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CHRISTIAN PETERS-BERRIES

ELECTIONS

# Voter Education in **Malawi**

## **Democracy and elections in Malawi**

In 1994, Malawi became one of the later countries in Africa to embrace democracy. Until then the small country in the 'warm heart of Africa' had suffered for nearly 30 years under Kamuzu Banda with one of the most autocratic regimes on the continent. In a predominantly peaceful process, the faith communities brokered between 1992 and 1994 a transition to a multi-party democracy. The first free and democratic elections were won by the newly established United Democratic Front (UDF) of Bakili Muluzi, a former minister of the Banda regime. In 1999 he repeated his victory.

Constitutionally prevented from standing again in 2004, Muluzi nominated Bingu wa Mutharika as his hand-picked successor. Competing against four other presidential candidates, wa Mutharika won the presidential election with a mere 36 per cent of the votes. The parliamentary vote was also split, with the opposition Malawi Congress Party winning the highest number of seats (57 or 30 per cent), a further seven parties gaining representation in Parliament and 38 independents elected.

Despite considerable logistical and organisational problems<sup>1</sup> the 2004 elections stabilised democracy in Malawi. A smooth transition in the presidency and a much more diverse and seemingly competent Parliament are strong indicators that Malawians have embraced democracy and its principles. Malawi thus withstood the crucial

test of third elections. How much of this consolidation of democracy can be attributed to voter (and civic) education?

Voter education (VE) in contrast to civic education (CE) is usually provided only immediately before and during elections. CE is the longer-term process of strengthening democracy, not only focusing on the electoral process and voting. The impact of VE on an election can be observed using indicators such as:

- Election participation rate;
- Number of null and void votes;
- Incidents of election-related violence;
- Choice of candidates.

## **Set-up and logistics of voter education in Malawi**

The task of providing VE should usually not be restricted to electoral commissions but should also assign an important role to political parties and civil society organisations.

In the case of Malawi, the responsibility to organise the delivery of VE rests with the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC). For the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections, the MEC accredited 21 organisations for the provision of VE. However, out of these organisations only a handful became actually involved in VE as most of them lacked the funds to do so. The MEC tried to act as a financial broker for the accredited organisations but had only limited success due to the reluctance of most donors to provide funds directly to the MEC for VE (the

exception was the German agency, GTZ, through its Malawi-German Programme for Democracy and Decentralisation project) and organisational problems at the UNDP-managed trust fund for the elections.

The electoral commission made an effort to harmonise and standardise the provision of VE by developing a Civic and Voter Education Policy. In a number of high-level stakeholder meetings (including representatives of the major political parties) and with the help of regional experts, the MEC produced a draft policy paper. The policy paper tried to determine the role of all interested parties involved in VE, regulate their conduct, and establish a framework under which VE was to be provided. However, it remained a bit of a mystery why the policy draft paper was in the end never officially adopted and implemented. Despite not being officially recognised, the draft policy paper nevertheless served as a guide, at least for some providers of VE. The political parties were those which cared least about the policy.

### The voter education service providers

From civil society, the most active organisations were the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), an inter-denominational organisation, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), the Centre for Human Rights and Reconstruction (CHRR), the Synods of the Anglican Church and the Malawi Centre for Advice, Research and Education on Rights (CARER). As these NGOs had also hoped for funding from the MEC to provide in-depth and on-going VE, their actual budgets were rather limited. Only the faith-based organisations were able to mobilise funding through their overseas support structures. The other service providers had in many cases to provide VE in one-off approaches organised from their respective head offices.

The only service provider covering the whole country with a permanent programme of VE (and before and parallel to that with civic education) was the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE).<sup>2</sup> Being a joint project of the government of Malawi and the European Union, NICE had the advantage of a country-wide office structure and sufficient funding for continuous programmes. Moreover, it had a basis of approximately 10 000 volunteers through which information was disseminated and activities are facilitated. Even the MEC through its District Election Support Teams (DEST) had to rely on NICE structures when they wanted to reach the grassroots with awareness campaigns and material.

### Delivery of voter education

Due to the financial bottlenecks, few organisations

actually became involved in VE. Apart from NICE and to some extent the church/faith-based organisations such as PAC, CCJP and the Synods of the Anglican Churches, the other organisations failed to deliver VE on a permanent basis. The political parties failed in general to educate even their own followers as they were mostly busy concentrating on individual campaigns. The MEC tried to reach out to the electorate predominantly through radio and television spots.

Apart from the NICE project, no other organisation published any figures on its involvement in the VE exercise. Between November 2003 and May 2004, NICE conducted more than 1 400 VE activities. They centred mostly around:

- awareness raising about the elections (mobilisation);
- the technical aspects of the electoral act (how to vote);
- the issues of freedom of choice, secrecy and acceptance of the vote.

In its delivery, NICE employed a wide range of instruments ranging from 'traditional' rallies to whistle-stops at rural settlements and house-to-house visits. The project estimates that in the end more than 550 000 potential voters (ca. 10 per cent of the registered voters) were *directly* reached through its activities.

VE had to be all-inclusive and covering the entire country because:

- a large number of new voters were expected to participate in the elections;
- there is a high illiteracy rate (about 34 per cent);
- there is still insufficient familiarity with voting (after all this was only the third general election since 1994);
- there have been numerous attempts by politicians to manipulate the voting behaviour through false information regarding the voting itself.

The latter was particularly worrisome as there were numerous incidents reported that local politicians and chiefs tried to make people believe that they could check how they voted; in other incidents voters were told the elections were not about choosing new leaders and representatives but endorsing the current government.

### Voter education material

VE material was centrally developed, approved and supplied by the MEC. It consisted mainly of samples of ballot paper samples, graphic illustrations of the voting process, and a few guides. The material provided focused



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Officials from the Malawi Electoral Commission count the May 2004 ballots at a polling station in Blantyre, Malawi.

to a large extent on the technical aspects of voting (how to make a cross, how many boxes to tick, and so on.) and to a lesser extent on the right to vote and the secrecy of the vote. The latter were mostly delivered by radio and television slogans and due to the limited outreach capacity of the electronic media not received everywhere.

Neither quantities nor coverage of the VE materials provided by MEC were sufficient. For an organisation like NICE, which conducted a large number of activities, it became necessary to copy the material provided by the MEC and to source additional material from other organisations. Others faced similar bottlenecks.

A number of organisations provided guide books and manuals on how to undertake VE. Of the original Malawian material, the *Ngwira Mpini* handbook of the PAC was particularly widely used. The Electoral Institute for Southern Africa (EISA) in collaboration with CHR made available monitoring handbooks to interested parties.

### Dealing with electoral conflicts

To be able to deal with inevitable election related conflicts, the MEC established so-called Multi-Party Liaison Committees (MPLCs) at assembly level. In total, 32 MPLCs were set up. They consisted of representatives

of the political parties, the District Commissioner, the police, the National Intelligence Bureau, civil society organisations (amongst them NICE) and traditional leaders. While the original idea for the MPLCs originated from the MEC, its concrete concept and all the preparatory work was provided by two projects of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ). The Forum for Dialogue and Peace (FORUM) developed the terms of reference and provided the training for the MPLCs, while the Malawi-German Programme for Democracy and Decentralisation (MGPDD) made available basic operational funding for those MPLCs which applied. In the end nearly all received funding from GTZ.

The major function and mandate of the MPLCs was to investigate and intervene in any conflict situation pertaining to the electoral process. Often that meant explaining to local political leaders that it was unlawful to prevent other parties from holding meetings or rallies, convincing traditional authorities that they were not to expel villagers because they supported another party than the chief himself, and investigating incidents of local political violence.

Not all MPLCs functioned well (some never got off the ground, such as the one for Lilongwe City Assembly) but in general, they contributed to a more peaceful and

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The presidential candidate for the ruling United Democratic Front party, Bingu Wa Mutharika cast his vote.

just election than in 1999. Most international observer missions attributed the relatively few incidents of political violence to the MPLCs. As a result, the MEC has decided to keep the MPLCs in place in preparation for the pending local government elections in 2005.

### Impact of voter education

In the beginning it was pointed out how to measure the impact of VE: namely, to look at the election participation rate; the number of null and void votes; incidents of election related violence; and/or the choice of candidates.

#### 1. Election participation rate

Good VE should not just inform the electorate about the technical aspects of voting but should also motivate people to participate in the election. As such it may be

argued that VE in Malawi was insufficient and inappropriate as the official participation rate dropped from above 90 per cent in 1999 to just about 56 per cent in 2004. However, the 2004 figure is most probably heavily distorted as voter registration was plagued by substantial faults (including double registrations of people who had lost their registration cards, and hardly any de-registration of the dead) which led to an overestimation of the actual number of eligible voters. While it is difficult to gauge the real participation rate – as there are no reliable population figures available – it can be safely assumed that it was higher than the official rate. However, in absolute figures participation dropped by almost 1.4 million votes.

Given this and the fact that there was certainly a certain degree of disappointment with the economic delivery of democracy, it can be argued that VE contributed to a reasonably high voter turnout in Malawi.

#### 2. Null and void votes

Perhaps the most direct impact of VE can be obtained from looking at the number of null and void votes. While a small percentage of voters might deliberately spoil their papers in protest, the majority of spoiled papers are the result of insufficient knowledge of how to fill them in correctly. In the 2004 election the number of null and void votes was 4 per cent in the parliamentary and 2.9 per cent in the presidential election, as compared to 4 per cent and 1.9 per cent respectively in 1999.

In contrast to 1999, the number of competing parties and candidates was considerably higher in the parliamentary elections. Still the ratio of spoiled papers remained nearly the same. This seems to indicate that VE in 2004 was not worse than in 1999. The slightly higher ratio of null and void votes in the presidential election might be attributable to the fact that one of the candidates (H. Ntaba) withdrew his candidature after the ballot papers had already been printed, thus confusing some voters.

The direct impact of VE became evident by chance when one of the district officers of the NICE project in Mulanje was able to conduct VE activities in only seven out of the eight constituencies in her district. In the seven constituencies in which NICE had conducted VE activities the average number of spoiled papers was between 2 and 3 per cent of the votes cast. In the one constituency which was not covered by NICE VE activities, close to 15 per cent of the votes cast were null and void.

#### 3. Election-related violence

Indirectly, VE can also contribute to a peaceful election.

Politicians and their followers and also voters who understand democratic elections as a peaceful competition will not resort to violence to voice their frustrations or intimidate their opponents. Successful VE will thus translate into peaceful elections.

While the 1999 elections were marred by a number of violent incidents, which culminated in anti-Muslim riots in Mzuzu, there were no such grave incidents in 2004 although the campaign period was not entirely peaceful. Even the feared so-called Young Democrats of the ruling party UDF only caused trouble in a few districts (e.g. Kasungu). Violent incidents more often occurred as a result of intra-party strife than inter-party competition.

The relatively peaceful conduct of the election has been attributed by both the EU Observer Mission and the SADC Parliamentary Forum's Observer Mission to the role played by the MPLCs. In addition, several conflict-preventing VE activities were conducted in the run-up to the elections by NICE and the FORUM project.

#### 4. Choice of candidates

It can also be argued that the choice of political candidates is an indicator of the effectiveness of VE. If for example ethnic-regional voting patterns are diffused, imposed candidates are rejected or vote buying is condemned by the electorate, this may have been caused by effective VE.

In the 1994 and 1999 elections Malawi showed a clear ethnic-regional voting pattern. In 2004, at least in the North and partly in the South this pattern seemed to have been broken up. While the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) had previously scooped nearly all seats in North, they were only able to hold on to six (out of 31). In the South, the UDF lost its absolute dominance and won only 39 out of 85 seats compared to 76 in 1999. Only in the centre did the trend swing in the opposite direction: the MCP won 57 out of 71 seats as compared to 54 out of 66 seats in 1999.<sup>3</sup>

Another unique result was the strong showing of independent candidates who won 39 out of the 187 contested parliamentary seats. This and especially the diffusion of the ethnic voting pattern in the North indicates that the electorate was mature enough to make choices against the dominating political interests. Particularly, the UDF suffered due to the imposition of candidates by the party leadership. Rejected candidates stood as independents and often won.

Furthermore, the election of eight parties and a large group of Independents into parliament indicates that vote buying and voter intimidation no longer had much of an impact on voting behaviour. While this may partly be

attributable to effective VE, the reasons for more mature and interest-based voting can certainly also be found in the broad and continuous provision of civic education.

#### Conclusion

VE for the 2004 elections in Malawi might not have been optimally organised, not sufficiently widespread and might not have satisfied the expectations of Malawian NGOs, but it proved to be effective enough to ensure peaceful and informed elections that consolidated democracy further. The impact of VE contributed to a relatively high participation in the elections and a differentiated result with clear indications of overcoming deep-rooted regional-ethnic divergences, and ensured an acceptable low number of null and void ballot papers.

As a technical exercise VE had its limitations but in relation to the subsequent political results it achieved its purpose. What can be learned from the problems the 2004 VE exercise faced is that a government and its responsible agencies (in this case the MEC) must ensure that sufficient funding is available to cover the VE activities and the production of material, and that the provision of VE is not restricted to civil society only but also involves government institutions (and projects) as well as the political parties. On the positive side can be noted that standardisation and coordination of VE activities will enhance its effectiveness. And last but not least, conflict prevention measures such as the MPLCs should become standard components of any VE strategy. ♣

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In writing this paper, the author was assisted by his colleague Gray Kalindekafu of the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE).

#### Endnotes

- 1 See the reports of various organisations and institutions observing the 2004 Malawi Elections such as the European Union, the Southern Africa Development Community Parliamentary Forum, the Commonwealth and the African Union.
- 2 See also [www.nice-malawi.org](http://www.nice-malawi.org)
- 3 All figures for the 1994 and 1999 elections are taken from Ott, Martin, Phiri, Kings M., Patel, Nandini (eds). 2000. Malawi's Second Democratic Elections, Christian Literature Association: Blantyre. The figures for the 2004 election are based on the unofficial results issued by the MEC and calculations by NICE.