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Malawi: between black and white Africa

ITS RELIANCE ON SOUTH AFRICA
WISE OR FOOLHARDY?

By Henry J. Richardson III

With half its territory lying in the lap of Portuguese Mozambique and the other half squeezed between the disputed Zambian and Tanzanian frontiers, landlocked Malawi has been increasingly drawn to the white-dominated states of Southern Africa. There are both economic and geographic reasons for this. As the former British Protectorate of Nyasaland, and later as the poor third cousin in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, agriculture was developed unevenly and there was no industrialization. Future progress must depend primarily on annual exports of approximately 100,000 tons of food crop surpluses, plus foreign assistance. Malawi has no readily exploitable mineral resources, but it does have the potential for a tourist industry—an equable climate, beautiful scenery, and Lake Malawi—and three new hotels are now under construction.

An important source of foreign exchange—recently some \$5 million an-

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nally—comes from the money some 200,000 Malawians send to their families from their earnings in South Africa and Rhodesia. Since the beginning of this century, lack of employment opportunities at home has meant that these able-bodied young men must stay away from their families and earn their living on the farms and in the mines of Southern Africa.

Geographically, of course, Malawi is completely dependent on its neighbors. At the moment, its only commercial link with the coast is by rail from Salima on Lake Malawi through southern Malawi and Mozambique to Beira. Since an important segment of this route is in Portuguese territory, the government must be discreet in its dealings with Lisbon or risk economic strangulation.

This is just one illustration of Malawi's predicament: how can it maintain its political sovereignty and establish rapport with the black African states to the north at the same time as it is economically dependent on the south? Under the strict, paternal guidance of its strong-willed president, Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, who led his country to independence in 1964,

Malawi is striving for solutions to problems as intractable as any in Africa.

The government of Malawi is the country's largest employer, the dominating economic instrument, and, to a large extent, its social arbiter. Dr. Banda is head of the government, head of state, minister of justice, external affairs, works and supplies, commander in chief of the army and police, and life president of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the sole legitimate political party. Although the government is composed of ministers who theoretically report to a cabinet headed by the President, which in turn proposes legislation to the Parliament, in practice, the ministers, who are appointed and dismissed by the President at will, report directly to him. Once the President has made a decision, everything else becomes a mere formality.

Dr. Banda's control is often dictatorial, especially that which he exercises through the para-military Malawi Young Pioneers, and there are preventive detention laws and detention camps in the country today. Nevertheless, his continuance is no longer in question, as it was during and after the cabinet crisis and attempted coup d'état by four dissident ministers in 1964-65. Although these ex-ministers doubtless retain a residue of support in the country, that of the President is stronger and deeper, especially in the villages. This was proven in 1967 when rebel ex-minister Yatuta Chisiza plotted a commando assassination attempt which failed because villagers in the Fort Jameson district directed the police and army to the commandos' hideout where Chisiza was killed. Today, Banda tours the country in open cars, apparently without any fear of overthrow.

Dr. Banda possesses a sharp intelligence, an extraordinary memory, vast reserves of energy for a man in his sixties, and the capacity to make decisions and enforce them. He also has a frightening intolerance of mistakes. This elder of the Scottish Presbyterian Church feels committed to broadcasting his opinions, and he delights in lambasting those who disagree with him, particularly those African leaders who he feels say one thing and do another.

A distinguishing feature of the Malawian Government is the large number of British expatriates in key civil service positions. The five civil servants administratively closest to the President, including the secretary to the President (who is also secretary to the cabinet, head of the civil service, attorney general, and de facto coordinator of development programs—easily the most influential man in the civil service) and the majority of the permanent secretaries, deputy secretaries and under-secretaries are all British expatriates. The majority of the specialists, such as the director of civil aviation, the principal labor officer, the commanders of the army and the police, and the engineers are also in large part British subjects on contract to the Malawian Government and being paid by both Malawi and Britain. Their loyalties are inevitably divided, since they remain dependent on the British civil service for their career advancement (and, of course, pensions).

On the other hand, probably at this point there are not yet enough educated Malawians in the country to administer all the government services. Certainly there are not enough who are qualified, politically acceptable, and willing to work for the government, although this situation is improving. As a result of the 1964-65 cabinet crisis, which resulted in many young educated Malawians fleeing the country or being put into detention camps, soon after independence Malawi had lost anywhere from one-third to one-half of its educated elite. Today, it is uncertain how many qualified Malawians would be willing to work for the government if there were a change of regime.

Although their ranks were thinned by the cabinet crisis, the second major group in the government is still the Malawian civil servants. Many have had at least two years of university study and have taken a required nine-month course at the Institute of Public Administration (criticized by some as a waste of time and a barrier to advancement). Others, especially the higher-ranking officers, have come to government service either from the trade-union movement or from commercial employment.

The relationship between the Malawian and the expatriate civil servants is complex, and can be described in four basic categories: 1. The "bwana complex," which equals total subservience. The expatriate is expected to do everything, especially if any responsibility is involved. 2. Politeness and deference whenever the Malawian's role enters into the orbit of the expatriate's; independence in everything else. 3. Assertion of independence under all conditions, but a willingness to accept sincere advice and cooperation. 4. Strong distrust and hostility to all "Europeans," expressed with varying degrees of openness.

Unfortunately, most Malawian civil servants seem to fall into the first two categories, because expatriates control the key administrative posts and are in a position to influence, if not control, the personal advancement of Malawians in the civil service. However, such reticence on the part of Malawians almost inevitably leads to an acquiescence in their de facto position as second-class officers in their own government.

Those officers who fall into categories 3. and 4.—and there are comparatively few in 4.—find themselves on the firing line. They are in a position which is strikingly similar to that of black Americans employed in management positions in white companies and in some departments of the federal and state governments. If they assert any authority over expatriates with the same or a lower rank, especially in personnel matters or in a situation where the expatriate disagrees, they soon acquire the reputation of being "difficult" (i.e., "uppity"). Next they are accused of holding "racist" views (in contrast to the government's officially proclaimed policy of non-racialism). They finally discover that expatriate officers in their own ministries are circumventing them and arranging government business directly with their expatriate friends in other ministries.

The resentment in this group, which includes many of the most talented and highest ranking Malawians in the government, runs very deep. They do not conclude, however, that they must advocate overthrow of the

existing regime by allying themselves with the exiled ministers. Far from it. They respect Dr. Banda and are loyal to him, recognizing that a coup or white bloodbath would not solve any existing problems and would instead create untold new ones.

Nevertheless, they are in a painful quandary. They cannot do anything about the existing situation—at least not in the foreseeable future—yet, they have nowhere else to go, since the government is fully capable of black-balling them in the commercial sector. They are educated and motivated men who need outlets for their talents, men who want to see Malawi succeed and are committed to working towards this goal. By force of circumstance, they are compelled to remain in their present positions and endure the slights of men who are really alien mercenaries. They must struggle not only against expatriate opposition, but also against the opposition and indifference of those Malawians in categories 1. and 2. who are interested only in their own personal advancement. For a young, aware and talented African, to be trapped in such a situation is sheer hell.

The expatriate problem must also be placed in the ultimate perspective of the day when expatriates will not be needed or will not be allowed to serve in the government, except in restricted and limited advisory capacities. The timing and pace of "Africanization" or "localization" of governmental and commercial posts is one of the most emotional problems in all Africa. This is in part true because of a widespread suspicion (well-founded, in the Malawi context) that expatriates will expand their influence as much as possible. Upon independence some African governments immediately moved Africans, even if they were only remotely qualified, into all key positions but retained a large corps of expatriate advisers. Others, the Malawian Government included, adopted a policy of strict merit: qualified expatriates would continue to hold their posts until Africans were competent to replace them. This latter policy, heroic in its brute honesty, would seem to deny one of the basic emotions which fueled the drive towards independ-

ence: the desire to control one's own destiny (and to make one's own mistakes), especially vis-à-vis the former colonial regime and its symbols. White faces in continued positions of authority are simply not compatible with this desire unless they are men of exceptional sincerity, understanding, and ability. There are few such white men in Southern Africa.

A word must be said about Malawi's economic policies as they relate to the privileged position of foreign investment and expatriates in Malawi. Under Dr. Banda, the Malawian Government aligns itself squarely with "capitalism," the United States, Western Europe, and, increasingly, the foreign policy of South Africa. Foreign private capital is seen as a cornerstone of the country's economic development, and active measures are taken to invite it and to assure potential investors that their capital will be protected and they will be allowed to export a fair profit from the country so long as they are honest. Accordingly, nationalization has been specifically renounced as a government policy, although the government has recently acquired a majority interest in two major foreign business concerns.

The racial scene in Malawi can be best understood by placing it in the context of Southern Africa as a whole. It is apparent that South Africa is the dominant power of the region, with the largest market, the largest pool of available capital, the most potential technical assistance, the strongest military forces, and the most detested domestic political and social system on the African continent. South Africa also has one of the most complete and efficiently vicious internal security systems in the world.

It is important to understand that a mystique emanates from South Africa that affects the thinking of the majority of white people in that part of the continent. Once the inconvenient questions about the morality of apartheid and South Africa's general subjugation of the black man are repressed or forgotten, the land of the Cape appears to them as an island of law, order and prosperity in a thoroughly disordered part of the world.

In the near future it can be expected that contacts between Malawi and South Africa will increase rather than decline, since South Africa has recently agreed to lend funds for transferring Malawi's capital from Zomba in the low-lying southern region up to centrally located Lilongwe. South Africa is also providing specialized technical personnel to the government and rolling stock for Malawi's new Nacala rail link to the Indian Ocean through Mozambique. In return, South Africa has achieved the breakthrough of receiving diplomatic relations and gestures of friendship from the first black African state with which it does not share a common border and which is therefore not readily subject to direct military pressure. And although Dr. Banda is sometimes excoriated as a stooge by the most militant of his fellow African heads of state, his prestige on the continent confers a measure of respectability to South Africa, and could provide it with diplomatic and economic leverage on other African states in similar dire economic straits.

Along with its constantly repeated justifications of apartheid, South Africa exports a messianic and virulent brand of anti-communism. Social or political disturbances anywhere on the African continent (and much of the rest of the world) are seen as communist-inspired. For political purposes at least, white South Africa sees itself as standing in solidarity with the white Rhodesians in their battle against "terrorist" groups infiltrating from the north. And it has underlined this support by lending Rhodesia helicopters and army units as well as by threatening armed attack on Zambia if it does not put an end to the use of its territory for infiltrating liberation fighters southward and thus furthering the march of "communism." The Zambezi River is South Africa's Maginot Line, and nothing less than the future of (white) "civilization" is declared to be at stake.

The politico-military stance tends to reinforce the racist feelings of the majority of whites in Southern Africa. When combined with the clanishness of the whites in each of the Southern African states and the in-

formal communication among these separate groups, this racism forms a network among whites in this area and results in an extra-national force which is capable of operating independently of the black governments dependent on these whites for skills and financial resources. It is a force which can operate either for or against the policies of the black governments concerned, especially in negotiations among them.

In considering Malawi's future, the overall question would seem to be whether it will be drawn into South Africa's orbit and become no more than a satellite, or whether it will be able to maintain a modicum of independence in its foreign and domestic policies and be able to use the benefits of such ties to develop a genuine black African state which is more than a screen for apartheid and South African expansionism.

I must confess to a fear for the soul of Malawi. That country was led to independence by its overwhelming black African majority. Near-total domination by a white foreign power, even though such domination may result from a gradual accretion of influence and not from a Czech-style invasion, would eventually cause such a feeling of profound malaise among Malawians as to amount to a massive sentiment of national self-betrayal. It would seem as though really there had been no revolution, but merely the appearance of a few symbols and a little breathing space before the next group of masters appeared to grasp the slack reins of power not yet untied from the bits of the subjugated. The whole bloody business would have to be repeated again, but this time with a difference.

By now, the frustrated aspirations of the Malawians could well be seen as mere unjustified dissidence—unjustified in light of the continuing statistical economic progress which will undoubtedly have been made. There would be no mighty crescendo of emerging independences proclaiming a new international morality. Instead, there would be that true coldness which can only emerge from those counterrevolutions that violate the best in man's dreams. Black Malawi making its deserved revolution would be isolated—there would be

futile sympathy from the black North, indifference from white America and Europe (perhaps Russia also), and military hostility from South Africa or whatever other conqueror. Suppression would follow and overt resistance would be fragmented for years to come.

Hopefully, it is still possible for Malawi to cooperate with South Africa, Portugal and Britain for the purposes of economic and technical assistance without becoming a satellite of any of them.

In terms of economic statistics,

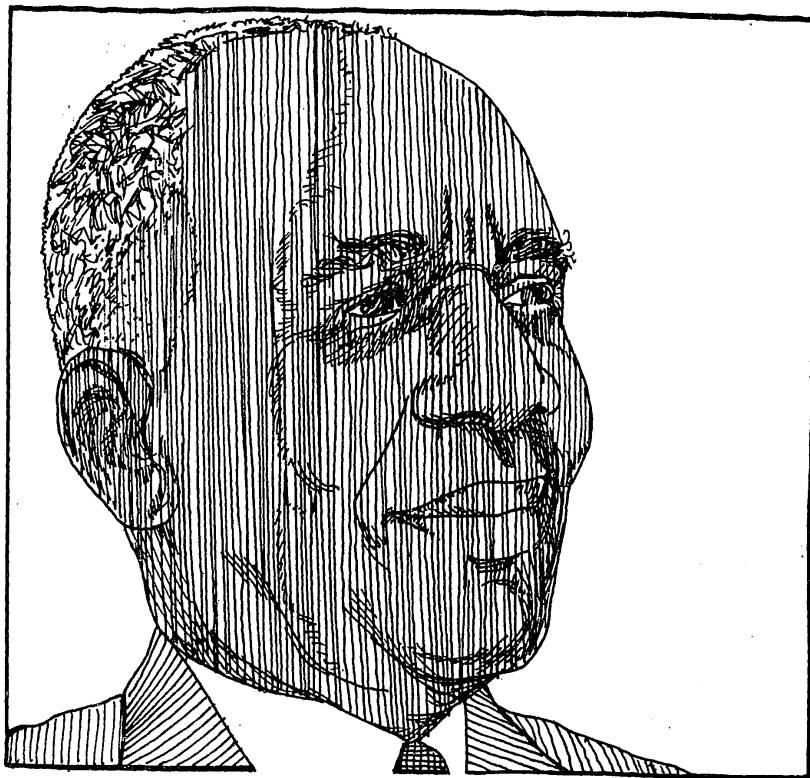
promised to supply funds for the move of the capital to Lilongwe. The volume of South African technical assistance is increasing. When the above is coupled with Portugal's agreement to build a new port at Nacala and a rail link connecting it to the Malawi railroad, it is apparent that Malawi's economic growth rate will continue to climb.

Such optimism would be safer, however, were South Africa not decidedly expansionist in its foreign policy at this time. It is on the march to counteract its isolation from the

premise that in the short run friendship with South Africa is the only course open to Malawi that is in the economic interests of its people. Indeed, some of the most militant black African leaders have admitted this privately.

But the short-term advantage does not mitigate the long-term danger of an insidious stranglehold. It is a cruel dilemma, all the more so because it must be faced by a small country with scant endurance in the absence of expanding markets and massive infusions of economic aid and technical assistance. A future which can be reached only by passing through a dynamite-laden tunnel might well be no future at all.

Though I knew intellectually that discrimination by white men against blacks existed in countries outside the United States, and though I had experienced it in Europe, it angered me to see the crude dignity-denying process at work in Africa in its old familiar forms, with the difference that *those* white people had the effrontery, as aliens and guests in a country, to practice such prejudice on the citizens of that country. It produced the strong suspicion that there is some subliminal psychosis in Western "civilization" demanding that white men attempt to subjugate blacks in any way, subtle or direct, that they are able. And it angered me to find so many white Americans in Malawi falling comfortably into these patterns of discrimination, extolling the "virtues" of South Africa and Rhodesia, looking longingly (though often furtively) at apartheid as the final solution, making noises about the "special situation" Africans are in as a prelude to the assertion that white "civilized guidance" will be needed for many more years, and equating "terrorists" (liberation fighters in Mozambique, Rhodesia, Angola and South Africa) with "communists." These same people will probably come back to the United States and play the same old "I'm against discrimination" tune that so many mouthwash liberals play. The world's black people are besieged, but as an American tank commander said of the Nazis in World War II, "They have us surrounded, the poor bastards!"



Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda

the South African policy is beginning to show dividends. The recent trade agreement gave substantial tariff preferences to some Malawi cash crops and thereby opened the lucrative South African market to Malawi. The recent labor agreement provided additional protection for Malawian nationals working in South Africa's mines, regularized the status of many who had entered illegally, and provided better administrative arrangements for the remittance of their pay to their families in Malawi. Dr. Banda was turned down by all other Western sources before South Africa

respectable elements of the world, to consolidate its control over South West Africa, and perhaps to acquire further territory in Southern Africa. It is orchestrating its expanding influence with a subtle harmony of technical assistance, liberal trade arrangements, soft loans and massive propaganda efforts punctuated by an occasional threatening blast of military retaliation under the guise of rigorous and consistent anti-communism. To a small nation in urgent need of vital resources, it is a siren's song not easily resisted. A strong argument can be made for the