malawi has never been at war and these countries outperforming us have been or are still in a conflict situation.

Various other countries of the world were then compared, showing that, despite war and conflict, they far out-ranked Malawi. Similarly, in an image of falling behind the world, Chinsinga wrote in one of his weekly political economy columns for the *Sunday Times*:

> Malawi cannot afford to sit and watch as neighbours in the West, North and South spring to prosperity while we remain perched at the precipice of collapse.[217]

Both the "wasted potential" and the "falling behind" discourses can be viewed as calls to action – as guilt-tripping and mobilising strategies. Employing pathetic imagery (as in pathos) and external comparison, they seek to shame political elites while inspiring a sense of a better future, which is where "visionary leadership" comes in as the clarion call of the times, sometimes (contentiously) invoking Kamuzu as the only visionary Malawi ever had. There is nothing uniquely Malawian about this tendency to employ narratives in public discourse, but the form and substance are of course specific to local experience.

3.1   The narrative of "wasted potential"

Leadership is invariably seen as the obstacle between inhibiting the fulfilment of potential. Sometimes Western donors are also part of this problem. (These are references to human obstacles, as opposed to natural resource deficiencies, though public emphasis on the former tends to overshadow the role of the latter). At the PAC conference, Chikaonda pointed out:

> The politician and the donor have sometimes romanticized poverty. Poverty is good business, the more the poor remain poor, the better for the politician and the donor. Why has there been no difference with the all the monies donors give us? What about the money government collects through various taxes and other non-tax revenues? Both the politician and the donor are at fault for making poverty their business.[218]

Mozambique in 2013 (African Development Bank Group). http://www.afdb.org/en/countries/southern-africa/mozambique/mozambique-economic-outlook/
[217] *Rationality of irrationality,* Sunday Times, Nov 25, 2012
[218] 2nd PAC conference, 2012

As part of their insightful analyses of Malawi's economic and political problems, all of the presenters at this conference told narratives about where the nation is, and where it potentially could be. Chinsinga asked:

> Are we doomed as a nation? Certainly not! We can get out of the seemingly intractable political, economic and social quagmire… A democratic developmental state seems to be our only way out but it will not drop down from heaven like manna. We will have to work for it. Another Malawi is possible!

Kanyongolo's talk reflected and concurred with Chinsinga's ideas. His prescriptions were grounded in both institutional (judicial) solutions and leader and citizen agency:

> The future depends on the existence of *political will* to entrench the principles of democracy… It equally depends on the readiness of the citizenry to use their collective power to demand effective representation, accountability, transparency and oversight.

Chikaonda's narrative alluded to significant public discourses connecting transformation and a new political order to a generational handover of political power:

> If we could even believe for a minute who we really were and how great our destiny, the balance would shift and we would emerge from this imprisonment. It is well established that dullness and boredom in life come from unmet or abandoned potential. Once we make the bold decision to realize our true potential, we will shatter this paradigm of insignificance and lead to a further realization that everything matters, and that everything affects everything else… The future of the nation lies in its Youth. We need to impress upon our elders that our time has come.

Ultimately, all of these narratives sustain the pervasive imagery of an unsatisfactory *status quo* and the need for *transformation*. It is interesting that Chikaonda directly referred to a sense of "insignificance". Some of the comments during the discussions inspired by each talk, included:

- "We need to change Malawi's political culture and especially mindset to flush out the old chameleon politics. We need new people to replace the prostitutes."

- "We need to go beyond civic education and mobilise the masses to get Malawians into the streets! It's the only time things change." (a Chancellor College lecturer).

- "We are tired of animal farm where some are more equal than others."

- "We need to unite, hold hands and be prepared to die for what we know is right, rather than live cowards." (another Chancellor College lecturer).

- "Too many people are complaining bystanders…"

There comments clearly advocate a break from the past. Yet, the social/political context at the time of the conference was portrayed by the international community as promising. Joyce Banda's administration had repealed repressive laws, relations with Western donors had been

renewed, and an economic recovery package had been implemented.[219] As seen, newspaper articles by foreign representatives tended to commend and defended the president. For example, one article noted that the German Ambassador, Peter Woeste, "has asked Malawians to be fair to President Joyce Banda, who has been in office for six months, saying she "deserves credit" for trying to bring the country's economy back on track".[220] Why, in contrast to foreign praise, were influential members of Malawi's middle class employing revolutionary rhetoric at the PAC conference?[221] It appears that foreign and domestic assessments of legitimacy are oriented towards completely different points of reference: the former, praising the 'fixing and restoring things' approach of Joyce Banda, are oriented towards the immediate past. They refer to the political and economic problems of the previous regime, as the benchmarks against which to judge if Joyce Banda has improved or made things worse. The Malawian public, on the other hand – condemning the same cast, the same script, and the lack of vision – are reference both a more extensive past, and notably, a *future of great potential.* These different approaches stem from two different levels of expectation. Donors and NGOs focus primarily on economic stabilisation and legal democratic procedure. A sector of Malawian society seeks improvement in this regard, to be sure, but also much more – it seeks 'significance' and substantial improvement through a wholesale transformation. Focussing on the strength of democratic institutions overlooks these public desires, communicated sometimes through myth and narrative. Beyond the important domains of economy and rights, are discourses about the soul of the nation. And this nation is constantly being re-created through the patriotic sentiments of urban discourses.

3.1.1 The tattered trousers tactic

Foucault sees discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 2002: 54, in Jäger and Maier, 2009: 40). With this notion in mind, we can see dystopian imagery as not merely a *reflection* of feelings of discontent; it is an active *expression* of discontent that is productive. It propagates a myth and thereby communicates a desire – to see things change. This is most obvious in the case of columnists who say that they target politicians. It is also consistent with a tradition that uses images of degeneration to communicate discontent, notably in the songs and poems during Kamuzu Banda's era. This study of written discourses has so far emphasised the imagery in written language, but cartoons and photographs are just as powerfully employed to the same ends. In the case of *My Malawi My Views*, photographs can be highly symbolic; and this symbolism must be interpreted within the context of the whole

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[219] Certainly, on the economic front, the situation was bleak as the floundering economy had failed to revive despite IMF prescriptions, and the devaluation of the currency led to serious inflation. There had been calls for Joyce Banda to resign, though PAC came to her defence in public by saying such calls were premature.

[220] JB 'deserves credit' – German ambassador, *Sunday Times*, Oct 7, 2012

[221] NB: while the rhetoric was revolutionary, PAC publicly defended Joyce Banda against calls for her resignation in late 2012.

discourse on leadership. Members frequently upload photographs depicting rickety makeshift bridges in villages, ramshackle township houses, ablution blocks that have been abandoned half way through construction, an overflowing rubbish tip in Lilongwe, etc. They symbolise infrastructural decay, which, in turn, reflects the sense of stagnation and *regression* in the democratic era, rather than progress. Kamuzu Banda was seen to have been the last leader to actually deliver well in terms of infrastructure.

Another theme is the pathetic aesthetic of poverty. For example, one cover photo at the top of the *MMMV* forum showed only a foot in a broken flip-flop, bound together with a piece of string. It was captioned: "Level of poverty in Malawi as Joyce Banda lavishly spends taxpayer's money. As the journey continues...." (June 24, 2013). Another photo showed only a pair of feet strapped onto flattened plastic bottles, like makeshift sandals. Judging from the comments, the image inspired both tragi-comic humour and pathos. One photo showed a man on the street wearing trousers so tattered they exposed his bare buttocks, symbolising the undignified poverty that failed leadership has inflicted on the people. These mundane images of poverty are

Figure 5: An image of poverty, *My Malawi My Views*, July, 2013

used as synecdoches, standing in for the whole narrative of political neglect, and its consequences of national decay and *wasted potential*.

In July 2013, someone uploaded a photograph of the *Daily Times*. It was a re-published article from the newspaper's past[222], from March 20, 1974, with the headline: "Great Demand for Malawi's vegetables in Europe". Clearly, significant symbolism was attached to this apparently mundane article, as it even became the cover photo of the *MMMV* forum for a few days. A short conversation beneath it went as follows:

Figure 6: Photograph of Daily Times article on *My Malawi My Views*, July 2013

(a) Amazing how way back with not much technological advancement we were doing so well.
(b) Suppose we were going at the pace set in the 1970s. Where would Malawi be now?
(a) We would be the real breadbasket of the world.
(c) Kamuzu set the standard…

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[222] It is a feature in the *Daily Times* to publish past articles under the headline, "We were there".

This interchange shows how the past is invoked to portray the deficiency of the present. Thus, comparison with the past is itself a form of public deliberation. Another benchmark for comparison is independence. A huge number of debates and historical narratives were inspired by the symbolism of independence day, typically to mark not the progress of the nation, but rather the lack thereof. A PAC presenter remarked: "The hope then was that in the shortest period possible, Malawi would be able to become a prosperous nation standing on its own feet with poverty dramatically reduced, and yet 48 years after independence the majority of the people are still poor. What has gone wrong?" A commenter on *MMMV* saw it from a youth perspective: "Our generation is asking questions. 50 years after independence. Is there much to celebrate about? Are we satisfied that Malawi is where we want it to be? Could we not have done things better?" (June 19, 2013).

These dystopian discourses can be viewed as a process that Bottici and Challand (2006) would call "the work on a common narrative". Distinct from a simple narrative, this process "coagulates and reproduces significance"; it is "shared by a given group", and it "can address the specifically political conditions in which a given group lives" (320). But as has been shown, in the Malawian public sphere, dystopian narratives give significance to the group through the very act of protesting against insignificance. 'Malawian potential' is what gives the public a sense of significance-in-waiting; images of wasted potential inspire an overthrow of the indifferent leadership blocking the path to significance (utopia).

4   Soul-searching: a project of national transformation

This study has so far focussed on the prevalent notion of failed leadership as the main obstacle to fulfilment of the nation's potential. But within this discourse, there are other strands (increasingly noticeable in written discourse with the rise of newspaper columns, social media, blogs, etc, though the ideas are not necessarily new) analysing and interrogating Malawian culture and mindsets. For want of a better term, these will be referred to as collective soul-searching discourses. They are reflexive, contemplating the nature of culture and discourse itself, questioning the focus on leadership, specifically the attribution of full agency to leaders, and therefore full blame, without taking account of wider political and cultural structures.

For example, one columnist has written pieces entitled, "We should move beyond the president" and "We need to change the national discourse". She argues that:

> Democracy, free press, etc. notwithstanding, we are a nation that is shaped in its thinking by the power of the presidents… As a nation we do not exist beyond the president and we have internalised this type of thinking[223]

Similarly, this columnist challenges the prevalence of negative imagery in both public and government discourse:

> Now is not the time to stand on podiums and glorify poverty and ignorance… Now is not the time to judge our achievements by how much we are able to beg as a nation. We need to change our national discourse and we need to do it fast. Politics of begging and hunger may have worked once upon a time but not anymore. In today's world, victims rarely succeed. Today, people laud success, go-getters, innovators and people who are proactive.[224]

Being "proactive" is a common metaphor, amongst many other synonymous terms, in the discourse on culture and mindsets. It is a strand of discourse that sees fundamental changes to these "problematic" modes of thought and action as imperative to solving the perennial problems stifling national development. It pits the perceived logicality and rationality of formal education, science and "the outside world" against the irrational aspects of culture. The PAC conference emphasised the centrality of leadership, but brought both structure and agency to the concept. For example, Chinsinga argued that Mutharika had been partly a creation of the system, which is why his demise did not signify a critical juncture, since the system in place could produce more Mutharikas:

> Malawi's problems are solvable but leadership is the most important ingredient of the political transformation we seek…. Northing short of a fundamental revolution will dramatically change Malawi's fortunes on the political, economic, social and even cultural fronts.[225]

Thus, culture is specifically mentioned as a domain that needs to transform. Chikaonda similarly argued that "any discourse on the question of poverty is incomplete if it is not anchored on the crucial and fundamental concept of leadership. However, instead of the traditional focus on individual leadership our focus should be on *collective leadership"*.

Three particularly prevalent themes are: the need to refrain from deference and praise for authority; the need to grasp opportunities; and the need to bring efficiency and logicality to everyday behaviour.

4.1   Praise and Sycophancy

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[223] *Sunday Times*, Nov 25, 2012
[224] *Sunday Times*, Nov 19, 2012
[225] PAC, 2nd conference, 2012

As Weber points out, when it comes to looking at the popularity and perceived legitimacy of an authority, it should be remembered that, "loyalty may be hypocritically simulated by individuals or by whole groups on purely opportunistic grounds, or carried out in practice for reasons of material self-interest" (1964: 326). Perceiving this tendency in Malawian politicians (towards the president) and ordinary people (towards authority), many have taken to condemning handclapping, described almost as if it were a traditional Malawian practice. As a PAC presenter asked rhetorically: "Is it possible for a President in Malawi not to be hero-worshipped by bootlickers, law-makers and sycophants?" The pejorative phrase "hand-clapping" is used to evoke what is perceived as one of the most problematic practices of the democratic era: undue deference for authority. Hand-clapping provides an explanation of how and why power becomes uncontrollable. The weak democratic institutions designed to constrain power have to contend with leaders buttressed by sycophancy, almost cajoled into breaking loose from institutional limitations, to the point of even daring to defy and remove the constitutional limits on their tenure of power, as both Muluzi and Mutharika did. Hand-clapping is put forward as a primary explanation for why Mutharika, after his first term success, took matters into his own hands with his dramatic increase in autocratic behaviour. Hence, "let's not clap hands too early" is a warning, not just that praise can be premature, but that it can be corrupting in and of itself, by stoking the power-hunger and egos of its recipients.

4.2 Grasping Opportunities

Missed opportunity is also a recurrent theme:

> Life at one point offers us opportunities that if we grab, we are assured of a life of bliss, but if we do not we will spend the rest of our damned life sleeping with flies and smelling poverty. If you look at Malawi now, forty-eight years after becoming independent, you will agree with me that there is almost nothing to point at and be proud of save the tranquillity that we must only thank our poverty for…[226]

In answer to the perception that the nation's potential is going to waste, a strand running through the whole leadership discourse is about seizing opportunities instead of merely bemoaning the nation's deficiencies. Thus, there are calls for an entrepreneurial spirit to solving problems; a spirit that is an intrinsic part of the overall transformation. For example, in the photo of an overflowing rubbish bin in Lilongwe, a commenter saw the chance to subvert the image of disorder and deterioration:

> This is a business opportunity for recyclers. Making toilet paper from waste cardboards, plastic bags, making compost manure from food waste.

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[226] We missed our tide, *Daily Times*, 7 Sep. 2012

Very often, this discourse uses other countries or cultures as a basis for comparison. So, for example, someone commented that, "The Chinese say talk talk talk does not cook rice, when are we framing our mind to action oriented discussions to the future?" One *MMMV* member uploaded a photo of a Pakistani mechanic in his workship, beside which he wrote:

> This guy is a mechanical engineer from Pakistan, look at his clothes [greasy and dirty] and where he ought to be, right in the workshop isn't it? Do we not have Mechanical Engineers in Malawi or they are disguised in business suits?
> Interesting enough, he is making these machines right here in Malawi, subjected to the same conditions and the same economy that we fault… Wake up guys or let me politely say good night this morning! (June 13, 2012).

In reaction to the pervasive implication in this strand of discourse that Malawian mindsets are 'deficient', one commenter wrote:

> Before you insult my country and claim we can't have values of selfless service, honesty and abhorrence at corruption, look at the 1970s civil servant, hardworking, diligent, honest, men and women of superior fortitude and standards. No, my views are not Western, they're home grown values of the motherland that her children mistakenly lost with the advent of democracy. (July 27, 2012).

4.3   New mindsets

A columnist writes: "Because we cling to the same old people, it's like we're stuck in the labyrinth of their archaic thoughts and we can never expect any new ideas".[227] Discourse on the Malawian mindset subsumes the handclapping and entrepreneurial discourse strands mentioned above. Entangled with leadership discourses, the 'mindset problem' holistically addresses the whole leadership issue, with phrases like, "it is not Malawi that is poor, but our mindset". This notion is sometimes expressed dramatically:

> …We Malawians have met the enemy, and that enemy is us. Unless we fight and overcome this enemy (ourselves) we will continue fighting wrong enemies![228]

> There is need for a seismic mindset shift among us in order to change the course on which Malawi is sailing."[229]

> I agree with Bingu that Malawians are chickens.[230]

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[227] We missed out tide, *Daily Times*, 7 Sep., 2012
[228] Nyasatimes 28.03.2013
[229] Hastings Fukula Nyekanyeka Betha blog, accessed 27.06
[230] My Malawi My Views, June 30

This discourse strand can be traced through the numerous mundane "throwaway" comments of daily banter in all areas of the urban public sphere. The subtext of trivial imagery can be read within the framework of wider discourses on leadership and culture. Thus, the photo uploaded to *MMMV* of a skip surrounded by rubbish in Lilongwe, which, as noted, one person saw as a business opportunity, also inspired someone else to attach much wider symbolism, in the comment:

> I know Malawi it is indeed what you can see in the picture above. At the time that this happened, Malawi was under the rule of STEERING WHEEEEEEL. Hoot hoot…[231]

Thus, the image is turned into a synecdoche for "life under Joyce Banda", for she is "at the steering wheel" while the country experiences the disorder and dysfunction that an overflowing bin represents. In the politically charged discourse setting of *MMMV*, such photos are queried by members for their potential political symbolism, for how they can be fitted into the prevalent dystopian narrative. In another example, an apparently trivial comment about an incompetent advertiser becomes an address to the nation as a whole:

> I don't think the 'visit Malawi' advert should be on MBC TV. If I was the marketing manager for tourism I was going to make sure that advert is on dstv channels. We need to wake up Malawi.

These examples show how, within single statements, very localised problems become synecdoches for the general malaise, blurring the divide between the everyday and the political. Just as rubbish bins need to be cleaned up and sorted out, so the national economy needs to be sorted out. Just as people need to see the opportunities around them, so leaders need to wake up, seize the country's potential, and show that they have a vision. If such comments were rare, they would not represent a significant strand of discourse. But the tendency to connect mundane images to 'problematic mindsets' is extremely common, suggesting that these connections are part of a diffuse discourse linking legitimate leadership to widespread deeper mindset changes. Even popular music participates in this discourse. For example, two popular young hip hop artists, 3rd Eye and Dominant 1, produced a song called "I am Malawi", in which they rap about the state of the country, which is described as: "ugly mentality, beautiful physically":

All my children, we need an education
All my elders, we need repatriation
My hospitals need better sanitation,
It's time for action, no hesitations.
I wanna see a day, when I run my own country,
I mean a day all the money ain't running from me,
A day when we build our own buildings
Maximum potential of fulfilment

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[231] (Translated from Chichewa.) Steering wheel refers to Joyce Banda being "in the driver's seat".

Come now children now make me proud,
Shout it out loud being black is allowed,
Feel no shame, my pain is your gain,
Embrace the flame, Malawi's the name,
I need more leaders, we need more schemers,
Here's some penicillin for your mental fever,
The mechanism of success we deliver,
Exit the nightmare, enter the dreamer…
Passion, fire, motivation, desire,
Frustration pent up, verses penned up,
Anger vent up, purses are filled up,
Too much greed and the people are fed up…

These lyrics show remarkable correspondence with the images of *potential*, national pride, the "nightmarish" present and the need to "dream". A lyric in the song – "Malawi on the rise with the flight of a sparrow" – captures the image of taking off to a better future. The chorus is simply a list of all of the main urban centres from across of the country, creating the sense of a united nation.

At the PAC conference, presenters made these connections between culture, mindsets and the country's leadership woes more explicitly. Chikaonda was particularly eager to promote the efficient business management mentality as a solution to running the country, in place of inefficient logics. He told an allegory of how Malawi was run like a minibus which needs 20 litres to get from Blantyre to Lilongwe, yet the drivers only fill it up with 10 litres, embarking on the journey knowing full well their project will fail half way (alluding to many underfunded government projects or bureaus that inevitably come to a grinding halt). Chinsinga's political science approach emphasised the incompatibility of traditional deference for authority with legal-rational bureaucratic functioning: it requires re-imagining leaders as public servants, he claimed, and thereby changing traditional deferential mentalities. Perhaps most emblematic of this whole urban public discourse about leadership, culture and change, is a single statement made by Chinsinga at the PAC conference. Malawi needs transformational leaders, he claimed, and these are people who…

…use their authority and power to fundamentally reshape the social and physical environment, thereby *destroying the old way of life and making way for a new one.*

Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand the processes of political cultural change in the "young" democracy of Malawi, as they are experienced, represented and transformed by local citizens. It has focused on the central theme in urban discourse – leadership – aiming to uncover the ways in which cultural transformation is revolving around the symbolic relation between rulers and ruled. This process has been explained in 4 parts: firstly, through an examination of the historical, political, and cultural factors that have shaped and continue to shape society and political life in the democratic era; secondly, an explication of the societal divisions, and relative positioning of the state vis-à-vis specific sectors and institutions of society, which structure the production of discourse in the public sphere; thirdly, an account of the collective 'project' in the public sphere, of constructing norms of appropriate leadership conduct and 'manners' of behaving, with the underlying rationale being the diminishment and constraint of political power, and an account of how this establishment of 'legitimacy' is a contested process, impeded by communication and trust issues; fourthly, an account of the ways in which critical urban public discourse around the theme of failed leadership has employed strategies of extraversion, nostalgic historical narratives about the Kamuzu Banda era, and dystopian imagery to shame leaders. Finally, the issue of 'leadership' is a focal point around which a diffuse discourse about cultural 'mindset' transformation for a new way of life has developed.

The approach taken in this study can be explained in contrast to other possible approaches: Hasty's (2006) study of the press in Ghana, for example, provides a detailed ethnographic comparison of rhetoric, text and practice in the state and private press. Due to these specific institutional contexts, her focus is limited (intentionally) to the relation between the press-institution and its productions (of text, rhetoric etc). This allows a deep understanding of the press, but does not enable any confident claims to be made about discourse beyond that specific setting. In contrast, Schatzberg's (2001) study of everyday discourses in papers, magazines, etc. across 8 African countries, places no institutional limits, and can therefore speak of a universal discourse (focusing on "subjacent notions") on 'legitimacy' in middle Africa. Its disadvantage, however, is twofold: by placing no institutional or social parameters around the discourse, he does not provide any contextual anchoring: by whom is such discourse produced? The study's aim is supposedly to reveal deep, "subjacent" cultural notions that are extremely diffuse, hence eliminating the need for context, but it could be argued that the notion of a universal, fixed matrix of legitimacy is explanatorily weak, because within the parameters of this vague matrix, there will always be different strategies and notions corresponding to different social subgroups (cf. Fraser (1990) on "subaltern counterpublics"). The other disadvantage is that the synchronic analysis gives no indication of change. It reveals static and reified notions of legitimacy (Lentz, 1998). If legitimacy is an on going contested process that can not be fully

anchored, then its unstable and historically contingent notions change over time. This study's methodology is an attempted compromise between the universalism of Schatzberg's approach and the institutional specificity of Hasty's approach (though of course not as comprehensive as their studies). It provides a more diachronic account of political legitimacy with historical context, showing how a build up of distrust, communication problems, and lessons from the past influence the process. Meanwhile, a search for significance and substantial transformation drive it on.

The institutional settings from which the analysed texts were mostly taken (media, civil society, informal social media) partially determine their language structures, patterns and participants (noted in chapter 2). But by sourcing texts from different settings, the institutional specificities could be transcended and "a discourse" circulating in the "public sphere" could be examined. As Foucault argues, "the same discourse, characteristic of the way of thinking or the state of knowledge at any one time… will appear across a range of texts, and as forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites across society" (Hall, 1997: 44).

A limitation of this study is that, due to my unfortunate ignorance of local languages, I was unable to analyse the frequent code-switching between English and (usually) Chichewa on *My Malawi My Views*, or the Chichewa supplements in the newspapers, which were normally as equally stuffed with politics as the rest of the paper. This would have been an interesting way to see how prevailing notions on leadership in urban discourses straddle the language gap, getting translated from English into Chichewa and vice versa, so that they circulate further beyond the English-speaking public (which they no doubt do to some extent). Another limitation derives from the attempt to balance breadth and depth. Covering a time span of two decades (though focusing almost exclusively on texts since 2002) and a widely-relevant strand of discourse (leadership), has uncovered discursive patterns in civic engagement, in order to see the ways in which this engagement reflects "politics from below" and constitutes a process of cultural change in a period of uncertainty around many aspects of the political system and the relationship between society and its leaders, exemplified in the struggles that both Joyce Banda and her predecessor faced in maintaining their legitimacy. (Till today, some scholars have even speculated on whether Malawi's democracy will "survive".) But this broader approach has been at the expense of a closer analysis of various individual themes or strategies, and other important dimensions of leadership, such as gender (however much most informants insisted Banda's being a woman was of no consequence) and the role of religion.

Influence and innovation

In order to give a social context to the leadership discourse analysed in this study, it was located in the "urban public sphere", a label intended to roughly demarcate the origin, concentration and

impact of these patterns of statements about leadership, but by no means to imply any strict limits to their wider circulation throughout society. Certainly more precise descriptors (educated, middle-class etc.) can be applied, but these indicate who the more influential and possibly innovative participants are, not the boundaries of circulation and impact.

Who are the influential and innovative voices and what are their sources of inspiration? Jäger and Maier (2009: 38) stress that, even if no individual can "simply defy dominant discourse" (since discourses are supra-individual and co-produced by everybody), some individuals or groups *do* clearly have greater power/influence over discourse. An educated and informed group of urbanites (mostly young to middle aged) – notably columnists, *MMMV* participants and prominent academic experts – constitute the majority of influential and innovative participants in the discourses studied here. A common discursive strategy of all these individuals is to go against the cultural grain, by challenging prevailing mindsets on many fronts. They could therefore be described as a "cultural elite".

These prominent individuals produce authoritative statements about political phenomena, a classic example being Chinsinga's distinction between transformational and transactional leadership. Taken from a specialist discourse, it came to be disseminated into public interdiscourse, both because it came from a source that had *clout,* and because it fitted nicely into a narrative about the need for wholesale transformation from an unsatisfactory status quo. Thereafter, this notion or concept constructs reality, creating categories of leadership that are then applied to actual leaders. Similarly, Jessie Kabwila-Kapasula's stand against Mutharika in the academic freedom saga created a powerful image of a woman standing defiantly up to the ultimate patriarch, while popularising the notion of "executive arrogance" that continues to be echoed today. These instances substantiate the assertion that discourses "transport knowledge on which collective and individual consciousness feeds. This knowledge…shapes reality" (ibid.). (An individual's influence and impact is, of course, unquantifiable).

Discursive strategies and agency

Three strategies, 'projects' or debates are discernible in the urban public sphere: 1) a reflexive project to establish the norms of public discourse itself; 2) a strategy/discourse that aims to redefine the nature of the relationship between political representatives and citizens, as well as proper leadership conduct, in Malawi's democracy; 3) a discourse of self-creation, on how best to transform the nation from the inadequate *status quo*.

In terms of the first project, the newspapers have engaged in self-reflection on their function and legitimate conduct (including responsible journalism) in democracy, as well as their strategic positioning vis-à-vis the state. PAC continues to style itself as neutral readers of the signs of the times, and the voice of the people, preserving above all moral integrity where in the

political realm it has broken down. Religious leaders continue to bring this authority to the organisation, giving it significant powers of censure. *MMMV*'s administrators, and also ordinary participants, engage in internal reflection on the norms and procedures that need to be established in order to regulate communication for an ideal forum of public deliberation, much like Habermas' ideal "public sphere".

In the second process, the relation between rulers and ruled is redefined through a constant denunciation of excess, arrogance, ceremonial displays that lack substance, personalisation of politics, and unaccountability. Thus, the standards of rational-legal authority are emphasised over charisma and tradition, and the parental status of leaders is converted to a servant status, a strategy sometimes strengthened by appropriating global "democracy discourses" and examples from 'outside'.

The self-creating strands of discourse challenge prevailing cultural norms and meanings that underlie the problematic 'mindsets' which are seen to be linked to perpetual stagnation, or, as Chikaonda described it at the PAC conference, "a paradigm of insignificance" causing "imprisonment", "dullness and boredom… from unmet or abandoned potential"; "a nation of mediocrity arising from lack of belief and confidence…" These strands see betterment as a form of cultural transformation, not just leadership alternation. Motivating this constructive discourse is a utopian streak, a search for significance and a belief that great potential is being tragically wasted. Recall Chikaonda's affirmation that, "if we could even believe for a minute who we really were and how great our destiny, the balance would shift and we would emerge from this imprisonment" (ibid.).

Many scholarly approaches to Malawian development lament the problematic political continuities from the "tyrannous" and "traditional" past that hinder its economic and social progress. Proposed solutions often focus on ways to tinker with the system design, by strengthening certain institutions such as the judiciary, weakening others such as the executive, ensuring fair electoral procedures, and so on. Such prescriptions have often resulted in disappointment, depending on their time-perspective and level of expectations. Chinsinga (2003) notes the limitations of the institutional/procedural focus in the case of Malawi:

> The problem seems to be that the mere adoption of the liberal Constitution providing for the bill of rights, constitutionally guaranteed watchdog institutions, the existence of other parties besides the ruling party, and the birth of a couple of non state actors are mistaken for indicators of a mature democracy (3).

As Chabal points out, the study of politics "normally starts from things as they are supposed to be: individuals competing for resources within a given socio-economic framework. But perhaps this is the problem: what we set out to discover is what we know already because we have a sense

of how the political system works. What we need to do is come to politics from a different angle…" (2009: 16). Looking at a democratic system as it is experienced and represented by those living in it presents us not merely with "epiphenomena", but actual processes that shape political patterns and events; it uncovers discourses that produce, sustain and interpret this reality, by those who feel the frustrations of its "teething problems" and engage daily in the testing and negotiation of meanings, norms and relationships. It provides insights into the strategies, narratives, historical lessons and aspirations that structure the way people interpret reality and act upon it…

> *When you think about how young our democracy is, from 1994, I think we haven't done too badly, really. We're still in the transient phase; we're still nascent, okay. I think in 25, 30 years, at this current rate of progress, we will probably have a democracy the world will strive to emulate. (Rafiq Hajat, Limbe, 2012).*

Final Comment

Interpreting another culture through the close analysis of texts seems to give the analyst the "power" to trace the limits of other peoples' ways of conceiving reality. It seems to imply that only *they* (other people) are 'subjected' to discourse. Similarly, portraying other peoples' mode of public interaction and deliberation as 'narrative' or 'mythical' seems to contrast with the rational and objective mode of the analyst. Analysing another society, especially one to which one is a newcomer, can therefore be awkward and uncomfortable. Two things, then, have to be acknowledged: firstly, my position as the analyst is no more outside discourse than the positions of those being analysed. My interpretations are structured by my own cultural notions about power and leadership, and the social scientific discourse that has shaped my own thought processes and ways of seeing the world. Secondly, there is no such thing as "essential Malawian-ness", nor even processes that are specific to the country. Using narratives and myths to bring sense and significance to daily life and politics seems to be a universal practice both in the past and the present. Some go as far as claiming that people are essentially *homo narrans* (see Fisher, 1984), and as Geertz noted, "Myths have not gone out of modern politics, however much of the banal may have entered it" (1983: 143, paraphrased in Bottici and Challand, 2006: 315). In addition, the analysis of discourse gives the impression that a whole system has been explained or at least its limits clearly defined. But taking extracts of texts from a few sources only shows basic patterns, and can only point to the way some processes may work, such as the process of debating how legitimate an elected leader really is. It does not in any way fully capture the variation and open-endedness, nor does it reflect the full extent of reasoning and argumentation, that takes place in the public sphere.

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