

#Malawi sliding towards violent #anarchy

As unrest takes hold in Malawi, LSE's Linje Manyozo urges his fellow citizens to realise that democracy is not just about speaking, but also listening. This post originally appeared in the newspaper, *Nyasa Times*.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the peaceful Malawi we knew is gradually disappearing right before our eyes. An important instrument of democracy, *kumemekeza maustogoleri* (a combination of *bata* and *ulemu*) is slowly disappearing into the political horizons. Instead, what we have in its place is the foreign concept of citizenship that is rooted in arrogance, aggression and the deliberate undermining of the very weak governance institutions that we should try to protect. I have to mention that one contributing factor is the disaster of the government's public relations – characterised by denial, lies, outright arrogance and miscommunication of policy direction. People do get angry when they are talked at rather than being engaged with.



A scene from a recent protest in Malawi

Official media outlets and private blogs continue to point fingers – at the government, or the civil society, the judiciary or the legislative structures. I do not want to join the chorus of condemnation – what would be the point anyway? At the moment, plenty of proposed solutions are being touted: impeaching the president, increased demonstrations, repealing bad laws, devaluing the currency, restoring diplomatic relations with Britain or, more recently, bringing in new blood in 2014 – and lots of other strategies.

Mine is just a lamentation, not of the 'good' old days, but one that calls upon Malawians to understand the collectivity of our responsibility as we watch and push the country to the brink of violent anarchy.

In our collective insanity (or active citizenship as some of us might describe this phenomena), we have forgotten four things – and I want us to remember these before it is too late. In the wonderful essay, *In front of your nose*, George Orwell reminds us of the mind's tendency to easily forget the obvious. So, what should we not forget?

1. The violent civil wars in Mozambique and Rwanda
2. The obscene poverty in Malawi
3. The likely ethnic nature of any civil war
4. The high cost of reconstruction

Remembering these tragic realities will help us tackle two huge problems we have in the country at the moment. The first problem is that we are not listening to each other. Everyone believes they deserve to speak and be heard. Which is fine. Yet, it is all about speaking.

The second problem is that we are angry, not just with each other – but disgustingly angry with the country. What frightens me is that this anger seems to have acquired violent animosity and intolerance against ‘the other’. Of course, I do appreciate that the world is an angry place right now.

I remember talking to a long-time friend recently who, in our conversation, observed: “Alhomwe amenewo, mukunyadatu masiku ano, nafenso nthawi yathu idzafika” (despite the fact that I am not even Lhomwe, and that I have not benefitted from any political favours). I could see in his eyes that he is a bitter man. Whatever happened to him?

It appears our anger goes beyond the governance processes, that seem to marginalise and disempower the voiceless – we seem to have acquired this raging anger against everything we disagree with. Even the religious institutions that must preach peace and understanding are at the forefront indirectly instigating ideological divisions among citizens.

Mine is just a plea with fellow citizens to calm down and re-examine where we are taking the country without pointing fingers. We all have contributed to the poisonous environment that characterises public discourses and the polity in the country.

In the *Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt explains how unthinkable crimes against humanity have been committed by seemingly neighbourly men and women like us. We should not think that, as a country, we are incapable of a ruthless anarchy. Mozambique and Rwanda should remind us that people do not need resources to commit heinous crimes in the twisted passion of defending a certain ideological cause. We should not forget that collective crimes are instigated by seemingly small events. All it takes is one moment of madness, and all this anger explodes into empirical violence.

What we need to do is to step back and listen to each other. Listening carefully, even if we do not like what we hear. Listening is much more than keeping silent when someone is speaking. It is also a form of humility to respect other people’s viewpoints and our preparedness to act upon them, even if we strongly disagree. Listening is a form of prayer. It heals and builds.

I have been moved by Professor Thandika Mkandawire’s patience to listen every time I interact with him. We might not always agree – but he continually respects my viewpoint. In fact, he seems to enjoy listening to the very issues that we might disagree upon, even when he has so much knowledge and life experience to disagree with me. He has this ability to find good in the things I have to say, notwithstanding that I may not be sure about what I believe and say sometimes.

He keeps reminding me, in his own Thandika-way, that listening is a virtue. That’s the listening that I am talking about.

PS: Atupele Muluzi (despite my dislike for his father and the UDF), seems to be a well-informed politician who is competently engaging with political and economic discourses without castigating the dignity and personality of his opponents. I am impressed by his political maturity. Nothing but respect to him.

