

Fraudulent elections in Malawi

Violence follows re-election of United Democratic Front

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The recent elections in the southern African country of Malawi, held on June 15, were characterized by voting irregularities and accusations of fraud. The ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) resorted to openly bribing Malawians to vote for them. So blatant was the corruption that Malawi's new TV station, broadcasting for two and a half hours each evening, showed UDF leader Bakili Muluzi handing out fistfuls of money to singing and dancing supporters.

On June 17 the Opposition Alliance, comprising the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the Alliance For Democracy (AFORD), in vain sought a high court injunction to stop the Malawi Electoral Commission from publishing the election results. They listed the following allegations:

- * The police were holding a driver found with ballot papers, who had been sent by a senior UDF politician to rig the polls in the central district of Malawi.

- * The UDF had continued campaigning after the ballot had officially closed.

- * A UDF official gave money to churchgoers in return for votes.

- * There were inadequate numbers of ballot papers in the Alliance's stronghold areas.

- * There were 168,000 non-registered voters in the northern region (i.e. in opposition strongholds).

The elections had been postponed twice amid allegations of registration irregularities and vote rigging.

When the election results were announced, out of 193 seats the UDF won 93, the MCP won 66 and AFORD 29, with four seats going to independent candidates. One seat is still to be contested in a by-election as the candidate died on the eve of the poll.

As well as vote rigging, the UDF was accused of intimidating opposing candidates. A former broadcaster

and ex-UDF member, now standing as an independent, Patricia Chipungu-Thodi, was threatened with a gun and told: "We'll blow your brains out if you don't stop embarrassing Muluzi."

After the election there were violent clashes between supporters of rival parties. In the north of the country supporters of AFORD clashed with supporters of the UDF, with reports of at least 10 mosques being set on fire by AFORD supporters, due to the fact that Bakili Muluzi is a Muslim. In the northern city of Mzuzu three people were killed and many families, originally from the south, had to leave their homes for fear of being attacked by AFORD supporters. In the central town of Mangochi a 19-year-old female student was shot dead when police opened fire on a crowd of UDF supporters gathered outside an MCP office.

Despite all this, a spokesman for the International Election Observers said the elections were "substantially free, fair and acceptable".

There are no discernible ideological differences separating any of the parties that contested the elections. Both Bakili Muluzi and Gwanda Chakuamba, present leader of the MCP, were previously key figures in the MCP and the regime of Hastings Banda.

The introduction of multiparty elections in 1994, after 30 years of dictatorship under Hastings Banda, has done nothing to alleviate the plight of Malawi's poor. Banda's extreme unpopularity—he supported and received aid from the apartheid regime in South Africa from the mid-1960s on—enabled the UDF to come to power on a programme of support for "free market" economics. Since 1994 the UDF has stuck to its promises to the IMF, attacking the working class and rural masses through cuts in government spending and an increase in taxes. In 1998 it devalued the country's currency, the Kwacha, which lost 68 percent of its

value, giving rise to a sharp increase in food prices. The devaluation followed an \$80 million deficit in tobacco sales—the main export—following a fall in prices.

Malawi, with a population of around 12 million, is one of the world's least developed countries. Its economy is predominantly agricultural and until recently 90 percent of the people lived in rural areas. The current per capita income is less than \$200. Life expectancy is just 36.6 years for men and 36.5 years for women. The maternal mortality rate is 620 per 100,000 live births and Malawi has the highest infant mortality rates in Africa. This is due to deteriorating nutrition levels and falling immunization coverage.

The main cause of death in children is malaria and malnutrition, the situation being made worse by the limited number of health facilities. Fully 57 percent of Malawians live more than five kilometres from a health center. A new report by UNICEF states that 48 percent of under fives in Malawi are stunted or too short for their age, indicating chronic malnutrition. Severe stunting in the cities increased during the last three years from 11 percent to 19 percent.

The current proportion of people who are HIV positive is 12 percent, and 88,000 children are orphaned, many as a consequence of this. The figure is expected to grow to 330,000 by the year 2000.

Malawi, listed in the recent G8 summit as one of the countries most in need of aid, is receiving some attention from transnational corporations and the imperialist powers. It possesses sizable deposits of bauxite, asbestos, coal, gemstones, uranium, hydrocarbons and graphite. These have not been extensively exploited due to the lack of an infrastructure and the high cost of transport to the nearest ports in Mozambique.

Japan is to fund the Shire River bridge, costing over \$12 million, to establish a cross-border transport link through Mozambique. In May the Malawi Privatization Commission approved a bid by the consortium CFM/SDCN to buy Malawi Railways Ltd. The consortium is made up of a Mozambique company and the Railroad Development Corporation of the United States. The company plans to rebuild rail lines to the Moatize coal mines in the Tete province and another to a sugar plantation in Marromeu. There are also plans for a rail link to be developed with the Mozambican port of Beira. American investors are also seeking to

open up the Nacala corridor through Mozambique, which will provide a trade route to landlocked Zambia as well as Malawi.



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