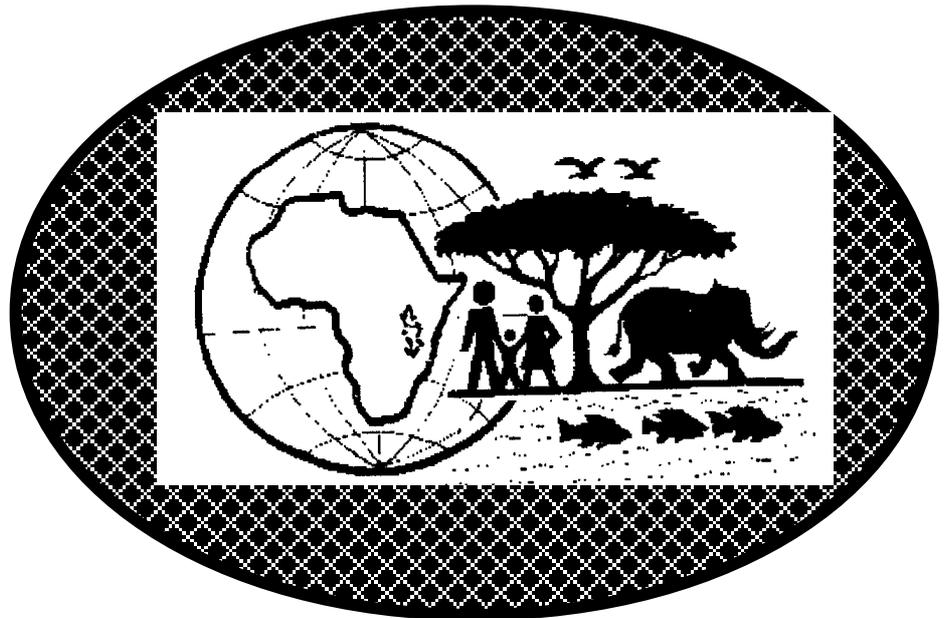


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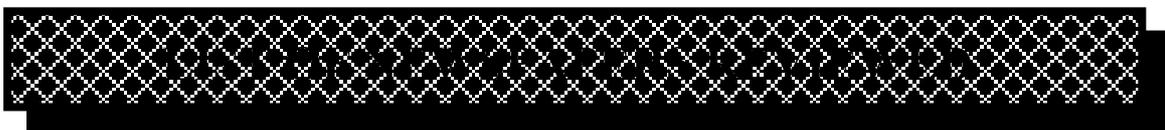
**APRIL
2014**

**News clippings
with analysis
From the
Major newspapers
in Malawi**

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Daily Times
Malawi News
The Nation

The Weekend Nation
The Guardian

The Sunday Times
Nation on Sunday

PREVIEW

All is set for the 2014 first ever tripartite elections. For the first time Malawians are choosing a president, Member of Parliament and a Councillor in one election. There are so many questions that have been asked about this scenario having been without councillors for more than ten years. Is Malawi ready for such an election? Is the *Malawi Electoral Commission* prepared enough for this day.

Politicians have done their part to sell themselves to the electorate and the onus remains on the voters to make their choices. Having gone through number elections in the past Malawians have the key to who will be the number one citizen at State House and who will represent them in the National Assembly and who will be their councillor.

On the economy news that there might be no budgetary support is not good news at all. Much as Malawi may need to be donor independent, she is not at that level yet. It therefore spells doom for a nation that has been relying on budgetary support for fifty year not to have it in the next financial year.

Food security reports are very impressive with prices of maize going down each passing day as now farmers are harvesting. But the challenge remains how long will maize be available on the markets and how long will be prices be affordable? Another challenge is how will the staple grain be guarded from post harvest losses?

Finally labour officers can afford a smile with the news that Malawi has improved on the child labour fight. It has been an issue as estate owners and many more employers prefer to employ children because they are cheap. An international report showing there is an improvement in child labour fight is a morale booster to Malawi to do more on this.

The health sector is still sailing in troubled waters at least going by what the media reports have portrayed in the month under review. The drug shortage is hitting hard especially in the referral hospitals with some doctors contributing their own money to buy medication for the patients. It does not get worse than this! It surely requires an urgent solution.

POLITICS

So the Malawi nation got to see the presidential candidates debating on various issues in the month under review. Just like what happened during the running mates debate all the presidential candidates that availed themselves to the debate were given an equal chance to say something on a number of issues. Missing on the line up during the first presidential debate were the incumbent president Dr Joyce Banda of the *People's Party PP*, *Democratic Progressive Party's* Peter Mutharika, Thom Mnesa representing the *Tisinthe Coalition* and *Chipani Cha Pfuko* Davis Katsonga. As the other eight took turns to market themselves to the electorate, the others chose to stay away. And then Dr Joyce Banda chose to absent herself even at the other two presidential debates in Lilongwe and Blantyre.

As some observers have noted it was the so called small parties that impressed many with the convincing answers they gave to the questions during the presidential debate. It was James Nyondo of the *National Salvation Front NASAF*, *United Independent Party's* Hallen Singh and president of *People's Progressive Movement PPM*, Mark Katsonga are among the ones that gave some of the best answers. The observers still feel there is a lot of substance in what each of the participating presidential candidates had to offer. Meanwhile there are worries that Dr Joyce Banda's decision not to attend these debates only shows that she has nothing to say to the audience and that it was a missed opportunity for her to sell herself and her party.

The opinion poll result by an organisation called *Research Tech* has attracted mixed reactions from many observers in Malawi. While others feel such opinion polls should not be encouraged others are saying this is a positive development and the researchers are free to do as they please. According to experts there is no way such opinion polls should be encouraged because they confuse the electorate some of whom may think of shunning the voting exercise because they feel their candidate of choice has failed to win and may simply see no reason to go ahead and vote. Again there are also fears that the research could be the work of some bogus organisation that is bound to confuse people.

All political parties are too busy with campaign as observed by many political campaign stories that have been carried out in the press. There is more travel for almost all the party leaders. This is the time many politicians make promises some of which may leave one wondering if at all they will be met. Malawians have come from a background of more than three elections and therefore should not be taken for granted as the choices they will make now in choosing a president, Member of Parliament and councillor will be stuck with the electorate even after the election.

A number of aspiring presidents have vowed to turn around the Malawi economy. At present Malawi seems to have lost a part of the trust that the donor community had. Almost all the candidates are promising to turn things around. There is hope that whoever will be Malawi's leader after May 20 will put the economy back on the right track. With the presidential hopefuls making so many pledges as of now no one really knows who will make this work.

One particular pledge is that coming from the *Democratic Progressive Party* that have vowed to subsidize the prices of cement and iron sheets if they come back to power.

One thing is for sure is that Malawi's presidency has a lot of powers that even those who are around the president are at times too afraid to give sensible advice even when the president is making grave mistakes. It is not only the incumbent president who is guilty of having too much power so that at times she can easily abuse it, but also all her predecessors. Dr Joyce Banda is at liberty to make political podium appointments and statements and they become policies. Such policies have financial implications that in normal circumstances they should have been made with thorough consultations with technical experts, but alas this is not the case. Other political parties have since proposed that Malawi should trim the presidential powers. And these sentiments have been supported by some law experts.

Beleaguered Khumbo Kachali in April was rumoured to be joining the opposition *Malawi Congress Party MCP* but he denied such stories. Kachali, who was a very close ally of president Joyce Banda, vice president of Malawi and the ruling People's Party got a rude awakening when she later chose young Sosten Gwengwe as her running mate. Since then Kachali has been absenting himself from many presidential functions saying he is concentrating on his parliamentary seat. But those in the know how say Kachali is detaching himself from the party and will eventually leave.

ECONOMY

2013 is the year that saw the issues of economic governance being dented by reports of the Cashgate scandal and this has spilled into 2014. With a lot of money being stolen at Capital Hill nobody could ever think of saying that there is economic prudence and governance in the government as such scandals have the possibility of ruining the government's reputation. Not only is Malawi's fiscal indiscipline questionable to Malawians but also on the international scene. It will therefore take a lot of convincing and drastic changes for government to mend its ways. Already with the campaign for 2014 Tripartite Elections officially on the opposition are suing this using to dampen the chances for the incumbent president.

It has been a long time since the Malawi economy has had any positive press coverage. For months the press have carried articles on the economy that do not give hope at all. It does not reflect well on a nation that has been independent for 50 year. If it is not poor prices of tobacco Malawi's foreign exchange earner, it is the imports cover which is not that impressive at all. Fifty years after independence Malawi still gets almost half of its budget support from the donors. All these issues point out the fact that Malawi is failing to develop and this is bad considering that at this stage Malawi should be financially stable.

Already there are stories going around that there is not going to be budgetary support from other countries and donor community. This news raises fears that most of the government's business will be affected. It will be very difficult to transact business in the next financial year if what is being said is not reversed. As some financial experts have noted, Malawi still needs budgetary support. Efforts to try and have a fully locally funded budget failed in the Bingu wa Mutharika administration and there is little hope if Malawi will succeed this time around with no budgetary support that is if there is going to be none.

As if the news that Malawi may not get budgetary support from its partners is not enough, Germany announced it had pulled out from a grouping called *Common Approach to Budgetary Support CABS* that provides support for the national budget in Malawi. This means that Germany will not be providing budgetary support to Malawi and will only be an observer. Germany has been supporting Malawi since 1964 and this latest stand makes matters worse for an already financially struggling nation. At present Malawi needs all the support as a number of governments seem to have been crippled by various factors one of which is financial mismanagement.

FOOD SECURITY

Farmers Union Malawi FUM has added weight in fighting for the abolition of the *Farm Input Subsidy Programme FISP*. It is not a secret that a number of individuals and organisations have spoken on the need to have the programme scrapped because, apart from all the administration hiccups, it is very expensive to run. Environmentalists on the other hand have a problem with chemicals being applied in the soil for a very long time which may end up robbing the soils of their natural nutrients. The *Farmers Union Malawi* is therefore joining all the other like-minded individuals and organisation to have the programme abolished.

Meanwhile none of the presidential candidates seems to be willing to scrap the subsidy programme. In their own words during the running mate and two presidential debates, no presidential aspirant has promised to abolish the subsidy programme. It has been there and has had a fair share of problems but the bottom line is it is always politicised. Just like the previous government the current government is also politicising the *FISP*. And at this time when every other party is in the campaign period no presidential hopeful wants to dent their image by saying they will deal away with the *FISP*. Because doing so now is shooting oneself in the foot at a time when they are looking for voters. It is therefore a very difficult time to advocate for the elimination of the programme. If anything some politicians have even said they will go for universal subsidy and not the current

The *Centre for Social Concern CfSC* in the month under review observed that the price of maize have gone down. According the release of the findings in the monthly household surveys on the cost of living there has been a positive outlook on the availability of maize in the months to come. Harvesting has started in many areas and this has contributed to the availability of maize. And now that there is plenty of maize the traders have resorted to lower the prices of the staple grain.

However, people need to exercise caution with the availability of plenty of grain because it is always seasonal. These lower prices of maize are seasonal because sooner or later the prices will sky rocket again. There are fears that people are always taken advantage of by the many traders that come to buy the grain immediately after harvest. Learning from past experiences at a time maize prices are low that is the time many farmers rush to sell it at such give away prices. Later it is the same traders who had been buying the grain at low prices later hammer the same farmers with exorbitant prices in the lean period.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

This year's Easter celebrations among Christians in Malawi would probably be in people's memory for a very long time because of the high participation of politicians. Being an election year the politicians did not want to be left out but also to take part in the Easter Prayers. President Joyce Banda of the *People's Party PP*, *Malawi Congress Party's* Chakwera and *Democratic Progressive Party's* Reverend Dr Lazarus Chakwera and Peter Mutharika respectively joined the faithful during this period. Politicians being the lot that they are always want to use every other opportunity to score points and so they participated in the Way of the Cross.

The Muslim community in the month under review took a swipe at the *People's Party PP* leadership for making women dance at their political rallies. Of late the media has published a lot of stories that have shown women dancing at political rallies. Press reports have shown that this it is totally unacceptable in Islam to have women dance to the beat of the drum. The *Muslim Association of Malawi MAM* has since asked political parties to avoid this at all cost because it is against the religious values. In Mangochi some Muslims went as far as petitioning the district commissioner over this same issue.

The *Malawi Electoral Commission MEC* received materials to be used in the election from neighbouring Zimbabwe in April. Although a number of people went to inspect the materials which included lamps to be used during the election, a number of individuals and observers are not too happy with this arrangement, others are of the view that Zimbabwe as a country that has a record of not conducting credible elections at least going by the international press reports, should not in any way be seen to be assisting in Malawi elections in any way. On the other hand others feel an organisation like *MEC* should not be borrowing lamps for an election in Malawi as this is worrisome

Religious groups are separately advising their faithful to vote wisely in the May tripartite elections. This is the first time that Malawi is holding tripartite elections where people will be given a chance to vote for president, Member of Parliament and a councillor of their choice. Religious leaders are therefore asking the people to make the wisest choices by choosing leaders who will faithfully represent the nation in the next five years.

Long time human rights defender Undule Mwakasungule officially retired from the *Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation CHRR* where he had been executive director for some years. Mwakasungule is well known for his fight against the late professor Mutharika's government. He has been board member of several civil society organisations. Mwakasungula will always be remembered for his dedication in activism work as he was always consistent when some of his colleagues were being swept off their feet by politicians. Mwakasungula has been replaced by Timothy Mtambo.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

Although legally foreigners who have lived in Malawi for seven consecutive years are allowed to vote in any election this set up does not amuse some traditional leaders. The Chewa leader Paramount Chief Lundu made it clear in his utterances that he is unhappy with laws on foreigners as far as voting is concerned because they are at liberty to vote in Malawi and that they ruin things. While it is legal to vote in Malawi simply because one has been in the country, the same is not the case for Malawians in other countries.

Some good reports came out in the month under review on child labour. It is said that Malawi is now improving on child labour in the agricultural sector. In the past the sector has been said to be one of the sectors that is highly involved in child labour. Reports had shown that some estate owners, especially in the tobacco farming, prefer to employ children because they are cheap labour. But in a recent international report there is evidence showing that things slowly changing and that there is some improvement because there are efforts that have been put in place.

After saying it will not pursue the Tenancy Labour Bill the government made a surprising u-turn to say they are now very ready to end tenancy system. This is for sure one way in which the government will fight child labour. Just like observers had noted there is child labour in the tobacco estates because the tenancy system is still present in Malawi. Despite the entire advocacy on the tabling and passing of the Tenancy Labour Bill there was still no political will from those in authority. But now that there is this announcement from government there is hope that the living and working conditions of tenants on estates will improve and that they will have contracts and will assist in the fight against child labour.

Youths took advantage of the campaign period to ask presidential candidates what policies they would advocate for that would directly benefit the youths. It has not been an easy road for the youths because most of the policies are done without their consultation. This time around with the campaign period the youths asked the candidates to make their commitment on children and youth affairs. Press reports have shown that all the aspiring president have signed a commitment to provide for the youths.

President Joyce Banda as people the world over were commemorating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ pardoned 281 prisoners. The president is mandated to pardon prisoners with the recommendation of the prison authorities. However the last time she pardoned prisoners there were some issues as press reports indicated that the pardoned prisoner was a relation of the president and was serving a stiff sentence on rape charges.

EDUCATION

Politicians being the type of people that they are will always want to politicise every other thing in Malawi. The education sector has not been spared in all this. Malawians have witnessed how politicians use their positions to get teachers transferred from one school to the other in the time of father and founder of the Malawi nation late Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Those that were present witnessed of how good hard-working teachers from the North were transferred from schools in the Central and Southern region to the Northern region.

The coming in of democracy also saw another form of politics facing the education sector. A number of contracts to build schools were awarded to those that had connection with politicians but some failed to finish off the projects. Even those who were not good enough for the jobs were awarded such contracts. It is partly because of the same politicians who were awarding these contracts to friends and relations that we have some substandard structures that are supposed to be schools. This tendency is failing to phase out as evidenced by latest press reports in the media. Just recently press reports revealed that presidential running mate for the *People's Party* Sosten Gwengwe has been accused of transferring some teachers in Dedza because they received materials from the *Malawi Congress Party*.

Just when people thought Malawi's democracy is mature enough that people can at least separate politics from all the other issues, our leaders are still deeply rooted into this practice. This example is probably one of the many things that are happening that do not reflect well on our democratic values as a nation. It only points out to one thing that we still have a lot of learn in as far as democracy is concerned.

The press also disclosed that Malawi has teachers who graduated and are still not employed. Despite the fact that many schools still have a long way to go balance up with the number the ratio of teachers and students. There is still shortage of teachers in many schools in Malawi. It is for this reason that the Minister of Education, Dr Lucious Kanyumba, is very disappointed that even with all these people that were trained to become teachers they are still not employed.

The issue of girls self boarding school is still being covered in the press every now and then. A number of observers are of the view that these should be banned because they exposed girls to various disastrous behaviours. Some traditional leaders have actually added their weight to have the girls self boarding schools banned.



HEALTH

It may take a very long time for the problems of the referral hospitals to be dealt with. This is because in every single month there are reports that are portraying trouble in the central hospitals. If it is not shortage of drugs or a stinking mortuary with non functional cold rooms, it is shortage of medical equipment. All these factors all contribute to the poor showing of the health sector.

At present it seems the problem of brain drain is not what the health sector is worried much about, but rather lack of funding that has resulted into the current problems the hospitals are facing. Not so long ago the Kamuzu Central Hospital's elevators were not operational and this forced all patients and guardians to use stairs. Some had to part way with a few Kwachas because vendors took advantage of the situation and offered to carry patients on their backs. This is how pathetic the situation is in Malawi's main hospital.

Just recently April reports revealed that the Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital also has its own share of problems. Doctors at times are forced to contribute money to buy drugs. But just like all other reports that are negative the hospital authorities have denied such stories. It is not a secret that there are insufficient drugs in government hospitals and times reports show that patients are given a prescription to buy the drugs from other sources. These problems certainly need urgent solution if Malawi is to save the ailing health sector.

The political campaign period brings its own issues as politicians try to out do each other to get the much needed votes. The *United Democratic Front* presidential candidate Atupele Muluzi did what others could also have done. He donated K3m to all the three central hospitals so that they could share equally. But the Ministry of Health refused to the donation even at a time the three main hospitals are going through economic hardships. Any monetary donation would have been a great benefit to some of the things at the hospital but the ministry of health said no and has since banned any donations in this time of political campaign.

Blood shortage has been a cause for concern for a very long time. Not too many Malawians are in a habit of donating blood and therefore the blood banks always run dry. At times the *Malawi Blood Transfusion Service MBTS* made a call for those that are interested to donate blood. Although they regularly do these exercises the blood is not always enough. One other reason that people do not want to donate blood is because of so many misconception over the screening of blood.



ENVIRONMENT

Latest reports on Malawi's wildlife show that it is under threat because of the high demand of such products in Asia. Reports on the environment show that in Asia people want more and more turtles and ivory. According to officials there are now a lot of elephants being killed for the ivory and this has threatened the population of one of the giant animals on the land. There are fears that Malawi may lose some of its wildlife and potential tourists if these trends continue. Late last year police at the *Kamuzu International Airport KIA* seized loads of ivory that a Chinese national was trying to smuggle out of the country. This is just one piece of evidence that Malawi's elephants are under threat there could be more that have not been reported.

Still on the same note some animal lovers have raised concerns over this scenario where Malawi's turtles are on great demand and that Malawi is being used as a route for illegal wildlife trade. For some reason Malawi's borders are porous making it easy for illegal wildlife traders to go through. Those that are transit to countries where they will sell their illegal wildlife

All the political parties that launched their manifestos in readiness of the 20 May tripartite election did not include anything on the environment. This is a cause for concern for all environmentalists who feel the parties should at least have made pledges on the environment and climate change. The four leading parties did not explicitly put pen to paper on the intervention on a number of issues on the environment. This only shows that not even the political parties and their leadership have the environment as one of the top most priority areas.

On the same note media reports show that there is not adequate funding for the environment. This situation is pretty bad because it means the department of environmental affairs will have to do with the little that they have. One area that is of concern is that of Environmental Impact Assessment. With little funding there are fears that the department may not carry out environmental impact assessment even when there is now high demand for the exercises to take place. Increased cases of minerals mean great demand for environmental Impact assessments and there need for enough funds.

GENDER

The focus on the gender reports in April were all on the coming elections and women's participation. Although the composition of all the political parties it is the women that make the numbers but their participation in top positions is negligible. Women will only be at a political rally to dance or to give support to the male members of the party. It is not a strange scenario because it is across the board as this is happening to all the political parties. To change all this seems to be an uphill task that cannot be done just overnight because it is a cultural thing. But with a lot of activism things may slowly change for the better.

With the elections coming in there is a concern that delayed funding for women to campaign is disastrous as this is the time they should be in action. There are a number of activities that female aspirants need to do to woo the electorate to give women the much needed votes. As Malawi is having tripartite elections gender activities have raised the tempo in fight for more women participation in decision making positions. During the previous general election a small number of women made it into the National Assembly and this year's stakeholders want this to change for the better. They want to have more women in parliament.

Such good ambition to have half of the national assembly seats occupied by women requires a lot of money and efforts. It is therefore understandable that there are all these worries about delayed funding. The NGO gender coordinating network has been on the forefront in the 50-50 campaign because for a very long time female participating in decision making positions has been on a lower side.

Even with a lot of funding there are again fears that some women lack campaign strategies. Unlike their male counterparts who have a lot of funding women aspirants on the other hand are struggling with campaign because they do not have the right skills and therefore need to come up with better strategies. Coupled with lack of funding and cultural beliefs, it is not going to be an easy road for women in this election but when all is said and done as nation Malawi should be going towards achieving 50 % of female representation in parliament.

The *Women of Distinction Awards WODA* which aims at rewarding excellence is back after some years of break. The committee which seeks to award women who have exceptionally performed well in various sectors of the society encourages women to do more for other women with the little they have. This year is the second time that *WODA* Malawi has organised these awards having gone on a break for some years.