



PREVIEW - JANUARY 2017
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL CONCERN

The more people think things are changing the more they remain the same. Looking at past reports it is very obvious that the current food situation is in one way or the other exaggerated so that some sectors of the society can benefit. But this of course is at the expense of the poor who are the ones in dire need of food.

From one scandal to the other this is what Malawi has become. What could have been a just cause in procuring maize the staple grain, ended up being a circus that continues to eat more and more from the meagre resources meant for food relief? Now Malawi has to be in the international media again for the wrong and shameful reasons again.

The Maizegate scandal is what is in the public domain and nobody knows for how long this will come to an end. Issues of corruption in Malawi are most of the times swept under the carpet especially when political gurus in the ruling government are alleged to be involved. It goes without saying that most of the times the non-entities face the long arm of the law at a fast rate than is the case with those with big names.

In a nation that has minimal resources and keeps facing hunger year in year out, the best that the masses expect is good economic governance. Not only does this improve the image of those in authorities, it also helps in building donor confidence.

But looking at what is being reported in the press Malawi is far from cleaning its image in as far as fighting corruption is concerned. Again trying to gag media houses that are reporting about the maizegate scandal only shows that those involved are in a way denying the masses their right to information.

Malawians await for the time when issues of corruption would be history. Past leaders have always preached about fighting corruption but looking at these trends this seems only to be podium utterances. Deemed the zero tolerance to corruption by former leaders, the campaign has nothing to show for. Instead of having progress in the fight against corruption new cases of financial mismanagement and corruption continue.

It is every citizen's wish that the maizegate scandal will be fully investigated and culprits brought to book regardless of what their position in society is. Millions of kwachas were wasted in the name of buying maize for the poor. It is no wonder many are following maizegate scandal issue with keen interest.

POLITICS

President Peter Mutharika has a lot on his hand as he tries to prove to Malawians he is a leader and the one in charge of business. The recent maizagate scandal puts his government in bad books again. Much as the government tries its best to run things and improve the image both for Malawians and the donors other scandals to do with alleged corruption come about. The maizagate scandal is for sure a step behind in the fight against corruption and does not reflect well on government. The battle against corruption has been hit heavily by reports of maizagate and at the same time it puts people's trust on government to test.

With some names being mentioned in the maizagate scandal, the opposition political parties and other sectors have asked the president to do the needful by disciplining the minister of agriculture Dr George Chaponda who is also alleged to have been involved in corrupt practices in the maizagate scandal. Already the civil society are also demanding the same saying they would want to see justice come to pass and the fact that the opposition have added their weight on the same means people are waiting with bated breath for some kind of action on the minister.

In the month under review Japie Mhango minister in Mutharika's cabinet stepped on raw nerves when he publicly made nepotistic statements in the north. Press reports have disclosed that Mhango said the northern region will never produce a president. This did not please some civil society leaders and religious leaders. The Livingstonia Synod of the Church of Central African Presbyterian have condemned such pronouncements saying they are nepotistic and should not be coming from leaders. Surprisingly the ruling *Democratic Progressive Party DPP* did not comment on the issue or rebuke it.

There was a repetition of violence between party supporters from the *Democratic Progressive Party DPP* and the *Malawi Congress Party MCP*. This time around it was at the commemoration of freedom fighter late Reverend John Chilembwe in Chiradzulu. Press reports have shown that there was verbal and blows exchanged between the *DPP* and *MCP* supporters. Just like it was at Gonapamhanya festival in Bolero Rumphu, the two parties' supporters were on each others' throats. These are the two biggest parties in the land and people would expect the supporters to lead by example in peaceful coexistence but this has not been the case. The other smaller parties surely need to learn from these two.

Meanwhile the *Malawi Congress Party MCP* leader Dr Lazarus Chakwera spoke about speculations that he has plans to have former *PP* member Sidik Mia join the party. While rumours are circulating that show Dr Chakwera would want to have Mia as his running mate in 2019, the *MCP* leader has said it is too early to be talking about this now. In the past other quarters have blamed Mia for being behind the party's wrangles. In recent months it has not been rosy for the *MCP* as the media have published reports of one wrangle after the other and several camps merging in the party.

The former ruling party the *People's Party PP* seems to be waking up from the deep slumber. After staying in the wilderness since the last elections where its president Dr Joyce Banda lost miserably, the party says it will hold a convention this year. The *PP* has been without its leader all this time like a ship without a captain. This as some observers have noted, is the reason why

the party has been affected heavily by defections .The party has in the past two years lost some of its most trusted executive members to other parties mainly the ruling *Democratic Progressive Party DPP*. The announcement that the *PP* intends to hold a convention this year gives hope that the party wants to mend things and come back into the mighty party it was.

The Councillors went to the polls to select Mayors for city and town councils in January. As usual the voters who are mostly Councillors were guided by their political affiliations. They did not in a moment stop to look and get guided by what the incumbent mayors had offered during the past two years of their term of office. Instead the councillors allowed to betray the residents of the cities by choosing a Mayor based on their political parties affiliations and not their capabilities. Blantyre residents were shocked to learn that Councillor Noel Chalamanda was shown the exit door despite his good works and initiatives in the city. Blantyre city was now the envy of other cities for its Keep Blantyre Clean.

ECONOMY

Malawians can at least have a sigh of relief after reports that the World Bank is contemplating budgetary support. For sure this is some good news that will send smiles to many if indeed it comes to pass. The coming back of the World Bank may also trigger the other donors to come back and with budgetary support. Malawi for some time has struggled with the budget due to the pulling out of a number of donors following the cash gate scandal. The plunder of public resources left a number of donors with no option but to stop supporting the budget instead some opted for direct funding to development projects. The prospects of the World Bank coming back to support the budget gives hope that the other donors may also come back. Malawi still struggles to fund its budget because mainly it relies on revenue collection from taxes

Many low income earners find themselves in a situation where they pay through the nose to the tax collecting body despite their conscious telling them otherwise. It is just too much because the tax measures are the worst in this part of Africa. According to the Minister of Finance Malawi still needs the revenue from taxes and will continue with the present tax measure despite the cries for better tax policies.

Although reports continue to show that there is potential in the mining sector, there is not much to show for. There is a lot of secrecy surrounding mining activities in Malawi. In the end many people have no chance of appreciating what goes on in the mining sector. It goes without saying that other nations have benefitted a lot from the mining industry and this provides some of the much needed revenue for national budgets. But this is not the case in Malawi because those that are close to the mines have no idea and access to information about the income made from mining activities. The Kayerekera Mines is one example of mining activities that did not benefit the locals fully.

In recent years Malawi has witnessed some mergers in the banking industry. Recently FDH bank bought Malawi government owned Malawi Savings Bank MSB and Inde Bank merged with National Bank. This development has not only affected individuals, but also the entire sector as well. The mergers meant some of the staff needed to be laid off and so Malawians witnessed some job losses in these two developments. But this is however not the only thing to worry about, economists still have one more thing. Reports show that these developments minimise competitions and in away they are a making of a monopoly in the business. Swallowing up the smaller banks means there will be less competition and the customers are the ones left to feel the pinch once the bigger banks start to bite. In any business competition is good on the part of the customers while monopoly is good for business, but at the end of the day it is the customers who have to pay the price.

FOOD SECURITY

The Maizegate Scandal continued to draw public scrutiny going by January press reports. It is a deplorable situation that Malawi is again in the wrong again over shady deals and poor public financial management. It is becoming the order of the day that those trusted in looking after the public resources are the same people that misuse their positions in the name of duty. Maizegate issues have been in the press for some time now and it is not know for how long the issue will be in the public domain. However Malawians have high expectations about w action the president will take after the recommendations by the commission of inquiry will be made.

Looking at some of the highlights of the commission of inquiry proceedings there is one interesting factor which is the exact number of people affected by hunger. Reports show that some of the members of the Parliamentary committee on agriculture have some doubts over the figures on hunger situation. According to the committee the figures may have been exaggerated. This is not strange because late last year the exact figures of people who are starving was not too clear since the president and his minister of agriculture told the nation two different versions. It is becoming so obvious why it is becoming difficult for government to have the correct figures. In the first place why would someone exaggerate the figures if it is not for his own benefit? The *Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee MVAC* is the organisation that releases figures.

2016/2017 *Farm Input subsidy Programme FISP* is said to be the worst. But this was also the case prior last season and the season before it as well. And so this has been the trend. It goes without saying that much as the *FISP* is a good initiative but it has had its own fair share of problems. Since its inception, the *FISP* has enjoyed both positive and negative press coverage, but of late a lot of it negative. As if that is not enough the calls to scrap off the *FISP* are getting louder each passing day. By the look of things it seems government has no exit strategy for the *FISP*. Reports show that even with a coupon in hand the farmers are failing to buy the farm inputs because they are simply not available. Again farmers are failing to buy the farm inputs because the prices are high.

Coming from a food shortage situation, reports of army worms attacking maize fields do not give hope at all. Looking at press reports it is evident that the production of maize from the affected gardens will certainly be minimised. This may mean loss of maize for some families. Any damage to the maize crop at this critical stage may result into another food shortage a thing that many people would not want.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

The Civil society organisations continued to play their role of giving the government checks and balances. With the maizagate issue in the media, the CSOs did their part by taking the issue to court. Among other things the CSOs wanted the minister of Agriculture, Water Irrigation and Food Security Dr George Chaponda to resign as minister to pave way for investigations. On the other hand some individuals want President Mutharika to fire Dr Chaponda. Despite the calls by many CSOs to have Chaponda fired or resign, the minister is still holding his position and enjoying his full benefits courtesy of tax payers.

The ongoing maizagate scandal seems to have attracted a number of CSOs who have vowed to do all they can to make sure justice prevails. As the issue is still in the public domain it has raised a lot of interest with some people wondering why there is too much rot coming from the ministry of agriculture. Just recently the same ministry was involved in another scandal called the tractor gate. To date the issue has not been concluded although names of those who benefitted from the tractors were mentioned. Against such a background the CSOs have vowed to keep the government on its toes until it gives the much needed answers.

Meanwhile press reports have shown that some CSOs and lawyers on the maizagate scandal are receiving death threats. For their role in pursuing the matter some members of the civil society are getting death threats. As for the lawyers involved in the case they are being told to drop the case.

Justice prevailed in the case of one street vendor on the abolition of Rouge and Vagabond Law in the month under review. The courts scrapped off the law. The court's ruling on the matter went in favour of the vendor and many others including prostitutes who for a very long time had fallen victim of Rouge and Vagabond. A number of civil society organisations in the past have in one way or the other tried to speak against this law but to no avail. It is therefore against this background that Non Governmental Organisations have applauded the courts for the ruling.

Finance Minister Goodall Gondwe stepped on raw nerves when he told those in the public service to resign and look for better employment elsewhere. Gondwe is reported to have said the civil service cannot make anyone rich and therefore they can resign and get better paying jobs. This did not please the Civil Service Trade Union have condemned the utterances. As the civil service is undergoing reforms many expect changes that would make the public service attractive and for sure not remarks like the ones Gondwe made. If anything there should be promises of a better public service after the reforms.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

Findings in an international report have shown that corruption is still rampant in Malawi. Issues of corruption are always appearing every now and then. A recent study noted that even the traffic police and traditional leaders are some of the most corrupt entities in the land. Now the report that Malawi is doing badly on the corruption index, it is not a surprise at all for many. At present Malawi is entangled in a number of corruption cases that do not reflect well on the nation that is trying to win back donor confidence. With such report Malawi can only hope working towards the zero tolerance to corruption that was preached by former leaders late Dr Bingu wa Mutharika.

Prison conditions are worse in Malawi no doubt about it. There is simply no space and shortage of food is the order of the day. It is not surprising at all because most of the prisons are very old and have surpassed their capacity way too much. Again due factors like high unemployment rate and poverty there has been an increase in crimes resulting into too many convicts that need the very same prisons. It is in these overcrowded prisons where reports show there is on-going illicit deals for the sake of food and space. With issues of congestion bothering many of the prisoners some have resorted to using their cash to buy good space to sleep on every night. For the love of money the inmates sell each other space and food. This is evident that the problem in prisons is too big.

Just months after reports a human hyena in the Lower Shire district of Nsanje, recent reports show that young girls are involved in sexual activities in exchange for food. This is a clear indication of how desperate people are, and how starved they are. If Malawi as a nation has young girls who are into sexual activities just to feed themselves then there is a big problem. This is again evidence that the food shortage problem is not what some people believe it is theoretically. There is a danger for the future of these young girls because they risk contracting sexually transmitted diseases one of them being the deadly AIDS.

Malawi is still struggling to end child labour completely. Press reports show of a number of efforts from various stakeholders fighting for the same cause. Much as stakeholders are trying their best to deal away with the problem reports show that there are some factors that are jeopardising the fight. Latest reports show that some children even after being rescued from child labour still go back due to poverty. In Mangochi however there is a positive report that shows that 9800 children have been rescued from child labour. This a positive way towards elimination of child labour and needs to be supported.

EDUCATION

Education ministry still has issues with teachers. Late last year the teachers had a strike over salaries, leave grants and promotion but it was foiled after some talks with government. However recent media reports show that the teachers both from secondary and primary school have not received their leave grants up to date. Press reports have disclosed that the *Teachers Union of Malawi TUM* has sent an ultimatum to the government to have the teachers receive leave grants by March.

Meanwhile press reports continue to show that teacher's issues seem to be far from over. After wasting resources to train the teachers, government has a long list of trained teachers that are not employed. Already Malawi has high levels of unemployment rate and these 13,000 teachers join an already huge number of the unemployed youths. For the past three years the government has failed to employ the teachers citing lack of funds. There are fears that if this continues government may lose its trained teachers to the private sector.

The Higher Education Loans and Grants Board in January announced students from unaccredited colleges would not be awarded loans or grants. The Board focuses on loan recovery from former beneficiaries and dispersing of the loans and grants to students in higher learning institutions for students both from public and independent universities. However as the trend has shown at present a number of private universities are not yet accredited. This means that only a few can access the loans and grants. A recent release from the National Council for Higher Education revealed a number of private universities that have fallen short in meeting the recommendations for accreditation.

Meanwhile the Loans and Grants board in the month under review warned that loan defaulters will face tough sanctions. In a bid to recover the loans the board is asking former public university students to voluntarily pay back what they owe. Press reports have shown that some have responded so well but there are still others who have not. The board would want to get the loans repaid so that they can also assist other needy students. Failing to repay the loan former students may face tough sanctions which include failing to get a bank loan, passports and driving licences.

Staff on strike at Mzuzu university finally agreed to get the 10% salary increase that they were offered. Despite saying no to the same 10% earlier the staff reluctantly accepted to go back to work for the same increase percentage. The academic staff were on strike following the disagreements over salary increases. Since October the university has had issues with the academic staff over salaries. Now that there is this minimal increase the staff have accepted to go back to work.

HEALTH

As the population of Malawi is going up at an alarming rate, and so is the need for more midwives. Majority of Malawians rely on public health facilities for one reason or the other. However the trends show that the ministry of health is struggling with shortages of medical personnel and this has been going on for some time. Among the medical personnel are midwives. Reports have revealed that Malawi only has 3420 midwives against the required 23,637. This is a huge gap meaning very few expectant women have access to smooth delivery while being attended to by a midwife while the rest leave it to fate. Statistics show that Malawians are living dangerously with a deficit of 85% shortage of midwives. This is again also not in line with world Health Organisation's recommended ratio which is at 751 to 1.

On medical drug shortage, latest reports show that much as the shortage is blamed on theft, one other factor contributing to the shortage is high prices at the Central medical stores. Due to the pricing of drugs at the Central Medical stores hospitals are made to pay heavily because the drugs are charged in United States dollars. Looking at how much the public hospitals get in terms of funding, it is really an uphill task to procure such drugs. However this is not the only factor that is contributing to the shortage of drugs, since reports of drug theft are also on the increase. The drug shortage is going to be even worse because reports have disclosed that government has cut the budget on drugs by 50%.

Minister of health in the month under review promised he would look into reports of bribes in hospitals. Media reports show that some medical personnel are charging patients for services that are supposed to be free. For an X-ray, Anti-Retroviral Drugs and surgical treatment patients are made to pay when all this is for free. This works to the disadvantage of the poor who cannot afford whatever is demanded. The trends have shown that some personnel are taking bribes against their work ethics. It is against this background that the Minister has warned that the culprits will be fired right away.

Patients at a health centre in Balaka are failing to be attended to by a medical professional not because there is none at the hospital, but he closes the hospital any time he wishes. Reports show that the medical assistant at the hospital closed it for some days and went for a Christmas holiday. Meanwhile patients were left at the mercy of with ward attendants and other untrained personnel. As if this is the only time the medical assistant absents himself from work, reports show that at some point he closes the hospital claiming he is attending meetings at the district Health office

ENVIRONMENT

It is not a secret that Malawi is losing its forest cover at a faster rate. Despite all the efforts to plant and take care of trees, Malawi is still not making much progress. Wanting cutting down of trees is the order of the day as charcoal making is one of the hottest businesses. There is always a ready market for charcoal mainly because there is no other reliable source of energy in Malawi. Many Malawians who live in dire poverty and low income earners cannot afford to use the other forms of energy instead and this is people resort to charcoal because it is cheaper.

Therefore it is good to learn that the Malawi leader Peter Mutharika officially launched the tree planting season. Since then a number of organisations and stakeholders have followed suit. However there are cries that there are always problems to take care of the trees once planted. This means that even when Malawi plants millions of trees, very few of these trees grow to what we can use for a number of things.

Meanwhile a number of stakeholders have shown concerns over the current state of Malawi's forests. There are fears that Malawi may lose its forest cover for good. Experts have however attributed the problem to overpopulation. Malawi's population has tremendously gone up thereby raising demand for trees through moulding bricks, building, energy and other forest products. With so many people wanting to use the same trees the future of Malawi forests lies in limbo. It goes without saying that population growth has contributed heavily to the wearing out of the environment. Malawians now have to pay heavily for the dilapidated forests in form of climate change. It is very obvious that some of the effects of climate change are manmade. If Malawians took time to take care of the environment some of the effects of climate change could not have been felt.

The government of Malawi in the month under review once again engaged another gear in the fight against the use of thin plastics. After issuing a ban on the use of thin plastics, the ministry went ahead and cautioned some of the companies that were still producing thin plastics. Despite the fact that some manufacturing companies were forced to lay off some workers, there has been some kind of good response from the masses. There is compliance from many of the stakeholders which is a commendable situation.

GENDER

The two dailies started the year 2017 on a low note with only a few articles on gender in the month of January. Again looking back at what has been the trend, the pattern is more or less the same when it comes to media coverage on women. There are always these imbalances as men dominate press coverage at the expense of some women who have done things that are news worthy. Talk of the front page it is very rare to find women making it on the front page unless when they are victims. One wonders if at all the contributions that women make any difference in newsrooms.

The imbalances are also conspicuous in the civil service where very few women have made it into top positions. It is the men that are dominating the most senior positions leaving out women some of whom have the required qualifications and experience. Reports show that even in political circles a few women had made it big. Evidence is shown in the fact that despite being the majority in numbers at political party level only a handful have decision making positions. The only thing that makes the women count is the ululation and dancing during party meetings and all the policy and decision making is left for the men to do. It goes without saying that the women are only there for the numbers.

It therefore is not surprising that women are less than 50% of the staff employed in the civil service. According to a report by Henry Chingaipe many women are not employed in all the departments of the government and this has also greatly contributed their small numbers in top positions. It goes without saying that education also has played a major role in the employment rate for women. Reports show that here area 24 principle secretaries out of 94. And the trend goes on to all the other senior positions in the civil service. No wonder Malawi is still lagging behind in the promotion of women in decision making positions.

Against a background of a few women in decision making positions, gender activists have faulted president Mutharika for failing to the appointments in some boards. In the university of Malawi and ADMARC boards Mutharika appointed only men. In other words this could be a way of saying the leadership is doing contrary to what the government promised on promotion on women. The fact that there are no women appointed in both boards is a drawback to the fight for women empowerment.

Meanwhile the National Initiative for Civic Education asked women and youths not to shy away but to participate in developmental issues. The trends have shown that there is low women participation in a number of sectors and these include participating in civic affairs. Committees in the communities can operate better if there is involvement of both youth and women.