

1964 CABINET CRISIS.

By: Paliani Gomani Chinguwo.

“History takes long to declare its verdict. The villains of today may be declared saints tomorrow; it may be after their death ...”-Masauko Chipembere.¹

Probably one of the most outrageous advents Malawi has ever gone through since independence inter alia was the cabinet crisis in 1964. Any book on the history of Malawi as an independent nation is devoid of profundity if it does not make mention of the cabinet crisis in passing or in detail. This was a disarray within the first cabinet of post Independent Malawi which was created by abrupt expulsions of some ministers from the cabinet and subsequent resignations by other ministers following an irreconcilable and growing rift that had developed between the then prime minister Dr. Banda and cabinet ministers.

Perhaps the best cabinet interms of size and merit Malawi has ever had, it was largely dominated by young university alumni who were highly obsessed with pan-africanist school of thought which was then a popular way of thinking among freedom fighters and nationalist movements across Africa among others. Paradoxically, it was Dr. Banda and his cabinet ministers who had gallantly fought together alongside other nationalists as a united front in the struggle for self-government and independence of Nyasaland, but sadly to part ways for good barely eight weeks after mission accomplishment.

Prior to 6th July 1964 there was a wide spread belief amongst the educated Africans that independence from British tutelage meant that many well paid expatriate positions in the civil service exclusively designed based on racial structure would obviously fall vacant to them. While to the ordinary African, independence meant no taxes would be paid to the new government and that bank loans would be readily accessible to all with no colour of man's skin as a yardstick as it used to be. Besides, there had been an outcry from the general public on the imposition of out patient's fee in all government hospitals of three pence by Dr. Banda with effect from 7th July 1964 amidst Independence ecstasy. This was indeed beyond the conviction of an ordinary African who had been receiving free medical attention all along under the colonial government only to be required to pay for the same service immediately after Independence. Consequently, clinical and hospital attendance fell drastically.

From July 1964, Dr. Banda also put into effect the Skinner's report on the civil service, which among others recommended the pegging of salaries and curtailment of leave benefits. “For many after the deductions for taxes...their take home pay for July was as much as 95% less than their June salary” (Kanyama Chiume 1982; 203). The civil servants became further disgruntled over this. Eventually after the cabinet crisis, Dr. Banda had to discontinue the implementation of some of the aspects of the Skinner's report. In his radio address to the nation on Sunday 4th July 1966 Dr. Banda declared, “...although the review of the report (Skinner's report) is still going on I have decided to

¹ This is an except from his last speech in parliament as a minister and an M.P. on 9th Sept.1964.

make changes in these two aspects right away so that the civil servants can enjoy 6th July with the rest of the people better than they did last year.”

On the other hand, cabinet ministers cried foul over Dr. Banda’s domestic and foreign policies. They had also become very much dissatisfied with the role they were expected to play by the prime minister as mere cogs of the. It was indeed clearly evident to them that the running of the government had absolutely turned out to be a one man’s show for the prime minister himself.

Further more, contrary to the Malawi Congress Party (M.C.P.) manifesto and the 1963 O.A.U.charter, since the demise of the federal government in 1963, Dr. Banda began openly to fraternize with the remaining imperialist and colonialist regimes in Mozambique, Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. Eventually Malawi became the only Independent African state with an embassy in apartheid South Africa. Some think tanks viewed Malawi’s foreign policy in this regard as an exasperation and act of betrayal to the cause of human liberty as far as the freedom fighters and Independence movements in Mozambique, Southern Rhodesia and South Africa among others were concerned.

When Dr. Banda jetted at Chileka airport on 28th July 1964 from an OAU summit in Cairo where he had bungled to convince fellow African heads of state and government regarding his controversial international relations with the three remaining colonial powers in Africa, he called upon the general public to spy on any of the cabinet ministers and to report anything against them. At a cabinet meeting held on 5th August 1964 the ministers seized an opportunity to express their discontent towards Dr. Banda’s policies and why they could not effectively contribute towards national development in an atmosphere of fear, suspicion and mistrust. Dr. Banda then revealed to his ministers that he intended to sponsor a preventive detention bill which could target at the arbitrary arrests of cabinet ministers and other nationalists who had been in the driving force of the struggle during the last stages of colonial era. In the afternoon, Collin Cameron the only European member of the cabinet resigned in protest to the proposed bill.

On 26th August 1964 the cabinet met again and the ministers voiced their protests against the following:

- The way Dr. Banda treated the ministers with contempt, ridicule and sarcasm in private and public.
- Cases of nepotism and corruption in the government and the party.
- Appointment of Michael Blackwood to the important posts of Malawi Development Corporation (M.D.C.) chairman and board member of Reserve Bank. This man was a former deputy leader of Roy Welensky’s party who were all members of a “racist” organization called Africa Capricon Society.
- Dr Banda’s uncogent foreign and domestic policies since self-governance in 1963.

In response to all these criticisms leveled against him, Dr. Banda opted to resign and leave the country for good. Since resignation was not actually what the ministers anticipated Dr.Banda to do but rather an overhaul on his policies and the way he ran state

affairs, they refused to accept his resignation. After discussing further on this issue, Dr. Banda reversed his decision and asked the ministers to put all their concerns in writing. The following day the ministers wrote a document called the Ku-Chawe petition, which was submitted to him for consideration.

Unfortunately, there were Dr. Banda's sycophants outside the cabinet who jumbled up the process. Through letters (some anonymous), telephone messages and in person they falsely reported to Dr. Banda on the pretext of being loyal that there was no discontent or unrest in the country in relation to the skinner report recommendations, introduction of a hospital fee, slow pace in the africanisation of the civil service etc. They even concocted a story that the ministers had done all that out of arrogance and ambition to illegally take over government and that they had gone to fetch for "juju" to bewitch Dr. Banda. In fact these sycophants happened to be the less popular party officials who had for so long resented the domination of the intellectuals in the cabinet and meanwhile envisaged greener pastures for themselves in the aftermath of any split in the cabinet.

On 3rd September 1964 Dr. Banda dismissed Kanyama Chiume, Orton Chirwa and Augustine Bwanausi from the cabinet. In protest to these dismissals Yatuta Chisiza, Willie Chokani and John Msonthi resigned from the cabinet. John Msonthi withdrew his resignation a few hours later. When Masauko Chipembere, education minister returned from Canada a few days later, he announced his resignation in parliament on 9th September 1964. Immediately after Dr. Banda gained an overwhelming vote of confidence in parliament from members of parliament, he set out to tour the central and northern regions to publicly castigate and consolidate his victory over the ex-ministers whom he labeled "rebels".

Meanwhile in the Capital City Zomba, the ex-ministers addressed gatherings of disgruntled civil servants and dissident factions. "These meetings led directly to clashes between groups of civil servants and some villagers from neighbouring rural areas on one hand and members of MYP and league of Malawi youth on the other hand" (John Pike: 1968; 168). The fracas grew beyond police control. The MCP offices in Zomba and national flags outside government buildings were set ablaze. Some top government officials were also brutally attacked and one newly appointed cabinet minister by the name of Gwanda Chakuamba ended up being admitted at the hospital.

No sooner had the ex-ministers planned to launch a political party of their own in two weeks time than the confidential information leaked that immediate arrests and sudden deaths were being plotted to silence them forever. At this stage any hope of reconciliation between Dr. Banda and the ex-ministers was completely out of question. While the other ex-ministers sought asylum abroad, Chipembere unshaken and radical as he had ever been, remained in the country and masterminded an armed insurrection in Mangochi which was heavily quashed by security forces at Liwonde in February 1965 enroute to the capital city to take over government. He retreated to the hills of Mangochi from where he orchestrated insurmountable guerrilla attacks. In his book entitled *Revolt of The Ministers*, Collin Baker (2001) reveals that subsequently without the knowledge of his new cabinet Dr. Banda assented to a plan that was hatched to clandestinely smuggle out Masauko Chipembere in April 1965 to California in collusion with the US government

on condition that as a 'rebel' commander he (Masauko Chipembere) had to discontinue the guerrilla warfare against the government altogether and agree to leave Malawi instantly in exchange with an amnesty and full scholarship for post-graduate studies at an American university. Chipembere accepted the deal, a decision he was to bitterly regret later as a betrayal to his guerrilla fighters so much so that he was compelled to leave USA for Tanzania in August 1966 for the sake of his followers there. He was allegedly assassinated in California in 1975.

In 1967 Yatuta Chisiza after attending a guerrilla fight training abroad and with some assistance he received from the African National Congress (ANC) among others, led another armed insurgency into Malawi. He was shot dead by security forces at Mpatamanga near Blantyre on 12th October 1967. Orton Chirwa and Kanyama Chiume established opposition political parties in Zambia and Tanzania respectively. Orton Chirwa mysteriously died in jail in Malawi in 1992 while serving a treason sentence.

Soon after the cabinet crisis, anyone known or suspected to have been sympathetic, in association or in any contact with any of the ex-ministers was accused of treason and sedition. These were grave crimes for which one could be detained for life in solitary confinement without trial or for which one could be slapped with a death sentence at a trial most often presided over by mere lay men of law. The fortunate ones, after being tipped by well wishers in the party/government of their impending apprehension, swiftly found their way into the neighboring countries where some got killed by assailants who were sent by Dr. Banda and others died under enigmatic circumstances. While a few chose to live in exile for good, some of the 1964 cabinet crisis victims have been flocking back to Malawi ever since the dawn of multiparty politics in 1993.