MALAWI - 2014

With Ruairidh, Charles and Bevan all at present in Lilongwe unpacking and getting the house ready for Fiona and the girls moving this week, it has been interesting watching the outplay of the recent Malawian Presidential Elections. Zambia's Vice-President Guy Scott last week attended the inauguration and afterwards held talks with President Peter Mutharika in Blantyre after his victory in the May 20th Elections. While Dr Scott and President Sata offered their congratulations, Malawi's former president Joyce Banda was conspicuous by her absence at the event.

After a robust campaign and some delay with the results, the Malawi Electoral Commission last Friday announced that Peter Mutharika won 36% of the vote. Second was Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party with 27.8%, and Joyce Banda was third with 20.2%. There was quite a similar break up of the vote in Zambia in 2008, with the President being elected on a minority of the vote. In neither Zambia nor Malawi is there provision constitutionally for a French-style Presidential run-off, it is a case of the Westminster’s first-past-the-post wins.

It is alleged that there were irregularities with polling places in Blantyre and Lilongwe being open for three days instead of 12 hours. This was attributed to a shortage of ballot papers. This reason did not convince some voters who protested. From some centres the number of people voting was greater than the number on the Electoral Register.

These anomolies and flaws prompted Joyce Banda, though acting ultra vires, to try and invalidate the election results. However, this was seen as personal pique since Peter was former President Bingu wa Mutharika’s brother. Peter had been Bingu’s chosen successor in stead of the then Vice-President Joyce. The attempted annulment and the promised future support for Rev Chikwera in the proposed re-run was widely criticised at home and abroad.

The other parties tried either to have the results released without further ado or to postpone them by extending the 8-day period for the count; even the Electoral Commission applied to the High Court for a recount. The High Court granted the MEC’s application for a recount but only with the 8 day time-frame permitted for the count. There was no time to do this so Mutharika was declared the winner on 30th May and sworn-in the next day.

Prior to the elections Joyce Banda's Government was hit by a major financial scandal called 'Cashgate', where US$32.5 million from the sale of Government assets including a fleet of luxury cars and a presidential jet could not be accounted for. Another factor in her demise was the mishandling of food security last year in which over 2 million Malawian were affected by a severe maize shortage. The strategic reserves disappeared but free maize was surprisingly available at ruling-party political rallies for supporters. On top of this a 34% devaluation of the Kwacha caused prices to rise by 50%. Corruption and hunger were the tipping points for many voters.

The new president has promised change but Malawians remember the administration of his older brother with its inflation and shortages; and from the content of his inaugural speech heard little to indicate any significant changes in the style of governance. For many, it is a matter of wait and see.

Banda was considered by much of the West to be a new kind of African leader, and for those who get most of their news about Malawi from the mainstream Western media, the election results were quite a surprise. Her image at home is somewhat different where she acted just like any other Malawian politician in her position whether buying votes or agreeing to IMF demands and making life more difficult for poor Malawians in the process. As the Chewa proverb says: **Mapanga awiri abvumbwitsa!** : *(Sitting between )- Two huts can make you get soaked!*

This election was chaotic with no candidate being above reproach. But despite the disorganisation and rigging, Malawi's young democracy dealt with the problem and found a peaceful and fairly consensual solution. Again whoever cries for rain also cries for mud **–Warira mvula, warira matope!**