

One step forward, two steps backwards: A Freirean post-mortem of an aborted reform process at Malawi Broadcasting Corporation in the 1990s

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Introduction

Aspects of Paulo Freire's theory of liberation, pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire's 1970/93), are used in the present paper to explore causes of an aborted democratisation process at Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) in the 1990s. From 1964 to early 1993 MBC operated under a monopolistic media policy pursued by the one party totalitarian regime of Malawi Congress Party (MCP) led by President Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Patel 2000a). Later, the wind of multiparty democracy that began to blow across Malawi in the early 1990s afforded the country a golden opportunity to reform state-controlled MBC into a Public Service Broadcaster. Efforts to reform MBC were, however, notably short-lived. In 1995, just about a year after Malawi became a multiparty democracy, the broadcaster started showing signs of reversal (Meinhardt and Patel 2003). The causes of the reversal are unclear to many, hence the present paper, which identifies three causes, namely UDF's overzealous efforts to block MCP from reassuming power; a weak post-election political environment prone to exploitation by UDF; and unpreparedness of MBC workers to pursue professional standards of press freedom.

The discussion starts with a brief description of Freire's theory before giving a short historical background of MBC from 1964 to the early 1990s, and, finally, using relevant aspects of pedagogy of the oppressed to analyse the aborted process of reform at MBC.

Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed

In 1970 Paulo Freire, a Brazilian philosopher and educationist, published a theory of liberation named "Pedagogy of the oppressed". Freire wrote his now famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in 1960 soon after his PhD in 1959

in which he examined the problems of public education in Brazil. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in Spanish, but would only be available in translation to the English speaking world in the 1970s. Although Freire situates his interrogation of the concept of liberation in the institution of education, he is generally concerned with how human interaction may be used to either liberate or oppress people. According to him, “dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (Freire 1993:69).

Freire conceptualises the oppressor as the beneficiary of a skewed power relationship in which one exists merely to serve the interests of the other. He, however, argues that the oppressed are not necessarily destined to a perpetual state of oppression as they are capable of becoming their own change agents, subject to their getting conscientised about the reality of their state of oppression. The key concept in conscientisation is the use of the word to read the world. Freire says, “to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it” (Freire 1993:69).

Freire further argues that, once liberated, the oppressed have potential to liberate their former oppressor. However, he also stresses the tendency of the former oppressed to become the new oppressor thereby frustrating the true aims of a revolution. Furthermore, he conceptualises other oppressed that opt to remain oppressed for fear of assuming responsibilities that accompany liberation. It is in this context that the present paper uses relevant aspects of pedagogy of the oppressed to understand the socio-political struggle involving media policy and regulation at MBC in the 1990s.

Press freedom and freedom of expression at MBC

MBC radio was established in 1964, the year that Malawi won her independence from Britain. At its inception the broadcaster mostly broadcast entertainment and news programmes. In July 1964, for example, 50% of its Monday and Tuesday programming was musical (‘Radio Times’, *Times*, 21 July 1964). The station’s main ideological goal, however, was to popularise Malawi’s nationalist development agenda as reflected by such programmes as *Malawi Lero (Malawi Today)* (‘Radio Times’, *Times*, 4 November, 1964) and *Readings from Malawi History* (‘Radio Times’, *Times*, 8 December, 1964). Although at independence Malawi had two prominent newspapers, namely, *Times* and *Malawi News*, the country’s poor road infrastructure, coupled with high illiteracy levels and lack of competition in the broadcasting sector, catalysed MBC’s swift attainment of the status of source of information at national level.

Not long after its inception MBC began to turn into a propaganda instrument of the Banda regime. The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation Act of 1964 empowered the Minister of Information to interfere with MBC's editorial policy. Similarly, during independence the country had not yet established a ministry of information and President Banda served as Director of MBC. As a result, Banda secured opportunity to have direct influence on operations of the station (Patel 2000:162). Worse still, in October 1964, barely three months after independence, MBC was affected by a cabinet crisis which the Banda regime experienced when a coalition of youthful ministers constitutionally challenged Banda's foreign policy and dictatorial leadership style (Venter 1995:154). In reaction Banda intensified his control over MBC airwaves under the guise of preventing dissenting views from derailing the country's virgin nationalist development agenda. Legally, his decision was backed by the Censorship Act of 1934 which empowered the Minister of Information to determine media content for public consumption. Eventually, in 1971 Banda secured a landmark opportunity to consolidate his vested interest at MBC when the MCP elected him Malawi's Life President. In 1972 Banda openly expressed his understanding of his life presidency by proclaiming that, "the Malawi system, the Malawi style is that, then its finished.... Everything I say is Law. It is a fact in this country" [(Chirwa (2001:9) quoting Lwanda (1993)]. A famous Spearhead Band song titled *Zonse Zimene Nza Kamuzu Banda (Everything Belongs to Kamuzu Banda)* which enjoyed air time until the early 1990s accurately reflected the implications of Banda's statement on Malawi, in general, and MBC, in particular.

By the early 1980s MBC was dominated by content which supported Banda's regime. In 1981, for example, MBC intentionally misrepresented a severe famine which hit Malawi after the country had experienced a dry spell during the previous growing season. The famine forced millions of Malawians to stand on endless queues to purchase imported rotten yellow maize instead of traditional white maize. MBC consistently gave the country and the international community false assurance that Malawi had enough staple food reserves. Similarly, in 1983 MBC deliberately misrepresented the death of three cabinet ministers, namely Aaron Gadama, Twaibu Sangala, and Dick Matenje, and one parliamentarian, David Chiwanga, who were allegedly brutally murdered by government agents in the border district of Mwanza (van Donge, 1998). The broadcaster repeatedly announced that the four had died in a car accident in the district when they were fleeing to neighbouring Mocambique after a foiled *coup de tat* attempt.

By the early 1990s Banda's name had dominated MBC airwaves so much so that each day the station opened its programming with praise songs about him and his achievements through a programme titled *Kwacha Kwayera (Day is Come)*. It also became a tradition for the station's presenters and participants of its development-oriented programmes such as *Ulimi wa Makono (Modern Agriculture)* to acknowledge Banda as the sole architect of Malawi's seemingly successful development programmes. Furthermore, during song request programmes MBC announcers freely turned down listeners' requests and substituted them with songs that praised Banda. In the final analysis, almost each and every song request programme, including *Zamchipatala, (Requests from the Hospital)* had something to say in praise of Banda.

The glory of the Banda dictatorship era began to fade in the early 1990s when the wind of multiparty democracy began to blow over Malawi as it did in other African countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union. The new political environment compelled the media to shed off its loyalty and support for the Banda regime and, instead, reflect the aspirations of the masses, thereby drawing the government and the masses closer to each other (Meinhardt and Patel 2003:38-39). Newspapers and anonymous leaflets and pamphlets which challenged the legitimacy of the Banda regime and its oppressive monopolistic media policy began to circulate in Malawi. The most decisive of these 'illegal' publications was a pastoral letter authored by eight Roman Catholic Bishops in March 1992. The Bishops, who until this time had enjoyed good rapport with the Banda regime, condemned his government's reprisals that innocent Malawians were suffering for honestly expressing and living up to their intellectual, religious or political convictions. Particularly, they vehemently condemned Malawi's communications environment in which monopoly of mass media and censorship prevented the expression of dissenting views and caused some innocent people to pay dearly for their political opinions (Episcopal Conference of Malawi 1992:8-9).

The pastoral letter was circulated in Catholic churches but Malawians of all walks of life across the country welcomed it with enthusiasm, debating its contents in public spaces such as city buses, shops, and produce markets, where hitherto no one had dared to criticise Banda for fear of detention without trial. Regardless of all this public enthusiasm MBC chose to ignore the pastoral letter and for five months continued to pursue sunshine journalism as usual.

On 6th April 1992 tension which the pastoral letter had been slowly generating in the country reached a climax when a trade unionist and human rights activist, Chakufwa Chihana, dramatically arrived at Kamuzu International Airport to openly challenge the legitimacy of Banda's government and to demand the introduction of freedom of expression in Malawi. The police hastily arrested Chihana before he could read his prepared speech, but his courageous act encouraged Malawians to focus their minds more on the importance of the right to freedom of expression. This time again, MBC stuck to its guns and ignored Chihana whom MCP tended to describe as 'just another prisoner'.

In July 1992 MBC openly defied local, regional, and international calls for the establishment of a free press in Malawi and unceremoniously dismissed journalist George Dambula after Police had arrested him for allegedly being overheard entertaining opposition views (Patel 2000a:167). Dambula's arrest and dismissal together with the arrest and dismissal of other journalists before him were widely publicised in the international media, thereby fuelling pressure against Banda's monopoly at MBC. When the Banda regime could no longer handle growing pressure for press freedom, on 20th August 1992 Minister of State, John Tembo, took the Malawi nation by surprise and announced an immediate introduction of press freedom in the country (Chimombo 1998:220). Later, on the last eve of 1992 Banda made a state of the nation address which tried to open up MBC airwaves in preparation for a referendum which took place on 14th June the following year. Although Banda directed MBC to report the referendum campaign impartially, he prohibited it from broadcasting partisan political broadcasts and paid political advertisements. Consequently, prior to the referendum MBC remained closed to multiparty democracy supporters regardless of the fact that it was the main source of information to rural masses due to high illiteracy levels rated at 58.3% (Venter 1985:165, 167).

The national referendum saw the country converting into a multiparty politics. Against this backdrop MBC began to make an editorial policy shift towards reform and progress. Patel (2000a:167) observes that in September, 1993 the first well consolidated step to make MBC adopt Public Service Broadcasting principles was taken. A consultative committee of representatives from the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), political parties, and multiparty activists developed a code of conduct for MBC that clearly demanded accurate, fair, and comprehensive reporting of events. The code was to be complemented with the

abolition of arbitrary suspensions and arrests of journalists to reflect journalistic values of pluralistic societies.

Although the provisions of the code of conduct could not substitute the need for more detailed guidelines that could give programme-makers “independence from both the state and commercial interests” (UNDP Bureau for Development Policy - Democratic Governance Group 2004:10), it assisted MBC to demonstrate its willingness to reform into a public service broadcaster. Eventually, during Malawi’s first multiparty elections in 1994 MBC was able to carry out independent and fair reporting (Meinhardt and Patel 2003:39). A new era of broadcasting had dawned at MBC.

On 17th May, 1994 Banda and the MCP lost the country’s first multiparty elections to United Democratic Front (UDF) under the leadership of Bakili Muluzi. Banda’s urgent public acceptance of defeat on MBC radio even before the Malawi Electoral Commission had finished counting votes reinforced the prevailing positive atmosphere for reformation at MBC. Five weeks after UDF came into power MBC openly demonstrated willingness to explore two more Public Service Broadcasting principles, namely “universality [and] concern for national identity and culture” (UNDP Bureau for Development Policy - Democratic Governance Group 2004:9,10). It reintroduced on its airwaves Chitumbuka, a semi-lingua franca of the Northern Region, which had been banned from MBC and the school curriculum in 1968 in the name of unifying the Malawi nation through the use of one common language, namely Chichewa. At independence Chichewa was the most spoken and used dialect of Chinyanja countrywide. Although other languages such as Chiyao, Chisena, and Chilomwe were also not allowed on MBC airwaves, some critics had seen the banning of Chitumbuka from the airwaves and the school curriculum and the consequent elevation of Chichewa to a national language as Banda’s strategy for marginalising Chitumbuka (Kishindo 1998:253-4) to achieve “*chewaisation*” of the country’s traditional and political culture (Chirwa 2001:12). In the 1970s and 1980s some Tumbuka teachers and learners resented Chichewa as a school subject. But, as Kishindo observes, “It is [...] difficult to gauge the extent of [Tumbuka] speaking people’s resentment to the policy because in Banda’s Malawi dissent was prohibited” (Kishindo 1998:254).

The second landmark development towards reforming MBC occurred in the second half of 1994. The Malawi Parliament amended the “Malawi Broadcasting

Corporation Act [of 1964] in order to make provision for television broadcasting; allow more radio channels; and provide for licensing radio and television dealers, receivers and satellite dishes” (Patel 2000a: 162). The Act was passed without any debate and continued to sanction information minister’s interference with the day to day running of MBC. Besides, government’s decision to open up the airwaves to other stakeholders was seen as an important step towards reforming MBC using liberalised market forces.

When UDF began to consolidate its political power during the post-election period, the enthusiasm of MBC to attain editorial independence began to falter. The broadcaster slowly began to revert to its protectionist editorial policy that favoured the ruling party and the government of the day at the expense of the public good (Meinhardt and Patel 2003:39). Once again it began to deal with a heavy hand journalists who it felt were promoting opposition interests. In June, 1996 it suspended and fired journalists Francis Chikunkhuzeni and Hastings Maloya for allegedly filing a story about an opposition MCP rally held in the volatile Ndirande Township where a by-election was about to be conducted. Later, in November the same year MBC hosted a controversial press conference in the waiting room of the office of its Director General where Edward Mlongoti, an MCP candidate in the Ndirande by-election, announced his immediate resignation from the party after being abducted by UDF functionaries five days before election day (Englund 2002:180). MBC also blatantly glorified UDF leadership and castigated its critics and opponents just like it did during the Banda regime. In September, 1996 when Rolf Patel, former Minister of Energy and Mining, and of Relief and Rehabilitation, resigned from UDF alleging that the party’s leadership was corrupt (*Malawi News Online*, 6th September 1996), MBC reacted to his resignation by barring his dissenting voice from the airwaves.

Following government’s adoption of the Malawi Government Communication Sector Policy Statement, the Malawi Parliament passed the Communications Act in 1998 (Manda 2004:165). The Act substituted the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation Act, Radio Communications Act, and Malawi Posts and Telecommunications Corporation Act and made provision for the establishment of the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) as an independent body responsible for regulating the communications sector (Patel 2000a:171). In practice the policy was UDF’s way of empowering

government to single-handedly control broadcasting in the country. One of its recommendations ironically stipulated that the proposed independent regulator will have to “act under the policy direction of government through the Ministry of Information which [was] responsible for the communications sector” (Malawi Government Communication Sector Policy Statement, 1998:31). It is, therefore, not surprising that in the presence of the Act the situation at MBC worsened as the nation drew closer to the second multiparty general elections in 1999. UDF took almost total charge of MBC airwaves whenever Muluzi was conducting his frequent countrywide election campaign rallies characterised by numerous lengthy whistles stops in trading centres. The broadcaster made live coverage of each and every rally, presented its major highlights in the day’s news bulletins, and eventually rebroadcast the whole event after eight o’clock evening English news.

On May 13, 1999 Robert Jamieson, Director of Article 19, observed that two weeks before the 1999 polls MBC had accorded the ruling UDF 82% coverage in contrast to 49% which it had given the ruling MCP during the campaign period of 1994 elections (Kamwendo 2000:192). Furthermore, while covering the rallies MBC became a podium of hate speech as UDF leadership found opportunity to castigate the opposition whose voice MBC had already barred from the air waves (Kamwendo 2000:191). In some cases the hate speech characterised even MBC’s editorial comments. One such editorial comment described Northern Region political leaders as ‘savages, uncouth parliamentarians, sadistic dictators, and uncivilised leaders’ when they had chosen not to give President Bakili Muluzi a warm welcome in the northern district of Karonga (Patel 2000a:169).

By the close of the 1990s all hope to reform MBC into a public broadcaster using contact and dialogue had almost been lost to the extent that some stakeholders decided to resort to seeking court intervention. In early June 1999 an MCP-AFORD alliance, which was specifically formed to try and defeat UDF, threatened to sue MBC if it failed to broadcast live the launch of its collective manifesto (Kamwendo 2000:192). Although the chairperson of the Malawi Electoral Commission and the Minister of Information eventually signed guidelines for the 1999 elections which required MBC to fairly allocate broadcast slots to registered political parties, the move was of no much consequence because it was taken only eleven days before polling day (Patel 2000b:36-37).

A Freirean analysis of causes of reversal of reforms at MBC

The reversal of the process of reform at MBC shocked many Malawians, especially those who had keenly followed the 1994 election campaign. UDF had widely campaigned for freedom of expression and press freedom and promised to give the same to the people once it assumed power. This shock was summarised by a feature article on press freedom that appeared in the Malawi News Online of 6 September, 1996, which lamented that President Bakili Muluzi, the very man who had championed freedom of the press in Malawi, was in the fore front muzzling it. Chirwa (2000:103) observes that there was a general reversal of pre-referendum political pressure after the 1994 elections and suggests that the causes can only be speculated. Interestingly, Malawi's experience is similar to the general trend in African countries. Mamdan (2010) observes that political revolutions in Africa tend to result into new shocking forms of violence and oppression by the former oppressed. However, to avoid over-generalising the causes of the reversal the present paper uses Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed to theorise the situation at MBC.

Freire (1993) conceptualises half-converted elites as influential people who engage in temporary solidarity with the oppressed in order to become the new oppressor once the revolution is won. The sudden reversal of reforms at MBC creates an immediate impression that the ruling UDF was this type of hypocritical liberator. The impression is even more plausible when one considers that Kamlepo Kaluwa, president of one of Malawi's small but outspoken political parties, had repeatedly warned Malawians to distrust UDF leaders, most of whom had suddenly converted from MCP. Kaluwa described the converts as hyenas that had changed their habitat but not their innermost characters. However, there is no clear evidence that UDF's decision to abandon the reforms at MBC was made way before it came into power. On the contrary, it appears that once in power the party was possibly simply trying to use any means within its reach to ensure that the MCP as the former oppressor should never return to power. When MCP lost the 1993 referendum, many Malawians thought the end of the party had finally come as reflected by a satirical obituary which appeared in *The Monitor* of 18 June, 1993 which in part reads:

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* (my emphasis) in polling station waste receptacles country-wide. Leaves children named Ballion, John, Louis, Robson, Hilda, Tije pani, and others two [sic] numerous to name....

RIP

The word, ‘cremated’ in this obituary was carefully chosen to emphasise the permanence of the defeat of MCP. Malawians bury their dead in dug graves, a practice which to them connotes hope for resurrection. In contrast, they perceive cremation as a way of ending life permanently because it reduces the corpse to ashes. Likewise, when MCP lost the 1994 elections some Malawians brought to the streets slaughtered black cocks to symbolically celebrate the much anticipated eradication of MCP whose identification during the campaign period had been a black cock. Later on, in the early post-election period, a series of arrests of prominent MCP personalities such as John Tembo, Charles Kamphulusa, Hilda Manjankhosi, and Cecilia Kadzamira, who many regarded as MCP orphans, further assured these Malawians that MCP would never live again.

UDF must have been shocked upon realising that, contrary to this popular expectation, MCP under the new leadership of Gwanda Chakwamba, Banda’s running mate during the 1994 elections, remained a force which the party could not take for granted. As if this was not bad enough, although Chakufwa Chihana’s AFORD was an ethnic-based political party serving the interests of the Northern Region (Khembo 2004:121), UDF could not ignore its active

participation in politics, both inside and outside parliament. The pressure must have become unbearable to UDF when MCP and AFORD eventually formed an alliance with the agreement that the two parties should work together, both inside and outside parliament, on matters of national importance (Venter 1985:178-179). It is unsurprising, therefore, that soon after assuming power UDF was tempted to tighten access to MBC to ensure that the former oppressor, MCP, had no easy access to voters. This is evidenced through the fact that Bakili Muluzi openly and repeatedly boasted during his endless countrywide tours that as long as he lived he would never allow MCP to come back into power.

Muluzi's determination to block access to MBC to bar the MCP from coming back into power must have appeared innocent and logical to Malawians who had not yet forgotten the evils committed during thirty years of Banda's dictatorship. As Freire (1993:39) observes:

The restraints imposed by the former oppressed on their oppressors, so that the latter cannot reassume their position do not constitute oppression. An act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being fully human. Accordingly these restraints do not in themselves signify that yesterday's oppressed have become today's oppressors. Acts which prevent the restoration of the oppressive regime cannot be compared with those which create and maintain it, cannot be compared with those by which a few men and women deny the majority the right to be human.

The problem however is that there is a thin line between acts aimed at restraining the restoration of the former oppressor and acts of oppressing the former oppressor. The former oppressed may end up acting exactly like the former oppressor unless they were truly liberated during the revolution and do not continue to "live in the duality in which to *be* is to *be like* and to *be like* is to *be like the oppressor*" (Freire 1993:30). Because UDF did not realize what a victim it had become under Banda's oppressive system it crossed the thin line and became the new oppressor, thereby engaging in horizontal violence that was a mere reflection of its wounded psyche (Fanon 1964/2004).

The UDF government, therefore, found it easy to slow down its legislative support for constitutional provisions made in sections 35 (freedom of expression to every person); 36 (freedom of the press); 37 (freedom to every person to access all information held by the state so far as the right is required by him

for the exercise of his right with the liberalisation of related legislation). When the Communications Act was being passed in 1998, for example, parliament had not yet repealed the 1930 penal code of sedition and the Censorship Act of 1968 which collectively were well known for sanctioning the brutalising of Malawians (Meinhardt and Patel 2003:39).

Thus, in practice UDF's decision to slow down the reforms was an overzealous act. There was no way it could restrain MCP and its ally from accessing MBC without disadvantaging the fellow former oppressed. Practically, every media practitioner, regardless of whether they supported UDF or the opposition, felt intimidated by the continued existence of the two archaic legal provisions which could only be identified with the former oppressor, MCP. UDF's overzealousness is also revealed through the fact that, although MCP was a former oppressor, it did not necessarily imply that the party was incapable of experiencing "a profound rebirth [and] take on a new form of existence" (Freire 1993). After all, during the campaign period in 1994 MCP had demonstrated willingness to liberate the airwaves, a gesture which was further evident through Banda's use of MBC airwaves to accept defeat and to congratulate Muluzi, his opponent.

UDF's overzealous efforts to control the former oppressor are also evident in the way it framed some provisions of the 1998 Communications Act. The Act does not have enough provisions to ensure much desired independence of MBC. On the contrary, it gives the State President powers to appoint board members and their Chairpersons for both MACRA and MBC (Malawi Communications Law 1998 Sections 7[1], 8[1], 90[1][a] and [b]). In the final analysis, these provisions give the president an upper hand at both MACRA and MBC, although the former was meant to oversee the activities of the latter. Since its inception MACRA has been widely criticised for its perceived lenience with MBC while making regular threats and taking harsh action against private radio stations (Article 19 Global Campaign for Free Expression [2003]). In 2009 the Supreme Court of Appeal ordered MACRA to compensate the Muluzi family-owned Joy Radio with 14 Million Malawi Kwacha (approximately US\$100,000.00) for revoking its broadcast licence arbitrarily (*Nyasa Times*, 21 September, 1998).

By barring MCP from the airwaves UDF, as the former oppressed, lost a lifetime opportunity to fully liberate itself and to help liberate its former oppressor, thereby demonstrating to all Malawians the type of country that the new Malawi should have been. As Freire (1993:38) argues "it is only the oppressed who by

freeing themselves, can free their oppressors”. However, it has been argued in some quarters that UDF lost this grand opportunity to help liberate the former oppressor because “the aims of the democratisation process themselves were unclear with people simply wanting to change the regime without having a clear vision of what society Malawi should become” (Chirwa 2000:103). Such sentiments are misleading because there were many well meaning Malawians who fought the oppressive Banda regime fully aware that they wanted a Malawi which would give equal rights to everyone, including the former oppressor. As early as 1995 some of the stakeholders who knew what type of society Malawi should have been had begun to get concerned about UDF’s reluctance to continue the reform process at MBC. For example, Kanyongolo (1995:88) warned Malawians that unless the law and practice of censorship in Malawi was restructured, the country would sooner or later lose the advances of freedom of expression which it had gained recently as a result of the process of political transition. Kanyongolo was particularly concerned that the Minister of Information still had powers to dictate the type of media products which could be allowed to circulate in the local media, including MBC. It is, therefore, arguable that the real problem was that UDF chose to ignore the concerns of well-meaning critics.

The reversal of the reform process at MBC can partly be attributed to the fact that it was not supported with appropriate structures. Freire (1993:39) argues that “the authentic solution of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction does not lie in a mere reversal of position, in moving from one pole to another”. Although PAC and other stakeholders had done commendable work in initiating the reforms (Patel, et al, 2007:31), they used a “minimalist theory of democracy” (Starr 2008:34), which was over-concerned with creating an immediate environment in which the state could not interfere with freedom of speech and of the press, consequently undermining the need to establish permanent structures which could sustain the reform process.

One of the areas which were affected by the minimalist approach was language reform. PAC and its fellow stakeholders did not establish any mechanism that could guide and monitor MBC’s language reform. The urgent reintroduction of Chitumbuka on the airwaves, for example, was based on a presidential decree rather than editorial or language policy. Against this background Kishindo (1998: 264-66) argues that Chitumbuka was reintroduced on MBC for political

reasons; Muluzi wanted to win the sympathy of the Northern Region where he was increasingly becoming unpopular. As a result, the language was reintroduced without professional consultation and at a time when MBC had no Chitumbuka service personnel on the ground. Similarly, although it took two years to introduce Chiyao, Chilomwe and Chisena on MBC, the introduction happened without any policy guidance at all. Kishindo (Ibid:266) explains that the main interest of UDF this time was to frustrate the Northern Region for not responding positively to its earlier gesture of good will, namely the reintroduction of Chitumbuka. The results of the hasty introduction of Chiyawo were disastrous. The audience vehemently lamented the poor linguistic quality of Chiyawo news service and MBC was compelled to suspend the service.

By over-emphasising a narrative of political progress PAC also ended up de-emphasising matters concerning media institutions, in general, and MBC, in particular. It was not until the period towards the end of the first term of the Muluzi government that PAC began to seriously tackle media matters. Ott (2000: 123-4) observes that:

The activities of PAC can be found in three main fields: advocacy, mediation, and civic education. The first years (1992-1994) the advocacy and mediation role (with the Presidential Committee on Dialogue) in Malawi's transition was dominant. After the first democratic election (1994), round table conferences with representatives of government, political parties and NGOs were organised (on the national and the regional level) to address issues like tolerance, reconciliation, accountability and transparency. In 1997, the parliamentary boycott and the civil service strike absorbed a lot of energy. In 1998, the themes of political parties' programmes and the role of the media were tackled.

It is not surprising, therefore, that during the early transition period Malawi did not have vibrant specialised media rights pressure groups as was the case with the political struggles of other African countries such as South Africa. The Journalists Association of Malawi (JAMA), a professional association of journalists, for example, was too weak to help lay any structures as evidenced by the fact that for many years it did not even have a secretariat. Similarly, the mandate of the often cash-strapped Media Council of Malawi which was born from JAMA in 1996 was to enforce media ethics and to adjudicate cases

of professional transgression and not to pressurise government to reform the media (Manda 2004:167-168).

The first year of the first presidential term of Bakili Muluzi was generally a glorious period at MBC. The broadcaster demonstrated considerable editorial autonomy as its news and current affairs programmes began to get characterised by notable depth and objectivity. Without fear or favour MBC did not only make effort to balance news stories, including highly politically charged ones, but also asked questions characterised by depth during news interviews. Soon, there emerged at MBC a new breed of journalists such as Zelia Banda, Edith Tsirizani, Francis Chikunkhuzeni, and Eunice Chipangula who distinguished themselves as critical thinkers and advocates of truth, fairness and justice. Malawians suddenly began to look forward to MBC lunch hour and evening news bulletins for updates of domestic current affairs.

Discussing the dilemma of the oppressed Freire (1993) argues that freedom comes with responsibilities which sometimes appear so scary to the oppressed that they shun it and prefer oppression. Regardless of the above-mentioned positive changes, some MBC staff, especially those who had benefited from the oppressive MCP regime, could not cope with the professional demands of the new political dispensation. As a result, in the absence of proper structures which could sustain the initiated reforms, they reverted to unprofessional practice of compromising journalistic professionalism in order to please those in power. The UDF government was quick to notice the existence of the two conflicting groups and decided to exploit it to its advantage. For the first time in the history of MBC government through the Minister of Information began to directly influence the selection of journalists who could be assigned to cover presidential and ministerial engagements and, unsurprisingly, the less professional were favoured the most.

Last but not least, MBC possibly reverted to the practice of serving the ruling regime as a result of subsiding political pressure from the general public. There are two explanations to this public resignation. On the one hand, after thirty years of oppression Malawians, especially UDF supporters, were so overexcited about their newly-found freedom that they did not see any immediate need to defend it. The positive developments which took place at MBC probably misled some Malawians to over-estimate their government's determination to forge ahead with the reform process at MBC. Such an over-trusting attitude

was probably encouraged by the fact that Malawi's democratisation process generally overemphasised human rights and freedoms at the expense of human responsibilities and duties. Until constitutional amendments of November, 2009, the Malawi constitution was silent about citizen duties and responsibilities.

UDF was aware about this unsuspecting orientation of Malawians which "is the fruit of the concrete situation of domination which surrounds [the oppressed] and which engendered their unauthentic view of the world" (Freire 1993:49), and decided to exploit it to its advantage. During his two presidential terms Muluzi often publicly criticised Malawians for having an over-trusting attitude which in his opinion misled them to take for granted oppressive acts committed by MCP when it was in power. Ironically, there was no guarantee that Muluzi could not exploit this very same over-trusting attitude if he saw need to do so.

On the other hand, the sophisticated urban electorate (Venter 1995:166), who during the 1994 election campaign had high hopes for the introduction of free airwaves, were so disappointed with UDF's monopolising of MBC that they saw no point to argue with the party about an obvious malpractice. As Freire (1993:39), argues, "the moment the new regime hardens into a dominating 'bureaucracy' the humanist dimension of the struggle is lost and it is no longer possible to speak of liberation". Alternatively, this urban electorate found solace in an independent press which began to emerge following the 20 August 1992 government declaration of a free press in the country. Chimombo (1998:20) observes that "from a handful of independently owned newspapers, covering relatively safe topics, the newsstands suddenly found themselves handling over twenty different titles, appearing anything from one to eight times a month". More significantly, this emerging commercial press was characterised by newspapers which were mostly affiliated with political parties through ownership (Patel 2000a:164-65) partly as a side effect of MBC's practice of barring the opposition from using its airwaves. Eventually, the alternative views which these newspapers advanced as they ideologically competed for readers caused the sophisticated urban electorate to see no need to pressurise MBC to accommodate the voice of the opposition.

UDF detected how the "self-righting process" (McQuail 2000: 147) of the liberalised press was counteracting its effort to silence the opposition through MBC. Consequently, under the guise of the need to hold the press accountable, parliament in September, 1995 passed a government bill which required

newspapers and all other publications to carry the names of its publisher, printer, editors and reporters. Practically, through this proposed naming and shaming law “the oppressor was going to weaken the oppressed still further, to isolate them, [and] to create and deepen rifts among them” (Freire 1993:122). Muluzi sensed the harm which the proposed law was going to cause to his good international human rights record and decided to cover up his guilt with “false generosity” (Freire 1993:127) by declining to assent to the bill. He told Malawians then that he did not want to destroy the freedom which the country had fought for and was now enjoying. Muluzi was probably sure that many Malawians, more especially the politically underprivileged rural population who formed the greater part of UDF, would easily be manipulated by this false generosity. His false generosity rewarded him handsomely. Many Malawians praised him for not consenting to the bill without necessarily asking why in the first place his government had gone all the way to create the bill, table it in parliament, defend it, and eventually pass it when Malawians had openly condemned Banda for oppressive press laws.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that there are three reasons why MBC abandoned the democratic reforms of the early 1990s. UDF was not only overzealous in its efforts to prevent MCP from coming back into power but also decided to exploit an already weak political environment. Civil society and political organisations that initiated the reforms failed to manage the process fully because they did not establish appropriate structures to sustain the reforms. At the same time, some MBC workers were overwhelmed by the burden of journalistic responsibilities that accompanied the introduction of freedom of the press.

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