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**Learning from the past: Mass communication
and access to information in Malawi from
1964-1994**

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Abstract

In only the first seven and half years of its existence from 1968-1974, the Malawi Censorship Board banned over 840 books, more than 100 periodicals and 16 cinematographic films. All publications in circulation in Malawi were subject to the control of the Board following the enactment of the Censorship and Control of Entertainment Act in 1968 which regulated and controlled the making and exhibition of any form of information source materials.

Academic Departments like the Department of Political Studies at the University of Malawi were non existent while the history of the nation course at the university had to be taught selectively to avoid secret police interventions planted all over the country. Access to the National Archives of Malawi was strictly prohibited and manuscripts had to be strictly censored. The control of the fourth estate, the press, also got its share as no local paper dared to criticize or seen to be undermining the authority of the government. The only state controlled broadcaster Malawi Broadcasting Corporation was heavily monitored in any form while talk of television was a taboo until the multiparty era. Ground phone lines were intercepted in such a way that any conversation between two people could be closely monitored more especially foreign calls. Mobile phones never existed.

This paper will try to look at some of the reasons and ways how access to certain information was prohibited.

Introduction

Malawi is a small country formerly colonized by the British wedged between Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique. The country is roughly 900km long and between 80km and 150km wide with an area of about 120000 square km. The Great Rift Valley passes through Malawi and Lake Malawi, third largest lake in Africa occupies a fifth of Malawi's total land area.

In 1953, in an attempt to boost economic development in the region, Nyasaland was joined to the Federation of Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Following dissatisfaction by Africans on the way the Federation was being run the Nyasaland African Congress (ANC) strongly opposed the federation with leading figures of the likes of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

In 1961, colonial authorities accepted to invite Malawians to a constitutional conference in London. Dr. Banda's Malawi Congress Party (MCP) swept to victory. In 1963, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was dissolved. In July 1964 Malawi became independent. In July 1966, Malawi became a republic under Banda as president.

Information in Malawi from 1964-1994

Electronic and Print Media

Electronic and print media constituted only a limited direct source of information. Radio was important as source of information in both rural and urban areas; however a survey conducted by Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) in 1970 showed that 93 percent of the rural households did not listen to the radio. The principle mode of information transmission was by word of mouth.

Fewer publications were produced on regular basis in Malawi after independence but those that were regularly printed included two general circulation newspapers, the official government gazette, several religious sponsored publications and a number of government sponsored periodicals.

In 1974, the *Daily Times* began appearing Monday through Friday. Published in Blantyre, it was a tabloid size newspaper and usually consisted of around 16 pages. News carried was largely foreign and contained only scattered articles on Malawi. Regular features were film schedules, radio programmes and a crossword puzzle. There were a short editorial and a section containing regularly classified advertisements and the last two pages were devoted to international and local sports news.

The other main newspaper founded in 1959 was the *Malawi News* published by Blantyre Print and Packaging Limited, a subsidiary of conglomerate Press Holdings Limited, on Saturdays with a mixture of mostly English and Chichewa (local language). It was a standard newspaper size and usually of twelve pages. News articles dealt with ordinary

domestic topics and foreign news. Regular features were a radio program, a listing of church services in Blantyre and sports on the last page. News emphasis was on development activities undertaken and other accomplishments by government and party associations.

The *Malawi Government Gazette* carried details of laws, government regulations, appointments and promotions, retirements and obituaries and the like. It was published weekly in English by Government Printing Press in Zomba.

Two other regular government publications were the monthly magazine, *This is Malawi* and the quarterly *Vision of Malawi* both in English. These were primarily intended for circulation outside the country.

In 1974, religious backed institutions backed periodicals issued regularly included two Roman Catholic publications. The *African* and *Moni* in Chichewa and English. *Kuunika* in chichewa was published by the Presbyterian church of Central Africa (CCAP).

Foreign newspaper and magazines were obtainable at local bookstores in Blantyre.

Books and Publishing

Books published in Malawi during early 1970 mainly consisted of government publications and school textbooks. Government publications were issued by the Government Printer in Zomba which also published a few textbooks. Other textbooks were published by the Hetherwick Press of the Presbyterian church of Central Africa and by the Montfort Press operated by the Roman Catholic missionaries. Before 1972, most textbooks were published outside Malawi under contractual agreements.

Radio

Radio broadcasting was the prerogative of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), an autonomous body that became functional at the beginning of 1964. Financing of MBC, was through commercial advertising and annual government funding.

Cinematographic Films

In the early 1970's no feature length films designed for commercial pictures theatres were produced in Malawi. Those films exhibited were chiefly British, Indian, Chinese and from United States of America. Occasionally, short documentary and tourist films were produced. In 1971, thirteen of the reported film theatres in operation were in Blantyre, however the total number indoor theatre seats through out the country was estimated at around 5, 000.

Censorship

In, 1968 the *Censorship and Control of Entertainment Act* was passed.

*'...to regulate and control the making and exhibition of cinematographic pictures, the importation, production, dissemination and possession of undesirable publications, pictures, statutes and records, the performance or presentation of stage plays and public entertainment, the operation of theatres and like places for the performance or presentation of stage plays and public entertainments in the interests of safety and to provide for matters incidental thereto connected therewith....'*ⁱ

The word publication as used in the act was defined in broad terms to mean *'any writing or typescript which has in any manner been duplicated or exhibited or made available to the public or any section of the public'*ⁱⁱ As a result of this act, all publications which circulated in Malawi were subjected to the control of the Malawi Censorship Board (MCB). In only the first seven and half years and half of its existence, the Censorship Board banned over 840 books, more than 100 periodicals and 16 films, with the list expanding considerably year on year. This meant that even drafts of academic papers circulating at the University of Malawi and other institutions of higher learning were also affected as long as they were made for public consumption. Further, banned publications were those: *'likely to give offense to the religious convictions or feelings of any section of the public, bring anyone into contempt, harm relations between sections of the public order'*ⁱⁱⁱ

The *Prohibited Publications Act of 1974*, permitted government to ban any publication that published information it considered false or distorted or critical of Malawi. In some occasions, issues of foreign publications were being withdrawn from sale. In June, 1972, the *Rhodesia Herald* was permanently banned for reporting that Mozambican guerrillas had bases in Malawi and were being aided by the Malawi Young Pioneers. The banning statement accused the newspaper of having worked against Malawian interests since the federal period. Malawian contributor and foreign correspondence were prohibited for providing any material to the newspaper and that if foreign journalists in Malawi did so, would be deported forthwith.

From time to time, government published lists of books, periodicals and films whose importation was prohibited. Among 15 books banned in May 1973 was an American novel of gangster violence, *The Godfather* and the horror film the *Return of Count Yorga*. The list also included *Awake*, a periodical published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of the Jehovah witnesses. Other banned publications ranged from the freely spoken political activists (*Marx, Engels and Trotsky*) through the sexual (*Playboy, Kama Sutra, and Harold Robbins*) to works of literature. Among the hundreds of authors who failed to win the approval of the MCB were *George Orwell (Animal Farm), James Baldwin, Bernard Malamud, Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek (Song of Lawino), Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, J.P. Donleavy, Graham Greene and Emil Zola*.

Several books on contemporary history were also banned; particularly studies of the Russian Revolution, the overthrow of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and accounts and problems of post independence Africa. Other titles banned included, the *History of the Russian Revolution* by Leon Trotsky (1879-1940); *Impact of the Russian Revolution* by historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975); *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The making of Malawi and Zambia 1873-1964* by Robert I. Rotberg. Other books that were banned include *Malawi: The Politics of Despair, Banda (1974): a biography* by journalist Phillip Short. One of the reasons for ban on Short's book may have been his probing into Banda's exact age. Also banned was *Strike a Bow and Die* by Chief Mwase an account of the 1915 John Chilembwe Uprising against the British rule. By speculation, Dr. Banda did not want people to praise Chilembwe but for him alone. Political reasons given were that Malawian historians did little research on Malawi's history.

Censorship versus Intellectual Neutrality

Schools and the only university, the University of Malawi (UNIMA) were not spared. Many Malawian intellectuals and writers were arrested without trial and many had to leave the country. Academic departments like the Department of Political Studies at the University of Malawi were non existent while the history of the nation course at the university had to be taught selectively to avoid secret police interventions and party affiliates or wings planted all over the country.

Malawian intellectuals and writers had to leave the country. Writers who remained in Malawi developed ways and means of beating the system. These included developing metaphors when expressing themselves for fear of being misquoted. However even in these circumstances, coding and complication did not always ensure safety.

Government control

In a move to bring the mass media, more directly under his control, in August 1973, Dr. Banda dissolved the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The ministry's functions were divided between the Office of the President and Cabinet and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism. The presidents office assumed responsibility for policy on all mass media activities, for briefings and liaison, for broadcasting and for the programming of public events. The mechanics of mass media operations such as design, layout, photography, distribution and maintenance were assigned to the Ministry of Trade, Industry Tourism. The latter was also given responsibility for the Malawi News Agency, the government official news distribution organ.

The radio Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, one daily paper Daily Times and the only regular weekly paper, Malawi News were rigidly controlled by the government. An independent monthly magazine Moni was not spared either. When a short story "The Betrayal" was submitted to Moni in 1967, the editor wanted to know if the killing of the chief was the essential ingredient of the harmless love story. An independent fortnightly Financial Post tried to be neutral as it was read by expatriates. Over the years there were a number of intermittent monthly magazines such as *Quest or Woman*. These were subject to self censorship, censorship by the printers and advertisers as well as the government

editor. The role of media in Malawi was summed up by the US state Department Human Rights report of 1989 “*exist primarily to catalogue the chief of state’s words and activities*”

The effect of the control of the press was summed up by the Bishop Lenten letter of May 1992. “*Academic freedom is seriously restricted, exposing injustices can be considered a betrayal; revealing some evils of our society is seen as slandering the country, monopoly of mass media and censorship prevent the express on of dissenting views; some people have paid dearly for their political opinions*”. The last quarter of 1992, following the campaign for human rights a number of papers like the “*Michiru sun*”, “*The New Express*”, “*The Financial Observer*”, “*The UDF News*”, “*Malawi Democratic*”, “*Monitor*”, “*The Independent*” had emerged. These were later joined by “*The Citizen*”, “*The Nation*” and other papers.

Journalism and Broadcasting.

Like academic colleagues, Malawi journalists have also suffered terrible hardships under Dr. Banda. Information in and out of Malawi was strictly and rigidly controlled. Journalists had to submit their copies to the information department for clearance before it could be sent out. The control of the press was very brutal and no local paper dared to criticize the Malawi Government.

The radio, Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), one daily paper, *Daily Times* and the only regular weekly paper, *Malawi News* were vigorously and cautiously controlled by the government. The government controlled the company that published the “*Daily Times*” and weekly “*Malawi News*”. It took a close personal interest in the editorial content of the papers. At MBC, key positions were taken by informers and party royalists. Party royalists and informers held the media in ransom for anything considered as ‘misinformation’.

The MBC Act 1964 gave the minister (of information) powers to include and prohibit certain items in Programmes.

“The minister may, by confirmed in writing, require the Corporation to include in any programme broadcast by the Corporation and as such time as may be specified in the notice, such items of general interest, utility, or public concern as the Minister may from time to time determine and the Corporation shall comply with such requirement. (Section 16) If the Minister is of the opinion that the broadcasting of any matter or matter of any class or character would be contrary to the public interest he may, by notice confirmed in writing prohibit the Corporation from broadcasting such matter or matter of such class or character and the Corporation shall comply with such notice so delivered. (Section 17)ⁱ”

In 1988, Melinda Ham and Mike Hall, British journalists, were sent out of Malawi when the then Deputy Chief Information Officer, Brown Mpinganjira, detained from 1986-1991, provided information to foreign journalists, something one would have assumed was the job of the information officer.ⁱ

Malawian journalists had a fair share of the Dr. Banda's wrath so much that no local paper dared criticize the Malawi government. Mkwapatira Mhango, a Malawian journalist exiled in Zambia died after Malawi security agents firebombed his house on October 13th 1989. Mhango's death occurred three weeks after Dr. Banda had attacked him in a speech.

Lwanda quoting the 1987 Government of Malawi statement of Policies (DEVPOL II) writes "*In Malawi all general information services are centralized under the information department. Individual ministries do not employ their own information officers. The function of the information department is to disseminate information on government objectives, policies and achievements to every strata of Malawian society, defend the state against misrepresentation or unreasonable criticism of its policies and programmes. The Malawi News Agency is the local regional and national news gathering agency within the information department*"

An independent monthly magazine *Moni Magazine* run by the Catholics and published by the Montfort Press was too subjected to government control and they had to learn to censor themselves. When John Lwanda submitted a short story "*The Betrayal*" to *Moni* magazine in 1967, the editor wanted to know if the killing of the chief was an essential ingredient of the harmless love story. The *Financial Post* tried its best to be independent basically because it was a business paper read by business minded people and expatriates

Literature and Contemporary Issues

Malawi has a rich tradition of oral literature. With independence a breed of Malawian writers emerged. Novelists and poets wrote extensively as opposed to the colonial rule. Dr. Banda in his rule became critical and many writers found themselves either imprisoned or exiled. Common themes for many writers were oppression, corruption, deceit and abuse of power. Many poets and novelists were jailed for their criticism of Dr. Banda.

Newspapers from local and international were frequently barred from circulation especially if seen to be critical of Dr. Banda. Any form of pornography was also prohibited including medical textbooks on the grounds that diagrams were indecent.ⁱⁱ "*Even guide books didn't escape; an early Lonely Planet book called Africa on the Cheap (forerunner of Africa on Shoestring) was critical of the (Banda) regime in the Malawi chapter and was promptly banned as well*"

Even with these coding complications, writers were not always safe. Jack Mapanje, then University Lecturer and Head of English department, was detained in 1987 by police

units acting for the Malawi's Special Branch and remained in detention at Mikuyu Maximum Security Detention Centre for three and half years without trial. His office was searched and various manuscripts including drafts of recent poems and the text of an address delivered at Stockholm in 1986 under titled "*Censoring the African poem: Personal Reflections*" which included a blow by blow account of his dealings with the Malawi Censorship Board. By speculation at least by reading between the lines of his thought provoking prose "*Of Chameleons and Gods*" (Heinemann, 1981) which he wrote after '*attempting to find a voice for the voiceless*' one can tell that the lines are drawing closer to Dr. Banda himself. In another poem, '*When This Carnival Finally Closes*' it is also speculated that could be one of the pieces that may have annoyed Dr. Banda. Another provocative poem that might have prompted his arrest is '*Song of Chickens*' in which he used the term "master" referring to Dr. Banda.

Leroy Vail argues that Mapanje might have been arrested for his role as founding member of the Malawi Writers Group (MWG) which used to meet weekly at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. The group provided its members, though small, with sympathetic audience for their own poems and stories. Through the groups' gatherings they succeeded in avoiding the control of the official government censor. Though this group was confined to the university college, it attracted contributions from journalists, teachers and businessmen with the materials circulated regarded as teaching materials. Secondly, the writers group became the only forum in which Malawian affairs were freely discussed. Within weeks of its formation in April, 1970, up to 400 copies of the materials to be discussed at each of the meetings were circulated within and outside the university college. It became easier using poems as a medium of expression and communication. Politicians might have underrated the influence of poems in expressing and communicating feelings of the oppressed. Leroy Vailⁱⁱ further quotes the English poet David Constantine in a poem known to have read by Mapanje in his detention "*Some things are black and white, laws against poems*"

Leading poets like Frank Chipasula whose collections include '*O earth Wait For me*', '*Nightwatcher*', '*Night Song*' and '*Whispers in the Wings*' were somehow critical of Dr. Banda's regime. Another literary figure, David Lubadiri compiled an anthology called Poetry from East Africa with a section on Malawi. His novel '*No Bride Price*' discusses corruption and oppression themes in Banda's regime. Novelist Legison Kaira's semi-autobiographical work, '*I will try*' and the '*Looming Shadow*' earned him Dr. Banda's wrath. Kaira's crime was that he had duplicated Banda's personal myth in walking many hundreds of miles away to obtain his education.ⁱⁱ Later works, '*The Detainee*' describes how one man is influenced and controlled by the state, but the title also refers to those oppressed and imprisoned by the ruthless dictator. Sam Mpasu; in his novel '*Nobody's Friend*' was about murder in an independent Malawi with secrecy on Malawian politics. His criticism earned him two and half years in jail. Mpasu later wrote '*Prisoner 3/75*' in which he depicts his harsh imprisonment life under Dr. Banda. His comments on the time of Dr. Banda sums up the situation for all writers and the people of Malawi "*We had peace, but it was the peace of a cemetery. Our lips were sealed with fear*"ⁱⁱⁱ

University students were not spared in the censorship game. There was *Chirunga Newsletter*, a magazine produced by the students at Chancellor College, one of the biggest constituent colleges of the University of Malawi. An issue of the magazine in late 1988 raised a number of grievances including the introduction of quota system where students were admitted by district of origin rather than merit. The newsletter also criticized the encroachment of political organisations on the university campus. The Chitukuko Cha Amayi m'Malawi (CCAM) organized functions at the campus in which all female students were obliged to attend. There was a poetical complaint that CCAM had ruined one of the College Sports grounds by holding a fair on it. In poetic way a stanza appeared like this '*Come, Come And Mend*' translated as CCAM. The editor of the Chirunga Newsletter and his two reporters were called before the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi and told that they were suspended for the remainder of the academic year. The contents of the magazine according to the university authorities were '*considered prejudicial to the good order of the university*'.

Postal, Telephone and Fax Technology

Telephones in Malawi were tapped by the Technical Services Department of the Malawi Police and mail to and from overseas was intercepted and regularly opened.

Talk of television, with its ability to bring instant messages of news and different cultures, was banned by Dr. Banda even though educationalists had considered that it would have revolutionised correspondence education which was in Malawi. Mobile phone operators never existed until after the multiparty dispensation. Non political; independent religious or other institutional or commercial radio stations were not encouraged operating in Malawi. The elite ruling families only had a different story as they had access to the world media and few super elites had satellite television capable of watching CNN, BBC, or SABC.

Fax machines were not spared either. However, the Malawi government could not disconnect all business fax machines without hampering economic activities of the country. By faxing to the religious, business and government offices exiled supporters could communicate cheaply, quickly, safely and extremely effectively with Malawi.

Through faxing messages and news were being sent into offices that could photocopy and relay or pass them on. Malawians could read '*Independent*', '*Herald*', '*Guardian*' or '*New York Times*' articles critical to the regime due to advent of fax machines.

National Archives of Malawi

National Archives of Malawi (NAM), a Government Department in the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture was established in Zomba in July 1947 as a Regional Branch of the then Central African Archives. In 1953 it was known as the National Archives of

Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The responsibility of this Branch was to be the official repository of Government records as well as records belonging to private institutions and individuals, who were connected with the territorial activities. After the dissolution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in December, 1963 the Zomba Branch was declared the National Archives of Malawi in January 1964.

NAM could not escape the harsh realities of Dr. Banda's regime in as far as government's control over information was concerned. NAM was forced to remain closed to the public during the Banda regime. Not only that NAM was turned into a 'consign to hell' any information that was deemed politically sensitive. No wonder, in January 1994 or thereabout, Banda regime was engaged in the destruction of classified and sensitive information prior to democratic rule. According to the terms of the Archives Act a record cannot be destroyed without the authority of the Government Archivist. The Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) abused their powers by ordering civil servants at the NAM to destroy what they thought was very sensitive to Dr. Banda's regime. According to Section 12 of the Archives Act as revised in 1989 destruction of public records rests with the National Archivist in consultation with the Minister. *"If the Government Archivist is satisfied that any public records, selected for deposit in the National Archives under subsection (1) of section 11 (Selection and conservation of public records) but not yet deposited therein, are duplicated, or that there is some other cogent reason why such records should not be preserved, he may with the approval of the Minister and of such ...authorize the destruction of such public records, or, with such approval, their disposal in any other way.*

Conclusion

Access to the right and correct information in Malawi during Dr. Banda's iron fist rule was not easy to get as much of the information was being jealously controlled. This was in the interest of Kamuzu with his four corner stones namely "**Unity**", "**Discipline**", "**loyalty**" and "**Obedience**". Even the library section had censorship members who were to ensure that prohibited materials have no access into the libraries.

Since the adoption of democratic system of government Malawians have freedom of expression and are able to write and critic publicly on any subject that is affecting the Malawian society in general than before. There are cross cutting public debates on many subjects today than before.

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