

“Accountable to the people”: Can President Mutharika be taken at his word?

Steve Sharra analyses how Malawi’s new President can be truly accountable to his people.

There is one statement in Professor Peter Mutharika’s inaugural speech that will be the ultimate test on which his term of office will be evaluated. Taking over the reins of power at the Kamuzu Stadium in Blantyre on 2 June, the president said: “Today, we are launching a government that must be accountable to the people. The central principle of democracy is that everyone must be accountable to someone else.” The president promised a “bottom-up approach” and “people-centred economic growth”.



People queue to vote at the recent elections in Malawi

This has never happened in Malawi before. Despite pronouncements and proclamations to follow the will of the people, we have never had a government that was truly accountable to the people. That President Mutharika chose this particular language in his inaugural address is nothing short of radical. And it should be a shock to those holding decision-making positions in a public sector that was accountable only to itself and ruling party cohorts.

The toughest choice facing newly-elected president Professor Arthur Peter Mutharika is how he can steer the country in a new direction with the people who helped him win the 20 May elections. Malawians are ready for the “new beginning” Mutharika has promised. But can he deliver this “new beginning” with the same faces that delivered victory? How President Mutharika manages that feat will foreshadow what his term of office is going to look like.

It is not an easy dilemma. No one needs to be reminded how the majority of Malawians viewed the individuals who formed the inner circle of the DPP until 5 April, 2012. But the reality is that they are the same people who have engineered the DPP victory in 2014. They did not work *pro bono*. They are pregnant with expectation for political and economic rewards. Can Mutharika afford to give Malawi a “new beginning” without having to dispense patronage and appeasement?

Their hearts are pounding with excitement at the prospects of cabinet positions, embassy postings, seats on boards and numerous other political appointments at the president’s disposal, as a token of appreciation. Yet it is those very positions that Malawians are keenly awaiting to scrutinise for the slightest hint of patronage, appeasement and a perpetuation of the old DPP.

For the second time in as many years Malawi is yet again presented with a ‘reset’ button. Going by the tone struck by the newly-elected president in his inaugural speech, it could be the moment we have been waiting for. But great speeches cannot be a substitute for tangible action.

There is a clear starting point for President Mutharika to make good on his promise to be accountable to Malawians. It is still not clear to many of us what caused the **mess that happened on election day and during the counting of votes**. It is understandable that many people want to move on and let bygones be bygones. But there cannot be peace without truth and justice. The truth of what happened with the election, even if it does not change the outcome, is of paramount importance.

There is a legion of voices joining calls for a thorough investigation of what exactly happened. In the words of Kizito Tenthani, Executive Director of the Centre for Multiparty Democracy, quoted in the *Nation on Sunday* of 8th June, “. . . it will be a great injustice to ourselves if we do not pursue and get to the bottom of what really happened so that we should avoid a repeat of the mess that was created.”

Dr. Garton Kamchedzera of Chancellor College in the University of Malawi adds that parties claiming they had evidence of rigging “should have pursued the truth, justice and righteousness for the sake of the nation, even if that could not have changed the results” (*Nation on Sunday*, 8th June). He is not alone. Another Chancellor College scholar, Dr. Blessings Chinsinga, says the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) itself indicated there were serious problems with the entire process.

Several MEC commissioners officially wrote a letter expressing deep reservations with the results. Dr. Chinsinga rues the eventuality that we may “never know for sure whether the electoral outcome reflected the genuine will of the people or the will of the courts.” (*Sunday Times*, 8th June). He adds that the conduct of the election raises a “serious question about the legitimacy of the new administration.”

Herein lies the perfect place to start demonstrating the accountability President Mutharika has promised. Not only would a process to establish the truth of what happened strengthen his legitimacy, it would also give him a genuine mandate and a clear conscience. If it turns out that it was the losing parties that connived to “hold the nation at ransom” for those ten days, to quote Seodi White, Malawians need to know the losing parties for what they are.

Fortunately or unfortunately for Mutharika, Malawians have taken note of his pledge of accountability, and have already started mobilising on how to hold his government to account. Siku Nkhoma, a social activist and researcher, has developed a monitoring tool drawn from the central tenets of the DPP manifesto. She has assembled a voluntary team of experts who will periodically provide empirical evidence on how the DPP-led government is doing in fulfilling or failing to fulfil its promises. The evidence will be there for all to see.

One innovation that will be interesting to watch is that of community colleges. Professor Mutharika first talked about this idea towards the end of 2010 when he was Minister of Education. Community colleges have transformed access to higher education in the US. They offer an affordable education to non-traditional students who dropped out before finishing secondary school, or who want to learn a new trade. They cost about \$2,500 per year, compared to \$7,000 in a public university, and \$26,000 in a private university. More than 40 percent of America’s higher education student enrolment is in community colleges.

If properly contextualised and adapted to the Malawian situation, community colleges could decisively end the severe challenges of access to higher education. We have more than 4 million students in primary schools, but at the secondary school level this number drastically drops to less than 300,000. More than 3 million youths slip through the gaping chasm between primary and secondary school in any given cycle. The total enrolment in tertiary education, combining university, technical and vocational colleges, is just above 10,000 but no more than 15,000.

More than 70 percent of Malawians do not have a secondary school education, according to the Malawi Demographic and Health Survey of 2010. As a matter of developing human capital, these

numbers portray a national disaster in the making. Lack of opportunities for education has led many Malawians to view intelligence as innate, fixed and immutable, rather than flexible and contingent on environment and opportunities.

And our policies have taken their cue from such beliefs. Our public universities offer an automatic government scholarship to all selected students regardless of whether the student has the need for a scholarship or not. As a result, we have the highest per student expenditure in all of Africa, at 2,000 percent the average in the SADC region. Thankfully, MUST has pioneered a different approach.

If higher education is going to be of central importance in the new administration, it must start with the seat of government. Lilongwe is the only major capital city that I know of that does not have a public university. Public lectures and academic symposia are held in expensive hotels owing to the absence of a prominent university campus. The Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources does not have a presence in the city, depriving policy-makers, government officials, civil society and the citizenry at large an intellectual atmosphere to generate new knowledge and ideas.

While Malawi needs more universities as the DPP manifesto promises, there is a need for whole universities that offer the full gamut of intellectual discourse to include the sciences, the liberal arts, and the social sciences. It does not make sense to have a university of fish here, a university of rice there, a university of cotton at that other place, as Professor Thandika Mkandawire jokingly advised in a public lecture in 2013.

Professor Mkandawire is the one who gave us the now famous line about what happens to some of Africa’s best intellectuals when they enter politics. He had seen some of these leading intellectuals become, wrote the professor, “unfathomable fools.” As a fellow internationally recognised and leading intellectual in his field, Professor Mutharika will have to work hard to dispel that damning spell.

Experience has taught us that all presidents come in genuinely wanting to change things for the better. Then politics sets in. Power changes people. But when the public takes up its duties and responsibilities, perhaps it might be the end of “business as usual” as the President himself has promised.

Steve Sharra writes about Pan Africanism, uMunthu-peace & social justice. He is a fellow of the Programme for African Leadership, London School of Economics (2012) and blogs at [Afrika Aphukira](#).

June 16th, 2014 | [International Affairs](#) | [0 Comments](#)
