

Letter from Scotland #1

THINGS FALL APART IN MALAWI

If we are busy digesting “earthquake” election results here in Scotland, spare a thought for our twin country in Africa. The long-awaited general election in Malawi has descended into chaos. The results may not be known for months and will be much disputed. There have already been demonstrations in the streets and there are fears they could escalate into violence.

The president Mrs Joyce Banda – much feted in the West – has tried to declare the elections null and void after early results last Friday showed her trailing at 23 per cent support against her rival Peter Mutharika on 42 per cent. She claims that there’s been widespread vote-rigging and multiple voting and that the results computer system has been hacked. She’s offered to step down as a candidate and call a new election in three months time.

But the High Court has overruled her and the Electoral Commission has instead decided to continue with the count and investigate irregularities at 58 polling stations where more than 100 per cent of the people on the register actually voted.

The election was something of a challenge for Malawi anyway since it was the first time the presidential election had been held on the same day, 20th May, as the parliamentary elections and the local elections (the first local elections for 14 years !)

Malawi has been badly governed ever since independence in 1964, with a succession of corrupt presidents. Mrs Banda was supposed to change all that when she unexpectedly inherited the presidency two years ago on the death of Bingu wa Mutharika (Peter’s older brother). But she was forced to

devalue the currency, putting up fuel and food prices in an already impoverished country (currently the 7th poorest in the world). And she was hit by a massive corruption scandal – known as “cash-gate” – involving many of her own ministers.

Much of the British Government’s aid programme (£92m a year) was suspended for a time while checks were made that none of it was going astray. It has since resumed but there will now be further doubts over it as a result of the political quagmire Malawi has got itself into.

Meanwhile, the Scotland Malawi Partnership, involving many schools, universities, hospitals and churches in Scotland, is holding its breath and hoping its links with individual projects in Malawi will not be affected. The Scottish government, which signed a twinning agreement with the Malawi government in 2005, is also hoping its £5m aid programme will not be de-railed by the election uncertainties.

Elections are unsettling times – as we in Europe have been finding out. They can also be violent times, as in the Ukraine or in Egypt. At least that hasn’t happened in Malawi. But its 15 million people deserve better than the events of the past few weeks from their political system and their political leaders.



PART II – ELECTION UPDATE

Scotland’s twin country in Africa has just come through a muddled general election which sees the old regime restored to power. Peter Mutharika, brother of the late president, was declared the winner after days of confusion and legal challenges. Malawi experts here in Scotland are now trying to figure out what it means for the future of one of the poorest countries on earth.

The loser was Mrs Joyce Banda who took over from Peter’s older

brother Bingu wa Mutharika when he died suddenly in office two years ago. For a time she was seen as a sensible mother figure who would save her country from corruption, inefficient government and male domination.

She sold off the presidential jet and the fleet of luxury cars and took a large cut in her salary. She pleased international investors and aid-givers by devaluating the Kwacha. But that led to rapid increases in the cost of food and fuel. And then she ran into "Cash-gate", a corruption scandal involving some £80m and 68 civil servants, business people and politicians, including members of her own cabinet.

She had fallen out with Bingu before he died, saying he was becoming a corrupt dictator, like all his predecessors. She formed her own People's Party but legally she remained vice-president. She claimed that Peter had attempted a military coup to keep her out of office when his brother died. He is still facing a charge of treason, though while he is president, he enjoys immunity from prosecution.

The election, on 20th May, turned out to be something of a shambles. The Electoral Commission said it was investigating multiple voting at 58 polling stations, at least one local returning officer was facing investigation and there were allegations that the results computer had been hacked. When early indications emerged that Peter Mutharika was in the lead, Mrs Banda went to court to demand a re-run of the election. She even offered to withdraw as a candidate. But the court ruled that the Electoral Commission should continue with the count.

The Commission asked for more time, but the High Court decided that the results should be declared within the 8 days laid down by the constitution. So the results were duly declared: Peter Mutharika 36 per cent of the vote, Rev Lazarus Chakwera of the Congress Party 28 per cent and Mrs Banda 20 per cent. Similar results are expected for the parliament and for local

councils. It was the first time local council elections had been held for 14 years.

Mrs Banda has now accepted the result and Mutharika was sworn in as president on Monday in a packed football stadium in the southern city of Blantyre. Malawi is generally a peaceful nation and the result appears to have been broadly accepted. There were however one or two demonstrations during the chaotic days of counting and court hearings. In one, in Mangochi on Lake Malawi, a protestor was killed.

The Scotland-Malawi Partnership – linking schools, universities, hospital and churches in Scotland with aid projects in Malawi – has congratulated Peter Mutharika on becoming president. But its statement strikes a cautious note:

“While there were many serious shortcomings over the last few weeks, and many learning points for the Electoral Commission to take forward, we are relieved that a resolution to the impasse has been found and that this has been accepted peacefully by the people of Malawi.

“This is the first time since the advent of multi-party democracy in Malawi that the incumbent has faced serious democratic challenge and stepped down peacefully as a result. This is a major development in Malawi’s democracy. ”

Peter Mutharaka (74) is a lawyer, trained at the University of London and at Yale. He taught constitutional law in America for 40 years before returning to Malawi to serve as foreign minister in his brother’s two administrations. In his inaugural address he was careful to offer Mrs Banda an olive branch. “ I look forward to shaking hands with her to bury the past.” He promised to “pick up the pieces,” and build a Malawi strong against poverty, disease, fraud and greed.

He was careful too to announce that he would be keeping the subsidy for maize fertilizer to ensure there would be no repeat of the famines of the past. He would be pressing ahead

too with a network of new roads and a new port in the south linking Malawi with the Zambezi river.

The trouble is that similar promises have been made by new presidents in the past and yet Malawi remains dirt poor (currently 7th poorest in the world). Only 18 per cent of girls make it into secondary school and AIDS is still a major problem, affecting 10 per cent of the population. And all this despite decades of church and charity work and foreign aid. The British government sends £92m a year in aid to Malawi. The Scottish government has a separate £5m aid programme. The Scottish charity Mary's Meals is still having to provide 686,000 children with a mid-day meal every day.

I wonder whether, at the end of his five year term, the new President Mutharika will be able improve on these shocking figures or whether we shall be writing him off, like his late brother, as yet another failed African leader.

John Knox is an Edinburgh resident and retired BBC journalist.