

“OPERATION BWEZANI”: THE ARMY, POLITICAL CHANGE, AND DR. BANDA’S HEGEMONY IN MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

When the Malawi Army violently disarmed the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP), a paramilitary wing of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), in Operation Bwezani at the height of the political transition in December 1993, their action was hailed as marking a turning point in Malawi Army relationship to politics. It was also cheered as a profoundly significant catalyst for the political transition to democracy from Banda’s autocracy. This article, however, argues that the fact that for close to thirty years the army did not act against Banda or his repressive machinery even when the army itself was a victim indicates the extent of Banda’s hegemony in Malawi. Banda’s hegemony undermined the Army’s potential for resistance to oppression in Malawi. It concludes that the Army’s action to disarm MYP was the result of the civilian political transition and not necessarily the cause. The, Army, therefore, was more of a beneficiary of the political transition than a catalyst.

Keywords: hegemony, oppression, political change

INTRODUCTION

Political change from former life president Dr. H.K. Banda’s autocracy to democracy in Malawi in the early 1990s was remarkably peaceful. This, given the repressive nature of Banda’s regime, was contrary to fears that Banda would not easily give up power. Dr. Banda led Malawi to independence from British colonial rule in 1964 and ruled the country as a single-party dictatorship of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) up to 1993. In October 1992, Banda conceded to demands for a national referendum to decide the political future of Malawi. The referendum held on 14 June, 1993 rejected his continued single-party reign. From then on, Banda worked with the emerging opposition parties and the Churches toward the first democratic general elections in thirty years held in May 1994. He lost the general elections and accepted the results. He eventually retired from politics. This characterised the political transition from single-party dictatorship of Banda to democracy. The question for this article is the role of the Malawi Army in this political transition. A role that comes from what is known as Operation Bwezani, a Malawi Army operation to disarm the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) at the height of the political transition in December 1993. *Bwezani* means “give back,” and in this case the Army was retrieving,

albeit violently, arms that the Pioneers possessed which they were not willing to give up.

The MYP was a paramilitary wing of the MCP. It was established in 1964. Over the years, the MYP became the most dreaded agent of Banda’s brutality exacted overtly and covertly (Chirwa 1994a; Cammack and Chirwa 1997; Phiri 2000). The Pioneers bore arms, conducted espionage and intelligence operations, besides being the most trusted bodyguards around Banda. It was in this work for Banda that their relations with the Malawi Army and other security agents in the country soured. Both the Army and Police resented the Pioneers for usurping their roles as security agents. At the height of the political transition to democracy in 1993, the Malawi Army violently disarmed the Young Pioneers raising fears that it would also intervene in the political process leading to democracy by trying to depose Banda. However, despite the violence Operation Bwezani did not affect the progress of the political transition to democracy. The country continued on the road to democracy culminating in a relatively peaceful general election in May 1994. The question now is how much Operation Bwezani or the Army did contribute to the political process towards democracy? Or, was Operation Bwezani the result of the political transition at that time? Could Operation Bwezani have occurred at any other time before this time in Malawi?

In this article, I argue that in Operation Bwezani the conduct of the Army was determined largely by their relationship with the political establishment, particularly with Banda himself. I argue that Banda’s political leadership though totalitarian was hegemonic in that Banda mobilized a national consensus, moulding the political will of his people to support his regime. That support also came from the Army. In the Gramscian sense, Banda’s hegemony in Malawi manufactured consent to his leadership by providing the intellectual and ideological leadership that made his dictatorship the prevailing dominant and acceptable norm. This informed and guided the people’s political consciousness, convictions and actions. Since the political consciousness of members of the Malawi Army was as much informed and guided by the hegemonic leadership of Banda, their conduct of Operation Bwezani as both a military and political action was guided by their relationship with Banda.

1. DR. BANDA’S DICTATORSHIP AS HEGEMONY

Roger Simon (1982: 21) explains Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as “a relation not of domination by force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organization of consent.” In other words, a hegemonic class, individual, or party, is the one which achieves national leadership by gaining the consent of others by means of political and ideological leadership. Consent, Femia (1981: 36) explains, refer to “a *psychological* state, involving some kind of acceptance – not necessarily explicit – of the socio-political order or of

certain vital aspects of that order.” To secure consent, the hegemonic ruling class, Carl Boggs (1984: 161) observes, “always seeks to justify their power, wealth, or status ideologically with the aim of securing popular acceptance of their dominant position as something ‘natural’, part of an eternal social order, and thus unchallengeable.” The ruling class ideology transforms popular consciousness of the people making the dominant ideology become embedded in the fabric of social relations and national traditions (ibid). When the ruling ideas are internalized by the majority of the people and become a defining motif of everyday life, they appear as ‘common sense,’ yielding what Gramsci (1971: 133) calls the “traditional popular conception of the world,” or the “national-popular collective will (see also pp. 323–343).” Common sense is “uncritical and largely unconscious way in which a person perceives the world” (Simon 1982: 44). Though “often confused and contradictory, and compounded by folklore, myths and popular experience” (ibid.), nevertheless common sense is the basis of political behaviour by the masses.

Banda’s hegemony in Malawi was presented as Kamuzuism. Phiri (2000) rightly defines Kamuzuism as an ideology that Banda was the Father and Founder of the nation, a Messiah/Saviour that God provided to save and lead Malawi for life, “the fount of all wisdom, and always knew what was best for the nation.” In brief, Kamuzuism embodied the following ideas: that God chose Banda before he was born to become the leader of Malawi. Corollary to that, Banda was divinely appointed to lead Malawi for life. For this reason, he was made and fondly called “*Wamuyaya*,” meaning President-for-life. Second, all people in Malawi wanted Banda only and no one else to lead Malawi. Third, anyone criticizing Banda was waging a war against the people of Malawi and implicitly, challenged what divine will had purported in making Banda the leader. In other words, whoever criticized or challenged Banda was against the people of Malawi, therefore, a traitor. Kamuzuism, therefore, embodied ideas, beliefs, myths, and supernatural cultural preferences all emanating from the person and leadership of Banda. Banda was deified such that his life, history, and historical activities became legends and myths; acts of God’s divine intervention in his life for the good of the people of Malawi.

Kamuzuism was most vividly expressed in songs and dances of praise and worship that the people of Malawi composed and performed for Banda. At the level of ideology, these songs and dances propagated the ideas of Kamuzuism thereby legitimizing and popularizing Banda’s autocracy (Chirambo 2001; Chirwa 2001; Gilman 2001). Songs, which were a constant and probably one of the most important features of Banda’s appearances in public, utilized, among others, praise names and titles of Banda that defined who Banda was in Malawi, that is, they expressed Kamuzuism. These included *Ngwazi* (Conqueror), Lion, Fire, Messiah/Saviour that referred essentially to his historical role in helping achieve independence for Malawi from British colonial rule. The extended reference of these titles was Banda’s ability to successfully crush opposition or dissent to his rule. In a society where people believed that Banda’s enemies were enemies of the people and of the nation in general, Banda’s success against his

enemies was the people’s success. Other titles such *Wamuyaya*, had the connotation that Banda’s reign is without end, that is, Banda is immortal. *Nkhoswe* No. 1 was a title adopted from the Chewa tradition into a national tradition. Among the matrilineal Chewas of central Malawi, *nkhoswe*, is the male guardian, protector and at times provider of his *mbumba* which consists of his sister(s) and their family (Forster 1994; Semu 2002). He is sometimes called *Mwini-mbumba*, (literally, the owner of *mbumba*). When he called himself *Nkhoswe* No. 1, he appropriated a specific cultural tradition and extended it over the entire nation where now all women and by implication those associated with them were his *mbumba*. Through this, he placed women in Malawi under his direct tutelage, guiding their lives and providing for their needs at times.¹ In turn the women were the major players in song and dance that articulated.

As an ideology, Kamuzuism, in Gramscian terms, organized the masses, creating the “terrain on which men [in this case Malawians] moved, acquired consciousness of their position [in the socio-political order]” (Gramsci 1971: 377). In other words, Banda, as a hegemonic dictator, succeeded in transforming popular consciousness of the people of Malawi making Kamuzuism become deeply-embedded in the fabric of social relations and national traditions and internalized by the majority of the people. For the people of Malawi, Kamuzuism was a defining motif of everyday life. As Simon (1982: 58) explains, ideology has material existence in practical activities such as politics by providing people “with rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour,” and for that reason is equivalent to religion which Gramsci (1971: 326) says is “a unity of faith between a conception of the world and corresponding norm of conduct.” Kamuzuism was “common sense,” through which the people of Malawi perceived the world around them and was the basis of their political behaviour and relationship with Banda. Kamuzuism created what Gramsci (1971: 168) calls “Homogeneity between the leadership and the rank and file. Between the leaders and the mass following.” Furthermore, as Malawians re-enacted daily political rituals that affirmed Banda’s hegemony, particularly through songs and dances for and with Banda they became intimates of his person too (Mbembe 2001: 111). Kamuzuism “influenced behaviour, and moulded personal convictions, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour as a concept of reality” (Femia 1981: 24). Banda was a hegemonic dictator with the people accepting the core values of his leadership as the norm such that in their perceptions and beliefs and practice of politics, they supported Banda’s authoritarianism. The people somehow were convinced that the interests of Banda stood for a proper social and political order in which they had vested interest. And much more, the masses joined in what Mbembe (2001: 131)

¹ Banda, to fulfill his role as *nkhoswe*, built houses for some women members of the party, sent them on educational visits to places like United Kingdom, Germany, Israel, and Taiwan. He bought planes that were designated as for women. From time to time, when they visited him at his palace, he gave them handouts in form of money for their shopping needs. He also declared that harassing or beating up any woman in Malawi was tantamount to harassing Banda, therefore, punishable even by detention without trial.

calls “the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitation of power to reproduce its epistemology.”

Members of the Malawi Army subscribed to the same ideology of Kamuzuism evidenced by the songs they composed for parade for Banda. Banda in the songs is Messiah, the *Wamuyaya*, etc. The Malawi Army, therefore, was equally under the influence of Banda’s hegemony. An ideology that they articulated in the same way civil society institutions such as schools, churches, family, mass media, etc., among others, articulated and propagated. Banda demanded from the Army the same forms of expressions of loyalty and support that ordinary people gave him. If ordinary Malawians were “condemned to perceive reality through the conceptual spectacles of the ruling class [in this case Banda],” thereby “unable to recognize the nature of their servitude” (Femia 1981: 31), the Army was not spared. When Banda said, “I am a dictator of the people ... by permission, by consent” (*Malawi News* 1963), he meant that he had achieved hegemony in Malawi and no one or institution was spared.

2. “OPERATION BWEZANI”: THE MALAWI ARMY, THE MYP, AND THE POLITICAL TRANSITION

Operation Bwezani should be seen and interpreted against and within Banda’s hegemony in Malawi. My suggestion is that Banda’s hegemony undermined the army’s potential of conceiving and acting out resistance to Banda’s extremely repressive system. This, I suggest accounts for (1), why the Malawi Army failed to act against the MYP or Banda’s repression for close to thirty years, (2), why, when Operation Bwezani gave them the opportunity to dismantle Banda’s repressive system, the army could not act against Banda save the MYP infrastructures. In other words, Operation Bwezani demonstrates the extent of Banda’s hegemony over Malawi Army. For, as Taffet (1997: 92) suggests in his reading of Gramsci, that in manufacturing consent, “cultural hegemony eliminated the masses’ ability to conceive the conceptual tools to challenge the structure of the system. Hegemony kept alternatives from the public’s consciousness; revolution, or reaction against the system, was beyond the range of the mass ideology and thus impossible.” In other words, hegemony undermines the development of a critical consciousness against the hegemonic regime.

The political transition toward democracy in Malawi began in the early 1990s when international aid donors demanded that Banda implement reforms aimed at making his government transparent and accountable to the people and international community as a condition for aid. This meant opening up the country to democratic multiparty politics. This international pressure encouraged organizations and individuals within the country to dare Banda’s one-party dictatorship and demand reforms. In March 1992, Catholic Bishops in Malawi issued a Lenten Pastoral Letter that criticized Banda and his government

for his repressive politics and monopoly over power. Students of the University of Malawi at Chancellor College and the Polytechnic joined in through protests and demonstrations to support the Bishops forcing authorities to close the campuses. In April, Chakufwa Chihana, a labour unionist, openly called for a national referendum on the political future of Malawi despite being arrested even before he finished his speech at Lilongwe International Airport. In May, labour riots in the city of Blantyre turned political with demands that Banda give up power.² This mounting pressure from within and from the international community forced Banda to concede to a referendum to decide the future of Malawi’s politics in October 1992. The referendum was held on 14 June 1993 in which the majority of voters opted for change to democracy from one party dictatorship. Banda’s life presidency was scrapped off the republican constitution and so was MCP monopoly of politics in the country. After this, political parties formed besides the MCP and preparation for the general elections began. The process toward democracy had begun in earnest.

The MYP, though an armed wing of the MCP, its activities were funded by the government since it was legislated into existence by parliament in 1964. Banda said of them, “they are there to see for me, to hear for me, [and] to help the security forces...where necessary” (Banda qtd. in Short 1974: 299). It was in that spirit that the MYP act was passed by parliament establishing them as “an integral and equal part of the security forces” (Short 1974: 299). In November 1964, Banda decreed that the Young Pioneers could not be arrested by police without prior permission of commanding officers (ibid). This also meant that no one except the same Young Pioneers could release individuals that the Young Pioneers brought to the Police for detention. In most cases, Banda would commit such individuals to indefinite detention. The Pioneers worked closely with members of the Youth League of the MCP, together forming a militia kind of brigade. As Kings Phiri rightly observes the relationship between the army and MYP was an uneasy one partly because the Young Pioneers duplicated and usurped some of the functions of the Army and Police. In addition, it is because the Young Pioneers enjoyed preferred treatment from Banda. Over the years, they formed the core of security around Banda and had direct access to him with the Secretary General of the MCP as the Commander responsible only to Banda. The Young Pioneers swore allegiance to Banda, committing them to lifelong service to him personally. This meant that even if discharged from the force, Young Pioneers considered themselves still in active service of Banda. It is this uneasy relationship between Young Pioneers and the Army that finally ruptured into violence in December 1993 in Operation Bwezani.

² Workers demonstration at David Whitehead textile factory in Blantyre began as a demand for higher wages and better conditions of service, which quickly became violent and political. For several days, jobless people in Blantyre City joined the demonstration, which the police tried to suppress violently. Their political demands resonated with the political demands made by the Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter and Chakufwa Chihana at that time.

Kings Phiri (2000) argues that the Malawi Army disarming of the MYP played a crucial role in the transition from autocracy to democracy. This transition, he says, was “a case of revolutionary change in contemporary Malawi,” a view shared by many scholars in Malawi including Chirwa (1994a), Newell (1995), Tengatenga (1995), and journalists covering the episode at that time. Indeed, the transition itself was revolutionary in the sense of the phenomenal erosion of the power that Banda held in a monopolistic manner for close to thirty years without challenge. Second, because of how quickly that loss of power happened between 1991 and 1994, the peak of which being 1992 and 1993. Within three years, Banda’s hegemony dissipated and the country became a democracy. Operation Bwezani, which Phiri characterises as unprecedented and as marking a turning point in Malawi Army, took place between 1 and 9 December, 1993.

Operation Bwezani was the “culmination of a historical dialectic between...the Army, the Young Pioneers, and the Political system” (Phiri 2000). This uneasy relationship, particularly between the Malawi Army and the MYP, dates to the time immediately following independence in 1964. As the Pioneers increasingly became armed and overlapped in their work with the Police and Army, the tension increased. The fact that they served as watchdogs and vanguards as well as architects of Banda’s repressive machinery only served to make them feared and hated by both the security agents and the general public. Their role in the politics of Malawi evolved with the changing political terrain of post-independence Malawi especially after the 1964 Cabinet Crisis³ when Banda saw the need to not only suppress political dissent but also prevent it. During the cabinet crisis, Banda found the MYP and Youth League better companions and instruments of his terror than the Police and the Army. Pioneers and Youth League operated without the constraints of professionalism and legal mandate that bound the Police and Army, at this time still under the command of British colonial officers. With the Pioneers he was able to crush and suffocate the opposition and critics. In 1965, when Masauko Chipembere, one of the rebel ministers, launched an armed insurgency from his home district of Mangochi, Banda told the security forces that he was prepared to use his Pioneers and Youth League if they did not crush the insurgency (Baker 2001). This clearly showed his distrust of the security forces other than his own Pioneers. And he did use the Pioneers eventually to burn down the entire village from where Chipembere hailed detaining thousands of the people from the area. From then on, Pioneers were the security agent of his choice. He provided them arms, trained them in espionage and intelligent services. With the Pioneers he terrorized his enemies both in Malawi and abroad. With this, he signalled how the Army and Police would work in Malawi, along and with his trusted Pioneers

³ The Cabinet Crisis happened a few weeks into independence in August and September 1964 when six of Banda first cabinet resigned or were sacked. These included Kanyama Chiume, Orton Chirwa, Masauko Chipembere, Augustine Bwanausi, Yatuta Chisiza and Manoah Chirwa. They accused Banda of being a dictator.

as partners. It is this fact where the MYP replaced the Army and Police around Banda as the trusted bodyguards and performed functions that the two institutions were meant to do that should have caused the Army, at least, to act well before 1993.

The Malawi Army saw and knew the arming of the Young Pioneers for some of the arms apparently went through the Army itself. During Operation Bwezani, ordinances marked Cobbe Barracks of the Malawi Army were found at bases of the Young Pioneers in Kanjedza (*The Monitor*, 10 December, 1993). This suggests that these arms went through Malawi Army to get to the Young Pioneers. Besides training in the country, a number of Young Pioneers were trained in Taiwan (for amphibian activities), France (as helicopter pilots and mechanics), and Israel (for espionage and intelligence services). Taiwan, Britain, United States and Germany supplied some of the arms used by Pioneers (*The Monitor*, 17 December, 1993; *The Independent*, 18–24 December, 1994). These activities could not have escaped the knowledge of the Army. Therefore, the Army must have known that the Young Pioneers existed as a rival army in the country, armed by the government and MCP.

In terms of espionage activities, the Young Pioneers operated a number of clandestine offices across the country, placing on surveillance virtually every potential enemy of Banda. They recruited informers from all walks-of-life. They recruited from lecturers, administrators, and students in the University, for example, to spy on each other. They also recruited cleaners, messengers, and watchmen to watch their bosses in government offices and elsewhere. They recruited cooks, maids, and garden boys to watch people in their homes, or barmaids and bar tenders to eavesdrop levellers in pubs (Mapanje 1997).⁴ They also infiltrated the Army which means the Army did not escape MYP activities (Newell 1995). Banda did not put complete trust in anyone or institution, and certainly not the Army. It is inconceivable that the Army could not have been aware of the operations of the Pioneers both within Malawi and abroad. That the Army never acted against them until 1993 leaves a lot of questions. Therefore, while the episode of the Malawi Army disarming the Young Pioneers is said to have marked “a significant phase in the development of the Malawi Army” (Phiri 2000), the operation itself demonstrated just how Banda’s political hegemony operated where he had not just complete control of the Army as Commander-in-Chief, but also politically as a hegemonic dictator. This is why the Army could not act against him for so long. By creating and sustaining a party paramilitary brigade alongside the Army that both duplicated and usurped the functions of the security forces, Banda neutralized the Army. The Army accepted or at least condoned this arrangement for close to thirty years.

While the above analysis may be argued away as situations within the country in which the Army may have felt not obliged to get involved from a

⁴ According to my informant on MYP, a former pioneer himself, spies infiltrated every institution. Even among groups performing traditional dances such as women praise singers and dancers, some of the women were MYP informers.

professional point of view, the episode described below confirms my suspicion of the extent of Banda's hegemonic influence over the Army. Banda was able to use the Young Pioneers to destabilize neighbouring Mozambique by supporting the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo), a guerrilla movement. This while using the Malawi Army alongside Mozambican government soldiers of the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) to defend Malawi's interests in the same country (Hedges 1989; *Malawi: A Moment of Truth* 1993; Newell 1995). The MYP were couriers and active supporters for Renamo which had been fighting against the Frelimo government of Mozambique from the 1980s. However, Banda's support of insurgents in Mozambique dates to Portuguese colonial days in Mozambique when Banda supported the Portuguese colonial government and guerrilla forces that worked for the colonialist.⁵ Immediately following independence in Malawi, Banda strengthened his relationship with the Portuguese colonial government in Mozambique when he appointed Jorge Jardim as Malawi's Honorary Consul in Mozambique in September 1964 (Short 1974: 205). He also worked to squeeze out of Malawi Frelimo that was fighting against Portuguese colonial forces and began to support instead forces working for the Portuguese (Hedges 1989). He did this against the Organisation of African Unity which designated Malawi as one of the Frontline States to help independence movements fighting for liberation of their countries and the end of apartheid in South Africa.

In the 1980s, after the independence of Mozambique under Frelimo in 1975, Malawi became the conduit for South African foreign aid to Renamo. Samora Machel, president of Mozambique was greatly annoyed with Banda. In September 1986, Machel accompanied by Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister of Zimbabwe and Kenneth Kaunda, President of Zambia, visited Banda in Malawi to complain about the continued destabilization of Mozambique by Renamo with support from Malawi. This despite a cooperation agreement signed between Malawi and Mozambique in October 1984. In August earlier on, Mozambique circulated a dossier at the Frontline States meeting in Luanda, Angola, showing Malawi's active support for Renamo (Hedges 1989: 640). Towards the end of 1986, Malawi promised to end her support for Renamo. But after the death of Samora Machel in September 1986, his successor, Joachim Chissano continued to complain of Malawi's lack of willingness to stop supporting Renamo, calling on Malawi to act what it signed on paper (ibid: 642).

Meanwhile, because of Renamo insurgent activities in northern Mozambique, Malawi was unable to utilize Nacala port facilities on the east coast of Mozambique for much needed exports and imports. She was forced to rely on South African and Tanzanian ports, whose routes were both long and not connected by rail to Malawi, therefore, expensive for the landlocked country. In Mozambique, however, she has an agreement that allows her access to the port

⁵ For detailed discussion of Banda's involvement in Mozambique and his foreign policy in the region, see Short (1974) and Hedges (1989).

of Nacala that is connected by rail to Malawi. Against this background, and with the intervention of the European Economic Community in 1987, (ibid) Banda signed protocols with Mozambique to allow joint patrols of Malawi Army and Mozambican soldiers of the rail link between the Mozambican port of Nacala and Malawi. Malawian soldiers were deployed in Nayuchi. It is in this duty in Mozambique that they were being ambushed and sometimes killed by Renamo (*Malawi Insider* 2002). Since there were no press reports in Malawi, it is not known how many Malawian soldiers died in Nayuchi though speculations put it around over a hundred over the four years they were there. During the same time the Army was defending Malawi's interests there, MYP continued to provide support to Renamo (Hedges 1989). The Malawi Army was aware of the double-dealing that Banda did with the government of Mozambique. The Army is reported to have been furious with the fact that Banda had placed them and the MYP on opposite sides of the conflict. Potentially, he had also put them on harms way of each other. Newell (1995) reports that the Army expressed anger at the arrangement, pressing their commanding general, Melvin Khanga, to confront Banda and his henchmen, particularly John Tembo who was believed to control the Young Pioneers. However, there is no indication that the Army General ever confronted Banda. Hence, despite protocols that Malawi signed with Mozambique in 1986, indications are that Malawi continued to support Renamo up to the moment of the peace deal between Renamo and Frelimo in October 1992, an agreement where Malawi through John Tembo sat in as an observer and interest party at the signing ceremony in Rome. In other words, Banda successfully placed the Malawi Army and Young Pioneers in opposing missions in Mozambique from 1987 to 1992. The fact that the Army did not act against Banda or the MYP until 1993 should be seen as succumbing to Banda's hegemony. The Army was simply paralyzed to deal with Banda in any way let alone with the MYP even when the Army took casualties from MYP-supported war in Mozambique.

Operation Bwezani itself is revealing of Banda's hegemony in terms of what happened and what did not happen. Operation Bwezani started out as a brawl in a bar in Mzuzu between soldiers from Moyale Barracks and Young Pioneers that later turned out into a full-fledged violent disarming of the Young Pioneers across the country. The bar brawl was nothing more than a spark that ignited the tension between the Army and the Young Pioneers whose origins Phiri adequately traces as indicated above. However, there was another tension between the Young Pioneers and the leadership of the MCP in 1993. When MCP conceded to the referendum and to the results thereafter, MYP were the biggest losers. The Young Pioneers felt real frustration with Banda and MCP because the fall of Banda and MCP in Malawian politics exposed the MYP, whose activities were essentially criminal, to possible retaliation by the public and indeed the Malawi Army.⁶ It was obvious that Banda and MCP would not

⁶ Indeed, the initial claim by MYP as to why their cadres shot army officers were that because one of the MYP was earlier on beaten up by people in Masasa near the bar where

protect them once out of power. Secondly, their future in a democratic Malawi was uncertain insofar that it was certain they would be disbanded without fanfare. After all, at this time, the National Consultative Committee (NCC) formed after the referendum where MCP and emerging opposition parties oversaw the transition process to democracy, was discussing the possibility of disbanding the MYP and absorbing some of their functions and personnel into the Army and Police.⁷ Therefore, the MYP was bitter and it would not be far-fetched to suggest they felt a sense of betrayal by the MCP leadership. The Young Pioneers who shot soldiers in Mzuzu were probably reacting to this more than the humiliation suffered during the brawl.

In the evening of 30 November an MYP officer ambushed soldiers near the MYP offices in Mzuzu. They were returning from Masasa, the sight of the brawl between an MYP cadre and soldiers earlier on. He shot and killed one, some say two soldiers. Some of the soldiers escaped to Moyale Army Barracks where they reported the incident to their colleagues. From there, rumours suggest that disgruntled soldiers asked for guns and ammunition to avenge the deaths of their colleagues. When reports reached Kamuzu Barracks in Lilongwe, tension increased as the Army prepared to fight. The initial attack on MYP seemed to have been in Lilongwe where, without orders from the commander, soldiers attacked Kamuzu Institute for Youth, Youth House (MYP headquarters), and MCP national offices, all connected to MYP. These initial attacks on MYP-related infrastructure appear to have been simply a tit-for-tat episode. However, given the history of their relationship and the ongoing transition to democracy in which the Young Pioneers were at their weakest point, it is no surprise that it became an operation to disarm them. The operation spread to Mzuzu, Zomba, and other places where MYP training bases were attacked and ransacked. Some of the places were set on fire.

It should be mentioned that when this operation began, Banda was incapacitated having undergone a brain surgery in South Africa earlier on. The leadership of the country was in the hands of a three-man Presidential Commission headed by Gwanda Chakuamba and included John Tembo and Robson Chirwa, all members of the MCP Central Executive Committee. The Commission issued directives to the Army regarding the disarmament but these were too late and largely ignored by soldiers. As Army discontents became clear and the operation threatened to become chaotic, the Presidential Commission

soldiers were drinking. See Monitor 3 December 1993. If this was the case, it would demonstrate just how much vulnerable to public anger the MYP had become after the referendum.

⁷ NCC agreed to oversee the disarming of MYP by the Arms Control Board on Oct 14 according to Kaliyoma Phumisa, the then Chairman of NCC. Other concessions included the appointment of a Presidential Commission following Banda's hospitalisation, a calendar of events leading to general election set for May 17 in 1994. MCP on its part inserted into the party manifesto the following about MYP: "The paramilitary functions of the MYP will be examined in view of the new multiparty system of government now prevailing in the country."

handed power back to Banda counting on his hegemony to bring things to normality.

In terms of leadership for the operation, there is no evidence of leadership beyond the junior officers and soldiers themselves. Hence, it has been characterised as a soldiers’ rebellion (van Donge 1995). The Commander of the Army, at the time, Major General Yohane, is said to have been put under house arrest or at least prevented from leaving his house and/or issuing commands after refusing to authorise the operation. In other words, the command structure of the Army was essentially sidelined.⁸ Actually, soldiers demanded the retirement or resignation of the top command structure of the Army. They claimed that the command structure was compromised by politics, therefore, unable to serve the Army as a separate entity from the political establishment (*The Monitor*, 6 December, 1993). This is the same fact that I am arguing existed all along but the Army was unable to do anything about it. In other words, soldiers were aware that the Army operated under the tutelage of politicians but had been paralyzed to act against the influence up to this time (see also Newell 1995).

During much of the time the operation was on, the MCP political hierarchy kept quiet and out of view. Even Hetherwick Ntaba, spokesperson for the MCP and government, whose eloquent and contemptuous remarks about the opposition earned him the nickname ‘Computer,’ was quiet. John Tembo, the assumed in-charge of MYP, also disappeared from view. It was rumoured they had all gone into hiding (*The Monitor* 6, 10 December, 1993). It appears the army made no effort to get any of these individuals into custody or neutralize them.⁹ By the end of the exercise, Banda and the entire cabinet survived the operation unscathed. Other than attacking an old and abandoned residence in Mzuzu, none of Banda’s palaces was attacked. Banda, who was believed to have been in Sanjika Palace throughout the operation, was not attacked. Rumours circulating in the country at that time suggested that Banda was surrounded by an elite squad of Young Pioneers who, by their pledge of allegiance, were prepared to die for and with him. In the end, the operation saw minimal casualties on both sides the Army and Pioneers, and no political casualties.¹⁰ After all, the Young Pioneers did not resist the operation as feared. There were no reports to suggest that the Young Pioneers, beyond the shots that killed soldiers in Mzuzu and some small fight in Lilongwe and Kanjedza that they put up resistance. It is conceivable that the army could have retrieved the weapons without having to damage property as they did. This is why, terms like, “war” or

⁸ *The Monitor* 10 December, 1993 quotes soldiers as saying that they were not taking orders from the political or military command of the army but acting on their own.

⁹ There were reports of searches for arms at some prominent MCP supporters, some related to John Tembo. However, none of the searches went to Tembo himself.

¹⁰ The death toll by the end of the exercise was four soldiers and twenty-three MYP/civilians.

“fight between the army and Young Pioneers” used to describe the operation are both unwarranted and misleading.

Meanwhile, during the operation soldiers took Fred Nseula, in his capacity as Chair of NCC for December 1993, to tour the wreckage of Kanjedza MYP offices and see the cache of weapons recovered.¹¹ He was flown to the scene in an Army helicopter, which all along had been the preserve for Banda. Nseula, therefore, more or less filled in the vacuum in leadership created by Banda and the Presidential Commission’s silence. This gesture also signalled, on the part of the Army, that they recognized the alternative civilian leadership to Banda constituted through the NCC, a process they took advantage of and seemed not prepared to stop. This discounted rumours running around in the country that the Army would take over the political leadership of the country. In other words, there was no coup attempt against Banda or the civilian political leadership of the transition. While this might have been a psychological boost for the political transition to democracy, it was not a catalyst for a transition that was well underway.

When Banda returned into the scene around December 6, he addressed the nation calling for order. On December 9 he retired the army general, Yohane, and appointed General Dimas Maulana as new Commander. He also for the first time since independence appointed a Minister of Defence other than himself, Major General Wilfred Mponela whom he retired from the Army. In these acts, Banda conceded to the soldiers’ aspects that were not necessarily on the agenda of Operation Bwezani but had been brought to the fore by the exercise, that is, the need for a leadership that is detached from politics. There were also going to be no reprisals for the rebelling soldiers. It was rumoured that that was part of the deal for ending attacks on Young Pioneers.

How far did the army take advantage of the popular civilian uprising against Banda? Did the transition benefit much from the Army operation? The transition to democracy as indicated above began with the Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter, students’ protests, and demonstrations that followed, Chihana’s call for referendum, and labour riots in Blantyre in early 1992 as the most significant events. These events inaugurated the transition process. By December 1993 when Operation Bwezani took place, the process was well established. When Banda accepted to hold a national referendum in October 1992, he appointed a Presidential Commission on Dialogue (PCD), made up of MCP cabinet ministers, to engage in dialogue with pseudo-political parties called Pressure groups that teamed up with churches in Public Affairs Committee (PAC). Together they discussed modalities for the referendum. After the referendum in June 1993, Banda agreed to the formation of NCC in which all parties, that is, new parties such as United Democratic Front (UDF), Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), Malawi Democratic Party (MDP), etc. were represented including

¹¹ *Daily Times* December 13, 1993 reports that the Army recovered about 1193 mostly assault rifles and short guns. Amongst these were a few machine guns but no major weaponry that the pioneers were believed to possess.

MCP. This body had monthly rotating chairmanship. It recommended changes to the constitution to prepare for the first multiparty general election such as the removal of provisions for one party system and Banda’s life presidency. By November 1993, Banda was stripped of his life presidency. MCP monopoly over politics was dismantled. By December 1993, Malawi was constitutionally a multiparty state. On NCC’s insistence, the national public radio station, MBC stopped playing partisan praise songs for Banda, a key element of Banda’s hegemonic apparatuses.¹² The radio also began to air campaign news and programmes with dissenting views to Banda’s and the MCP. The NCC examined the fate of the MYP and was already about to take appropriate action to ensure their transition into new roles in the new Malawi when the Army took action. All these changes put the transition on firm footing.

The above is the political atmosphere where Banda’s hegemony had all but ended in which the Malawi Army conducted Operation Bwezani. The Army in their altercation with the Young Pioneers was, therefore, essentially taking advantage of the openness brought about by the civilian political process in the country. The euphoria of change beginning in 1992 was evident everywhere as seen by, apart from the above, the numerous newspapers on the streets signalling freedom of expression, the release of political prisoners and amnesty for exiles to return, among others. It is my suggestion, therefore, that it was the relatively opened up atmosphere of the political transition that gave the Army the opportunity it needed to act against the Young Pioneers. The army could not have acted against the MYP if it were not for the civilian-led political transition that had effectively destroyed Banda’s hegemony.

One other question is how far did the operation, cheered by ordinary people across the country fulfil the peoples’ aspirations for the end of Banda’s repression? The fact that MYP was a major instrument of Banda’s repressive machinery meant that the people’s anger against and dislike of the MYP was intense, Banda’s hegemony notwithstanding. The desire to neutralize them completely as a factor in the transition to democracy was obvious. This is why people cheered on the Army as they went attacking MYP infrastructure. However, the real target of the people’s anger at this time, as was the case before the beginning of the transition, was John Tembo (Meldrum 1995; Mapanje 1997; van Donge 1995). Both Meldrum and van Donge indicate that in Malawi, people generally held Banda in great respect even after he left politics while demonstrated bitter hatred for Tembo. Van Donge records that the discourse of Muluzi and his UDF, that succeeded Banda and MCP, is interspersed with remarks of respect for Banda. Indeed, Muluzi, at his meetings across the country often declares that he never fought against Banda but the system. This respect for Banda and effort to separate him from his oppressive system shows just how, as a hegemonic dictator, Banda popularised himself. On the other hand, Tembo is castigated as a villain. This is also indicated by various

¹² The programmes affected were “Kwacha Kwayera” [It is dawn], “Let the People Sing,” “Za a Payoniya” [Pioneers], Tithokoze [Let’s Thank Him], all in praise of Banda.

scholars trying to explain the nature of Banda's reign. They characterise it as "having widespread popular support" (Forster 1994: 496) hence a "democratic dictatorship" (Forster 2001).

Tembo with his niece, Cecilia Kadzamira, Banda's lifelong confidante and official government hostess, was believed to be the power behind Banda especially from the 1980s when Banda neared senility. In 1993, almost immediately after the referendum, Banda underwent brain surgery in South Africa. He became so weak that he did not even get out campaigning for the general elections though he was presented as the candidate for MCP. Despite the appointment of Gwanda Chakuamba during Banda's sickness to head a Presidential Commission, people's impressions of Tembo as the *de facto* leader did not change. He wielded too much power to be otherwise. Tembo was also believed to be in-charge of MYP, directing their operations including supporting Renamo in Mozambique. It was therefore Tembo that people blamed for most of the brutality of the Young Pioneers. It was Tembo that people feared would derail the transition process and hoped the Army would deal with during Operation Bwezani than just MYP (Newell 1995). However, the Army concentrated on MYP and not the politicians that controlled these cadres. They did not attack Tembo personally or Banda and his political establishment. I suggest that failure to deal with Banda or his political establishment, especially Tembo diminished the significance and contribution of Operation Bwezani to the political transition that was well under way.

Why did the army not attack Banda or Tembo other than just the MYP? A simplistic answer is that they had no intention beyond disarming MYP or had no political ambition. However, looking at events around the operation and in the thirty years of MYP existence, one is bound to see that the Army was very much under Banda's hegemonic influence. They saw Banda not just as Commander-in-Chief with a detached professionalism. He was for them as for everyone in Malawi God-given Messiah, Father and Founder of the nation, Ngwazi, and Life President. One of their parade songs during Kamuzu Day (Banda's official birthday) said that Banda was the greatest gift God gave Malawi.¹³ When they attacked and destroyed the MCP headquarters during the operation, the Army towed away to safety Banda's old open land rover. This was a piece of Banda's relics from the days he fought colonialism. MCP displayed the vehicle at all MCP annual conventions to show how Banda, as Father and Founder of the Malawi nation, founded the nation. The action of the Army here was an act of respect for Banda by preserving relics of his history as part of the national history. But this instinctive response was a response to Banda's hegemony. The Army's attitude here resonated with the general feeling of the people towards Banda, where they held him in awe, respect, and fondness. It is inconceivable, therefore, that the Army could have attacked Banda.

¹³ First Battalion of the Malawi Army parade song during Kamuzu Day celebrations. Recorded by Department of Information, 1986.

3. CONCLUSION

Operation Bwezani was an Army operation specifically against Malawi Young Pioneers to disarm them by extension than by design. It was a bar brawl that extended into disarmament. It was spontaneous swift, largely uncoordinated, without plan or extended agenda beyond destroying symbols of MYP militancy and power. There is no evidence of widespread mobilization of the army or effort to do more than target the MYP. Operation Bwezani was therefore primarily a targeted exercise on the MYP. It was an operation that left the real culprits of Banda’s vicious dictatorship such as John Tembo. For that reason, Operation Bwezani did not fulfil aspirations of the people. Instead, it served to de-ink the Army from the grassroots discontents that the people were expressing, particularly the Tembo factor in Malawian politics that came with the openness of the transition (*The Financial Observer*, qtd. in Newell 1995: 169). While the Young Pioneers were disbanded thereafter and their weapons recovered into Army barracks, the operation did not significantly affect the political transition process. In actual fact, because of the uncoordinated manner in which the operation was conducted, many of the MYP disappeared into the community with arms while others were believed to be regrouping in abandoned Renamo camps in Mozambique. This prompted a delegation from Mozambique to visit Malawi for talks (*The Monitor*, 4 January, 1994). Mozambique worried that its nascent peace with Renamo was under threat from a group of armed MYP in Mozambique. However, despite Operation Bwezani and rumours of MYP regrouping in Mozambique, the general elections already scheduled for May 1994, proceeded without hitches. Nothing of that programme changed. Neither were the results for MCP in the general elections affected by the operation. The UDF won the majority, MCP came second and AFORD third according to the level the size of the ethnic groups and less about ideology (Chirwa 1994b; Kaspin 1995).

It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Operation Bwezani essentially took advantage of the changed atmosphere established by the political process initiated and accomplished by civilian population in Malawi. Insofar that the Army never acted against MYP before this time and did not go all the way to deal with Banda or Tembo when given the opportunity; the army demonstrated just how much it was under the influence of Banda’s hegemony, a hegemony that paralyzed them like everyone else in the country from resisting or protesting his autocracy for thirty years.

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