

Diasporas as Agents of Democratisation: The Malawian Case

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Abstract

Over the past couple of decades, the discourse on diaspora has primarily centred on the developmental role of diasporic communities in their homeland through direct remittances and the provision of public goods and services. The impact of diasporas on trade, investment, technology, and other areas has also been significantly rising. The overall effect of diasporas on the economies of their homelands is staggering. However, migrants and diasporas, as agents of development, not only remit money to their countries of origin but also carry ideas for political, social, and cultural change. This paper examines the participation of the diaspora in nascent democracies, such as Malawi, in political reforms and the building of institutional capacity for the consolidation of democracy. The scope of involvement ranges from supporting democratic transitions to participating in electoral politics and lobbying for policy change at home. In other words, this paper examines how the Malawian diasporic community engages with and impacts political processes through various channels. The analysis draws primarily on secondary data from both traditional and digital media, supplemented by twelve purposively selected key informant interviews with members of the Malawian diaspora. Respondents were drawn from diaspora associations, civic activism networks, and political initiatives to capture a diversity of perspectives. The interviews were thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns in diaspora engagement and influence within Malawi's democratic processes. The paper has traced the contribution of the diaspora to Malawi's democratic evolution and how their participation has evolved in response to the technological revolution in information and communication. In general, the paper examines the concept of long-distance nationalism, followed by a discussion on political change and the Malawian diaspora. It then explores the one-party state era (1964–1993), the role of the Church and academia in the political transition, and, before concluding, the dynamics of the multiparty era.

Keywords: Diaspora, migrants, political transition, change, social media.

Introduction

In 2020, Malawi made headlines across the continent and beyond when the courts nullified the outcome of the 2019 presidential polls due to gross irregularities and called for a fresh election in the presidential race. The demand for electoral justice from local actors received support and involvement from the Malawian diaspora, primarily through digital platforms such as social media. This paper aims to examine

the roles that diasporas of nascent democracies play in political reforms and building institutional capacity for democracy consolidation. These roles range from their involvement in bringing democratic transitions to their participation in electoral politics and lobbying for policy change in their homeland. In other words, the paper examines how diasporas in the given democracies impact political processes through various channels.

As scholars (e.g. Koinova, 2009; Craven, 2018) argue, the discourse on the diaspora in the last couple of decades has primarily focused on the developmental role of the diasporic communities in the homeland through direct remittances and extending public goods and services. The impact of diasporas on trade, investment, technology, etc. has also been rising significantly. The overall effect of diasporas towards the economy of their homelands is staggering. However, migrants and diasporas, as agents of development, not only remit money to their countries of origin but also carry ideas of political, social and cultural change.

Malawi is one of the “third wave democracies” that adopted liberal democracy, along with many Eastern European, African, and Asian countries, in the early 1990s. This paper endeavours to present the role of the Malawian diaspora in the democratic transition from authoritarian rule in the early 1990s to the subsequent processes of democratic consolidation. The transition has been facilitated by various internal and external actors, including development partners, international NGOs focused on democracy and electoral support, and international think tanks, which have collaborated with local institutions and individuals. While there are studies on the role of donor partners and international NGOs, there is a dearth of information on the diaspora's contributions in this process. While Nyangulu and Sharra (2023) offer important insights into the agency and motivations of Malawian diasporic political influencers on Facebook, their focus is largely limited to individual-level dynamics on a single digital platform. This article fills the gap by taking a broader view of diaspora engagement, examining both online and offline political participation, historical trajectories, and the evolving role of diasporic communities—including youth—in Malawi's wider democratic processes.

The paper highlights the critical junctures in tracking the diaspora's role in Malawi's democratic history in the post-transition period. One issue which crept over 30 countries on the African continent, including Malawi, was the attempt to extend the presidential term limit stipulated in the constitution. The article also refers to Malawi's severe governance crisis during the 2010, 2012 and post-2019 general elections marred by frustration over electoral result administration and public demand for electoral justice. Finally, the paper highlights the limitations and challenges that diaspora initiatives face, given the fragility of democratic institutions in their homelands, as well as the personalised power structures of the 'big man syndrome' combined with ethnic, linguistic, and other differences between the elites at home and those in the diaspora.

Concept of long-distance nationalism and the political role of diasporas

The emerging global political economy encompasses more actors and processes beyond the nation-state, rendering Eurocentric analyses inadequate for portraying the diaspora in their role as transnational actors and essential contributors to the international political economy. Diasporas have been notably absent from this list of actors (Reis, 2004; Craven, 2018), who argue that despite concerted efforts to move away from the state, governance research remains inherently state-centric.

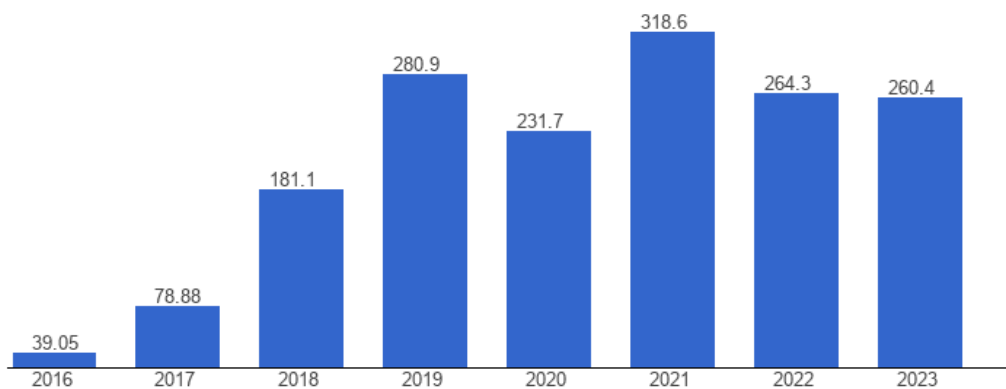
The transnational mobility of people has increasingly resulted in the emergence of diasporic populations that maintain active and often politically significant ties to their countries of origin. Among the most salient forms of diasporic political engagement is long-distance nationalism, a term originally conceptualised by Anderson (1998), describing the phenomenon where migrants continue to participate in, influence, or reshape political and nationalistic discourses in their homelands. This section explores the concept of long-distance nationalism, its drivers, challenges, and implications, particularly in relation to how it intersects with the notion of diasporas as agents of democratisation. Drawing on extensive literature across regions and historical contexts, this paper situates the concept within broader theoretical frameworks of long-distance nationalism and provides examples to illustrate its dynamics.

Long-distance nationalism refers to the political sentiments and activities directed toward a homeland by members of a diaspora community, often motivated by a sense of identity, belonging, or obligation (Skrbiš, 2017). Unlike traditional nationalism rooted in territorial presence, long-distance nationalism thrives on symbolic connections maintained across borders. Anderson (1998, p.2) emphasised that this form of nationalism allows migrants to “intervene in the politics of the homeland without bearing the risks of direct participation,” leading to a reconfiguration of political accountability. Long-distance nationalism is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing emotional, cultural, and political attachments. Loshkariov, Beliakova, and Saakian (2023) note that these attachments may shift over time from identity-based claims to more pragmatic interests such as economic nationalism. Cheng (2021) highlights that long-distance nationalism can even reshape in-group preferences within the host country, creating hybrid identities among first-generation migrants.

Several factors have driven the proliferation of long-distance nationalism in recent decades: Firstly, the advent of digital technologies and social media platforms has greatly enhanced the ability of diasporas to remain connected to their countries of origin, share information, and mobilise citizens (Omanga, Mare, & Mainye, 2023; Nyangulu & Sharra, 2023). Virtual platforms create imagined communities where national identity and political grievances are continuously reconstructed. Secondly, political repression, civil conflict, or failed democratization processes often force individuals into exile, fostering a form of nationalism rooted in grievance and

nostalgia (Aydın, 2021; Pampuch, 2024). The Crimean Tatar and Libyan diasporas exemplify how displacement catalyses long-distance nationalist ideologies (Alunni, 2019). Thirdly, many sending states have institutionalised relationships with their diasporas through formal policies and diaspora ministries, which paradoxically may both encourage long-distance nationalism and attempt to co-opt it (Gamlen, Cummings, & Vaaler, 2021; Ashutosh, 2021). Finally, experiences of exclusion or cultural marginalisation can heighten diasporic nationalism, as migrants seek meaning and empowerment through affiliation with their homeland (Faria, 2014; Cross, 2022).

Major theoretical works on diaspora have contributed to the economic development of developing countries. Kapur (2010), Brinkerhoff (2008), Oestergaard-Nielsen (2003), and the World Bank (2006, 2007) are notable works in this area. The significance of this trend is evident, as remittances sent by migrant workers to their families abroad have become a critical part of many economies worldwide. There has been considerable focus on economic remittances and brain drain, but relatively less on social and political contributions and economic development. Based on the data below, remittances are expected to continue growing in importance. The value of Malawi's remittances in millions of U.S. dollars in 2023 was \$ 260.40. The table below provides remittances in U.S. dollars from 1994 to 2023.



Source: <http://www/Theglobeconomy.com/Malawi/remittances>

The World Bank indicates that the minimum value (\$0.52 million) was reached in 1995, while the maximum value (\$318.64 million) was recorded in 2021.

Another research trend focuses on security and the relationship between diasporas and homeland conflicts. Feron and Lefort (2019) discuss the nexus between diaspora and conflict, cautioning against the simplistic generalisation that diasporas from conflict zones tend to import the dispute to the countries of residence, which puts an entire community at risk. Many case studies on conflict and diaspora focus on whether diasporas are constructive or destructive in conflict, as seen in the work of Smith and Stares (eds.), 2007, on *Diasporas in Conflict – Peace Makers or Peace Wreckers*.

Studies have also shown that many diasporas are active participants in peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities in their countries of origin (Smith and Stares 2007; Østergaard-Nielsen 2006).

The role of diasporas in bringing about political reforms and change, as well as enhancing political development, remains a relatively under-researched field. Diasporas extend support to further democratise governance in their homelands by pushing for legal and institutional reforms. Shain (1995) is one of the early scholars who focused on political mobilisation by the diasporas in the U.S., such as the Greeks, Haitians, Cubans, and Mexicans. Shain observes, "The global surge of national independence and the third wave of democratic transitions have awakened older diasporas in the United States and energised the more recently organised ethnic groups. Both these groups now play an increasingly important role in supporting democratisation and self-determination abroad" (1995, p.812).

Political interests and activities focused on homelands within diasporas are certainly nothing new. Historical studies of migrant communities have consistently shown a considerable degree of political engagement for centuries. "At present, we can broadly observe a variety of ways — many similar to these historical forms in which internationally dispersed social groups mobilise and undertake a range of electoral and non-electoral political activities" (Vertovec 2005, p.5).

Examining the role of diasporas in the post-communist Eastern European states of Armenia, Albania, Serbia, and Ukraine, Koinova (2009) contends that diasporas in stable or advanced democracies are better positioned to influence democratisation in their home countries. The impact of international actors on democratic and illiberal societies has yielded valuable insights into the roles of state and non-state actors, as well as the mechanisms of leverage and linkage that facilitate democratisation. However, little has been said about diasporas. This is also contended by Awil (2009), who argues that the role African diasporas play in democracy-building on the continent is an area that has not yet been sufficiently studied despite its critical significance. Consequently, the knowledge necessary for developing informed policy prescriptions on the subject is still minimal.

The African diaspora can also contribute to democracy building in Africa "by making its knowledge, professional experience and expertise available to strengthen the capacity of political institutions in Africa and create effective, responsible, transparent, accountable and democratic systems of governance on the continent" (Awil, 2009, p.2). Support for democratic governance is crucial in creating an enabling environment in the homeland and a key area for diaspora engagement to promote sustainable development in Africa.

The African Development Bank noted that the diasporas are also becoming significant players in building democratic institutions in Africa.

The nation-building process is based not only on financial resources but also on social and political dialogue, advocacy and awareness to stability for development. As the Diaspora gains more voice and recognition, they have begun demanding participation in the home country's political processes. An increasing number of Africans abroad seek elected office in their home countries, including as members of national legislatures, and many of the major national political parties rely on Diaspora financial contributions during electioneering campaigns (African Development Bank and African Development Fund, 2011, p. 13).

While long-distance nationalism provides diasporas with a platform for political participation, it is not without complications. It can delocalize conflicts, with diaspora groups promoting radical views disconnected from realities at home, as mentioned above (Demmers, 2002). It may fuel political polarisation, as seen in the Biafran case, where diaspora activism intensified ethno-nationalist divisions (Onyemechalu & Ejiofor, 2024). A lack of accountability is also a concern, as diaspora actors push for change without bearing the consequences of instability (Koser, 2003). Additionally, internal divisions often arise within diasporas due to differing nationalist perspectives (Elone & Chen, 2021).

Despite its challenges, long-distance nationalism holds potential as a democratising force. Diasporas often champion democratic ideals, lobby for human rights, and serve as watchdogs of authoritarian governments (Adeniyi, 2016). For instance, McGregor (2009) demonstrates how Zimbabweans in the UK have utilised long-distance nationalist frameworks to challenge the Mugabe regime and mobilise support for democratic change.

As comprehensively discussed below, in the Malawian context, digital long-distance nationalism is evident in Facebook-based political engagement, where diaspora influencers critique governmental actions, promote alternative political narratives, and contribute to civic education (Nyangulu & Sharra, 2023). These virtual interventions echo what Demmers (2002) describes as the "re-mapping" of political communities beyond territorial confines. Moreover, diasporas may offer material and intellectual support for democratisation, as seen in Sudanese diasporic parenting practices that transmit civic values to children (Faria, 2014) or in the transmission of heritage and political identity within the Malawian diaspora in South Africa (Sibanda, 2023). Such transgenerational engagements sustain political consciousness and collective memory vital for long-term democratisation.

Political Change and Diaspora: The Malawi Experience

Malawi, formerly known as Nyasaland, gained independence from British rule in 1964. Malawian diasporas are primarily located in neighbouring Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, owing to close ethnic, historical, political, and economic ties. Malawi also has a sizeable migrant population in South Africa. Malawians were a source of labour for Southern African diamond and gold mines, particularly in South

Africa. In the West, Malawians are mainly located in England, Scotland, and the United States, with a few hundred also in Canada. There is also a tiny student community now in India, Japan, China, and other Asian countries. Precise data on the Malawian diaspora population is unavailable, as the government adopted a diaspora policy only in 2017, and the initial mapping and profiling exercises are currently underway.

Diaspora involvement in political change dates back to the struggle for independence from colonial rule. Malawian nationalists with radical ideologies, based in then-Rhodesia, championed nationalist and human rights causes. Some of the noted names were "Clements Kadalie, who pioneered the Labour Movement of Southern Africa, and was associated with the formation of the Communist Party of Nyasaland, formed around 1920, Charles Mzingeli, an influential figure in the labour struggles of Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s, persons like Eliot Kamwana, Thom Nyirenda, Jack Muwamba and Oscar Kambona, all of whom played an influential role in the independence struggle of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (Kapote Mwakasangura & Douglas Miller, 1998).

The one-party state era (1964 – 1993)

After independence from British colonial rule, Malawi was a one-party authoritarian state under Dr Kamuzu Banda for almost three decades from 1964 to 1993. Banda's regime was one of the most oppressive in Africa, notorious for its censorship laws on information systems with "access to information effectively denied to excluded social groups including members of opposition political movements, speakers of minority languages, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims" (Sturges 2013, p. 185).

There was no organised opposition movement within the country, given the widespread environment of fear and suspicion, particularly among the urban elite. The only severe power struggle was in 1964 when six of Banda's cabinet ministers rebelled and fled the country. Even those who attempted to sustain an exiled opposition movement abroad were vulnerable to the long arm of the Banda state. Several such figures were assassinated or kidnapped from neighbouring states (Wiseman, 1999, p.3). One such case was Orton Chirwa. He was abducted from Zambia by the Malawian secret police in 1981 and remained in jail in Malawi until he died in 1992. Attati Mpakati had his hands blown off by a parcel bomb in Mozambique in 1979 and was assassinated on a visit to Zimbabwe in 1983. By the 1980s, Banda's secret police were operating in neighbouring countries, seeking out Banda's enemies.

The Malawian pro-democracy activists found support in the country of their refuge. As observed by Mchombo, "The opposition groups based outside Malawi found more support from the democratic forces there, support that provided new impetus to the challenge to Banda's rule" (1998, p.18). Electronic mail started to play a role in the political arena with the introduction of fax machines. Facsimile, the photocopier, and electronic mail provided an alternative to traditional media and also crossed national

boundaries, carrying information and thereby enhancing democracy. Information from numerous documents from outside the country, collected during the campaign for a multiparty system of government, was transmitted via fax machines. The photocopier was a crucial tool in disseminating campaign materials. Messages were transmitted underground and at night. Documents were also received from human rights activists and exiles, which were photocopied and distributed secretly. The arrival of computers gave new momentum to the dissemination of information.

The Church and the academia in political transition

The Church in Malawi played a pivotal role as a torchbearer of democratic change. In Malawi, as in South Africa and other parts of Africa, the Church has been an integral part of the state. The visible impact of the Church was evident in the early 1990s, when the wind of change swept across Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa, ushering in liberal democracy to replace dictatorship (Ott, 2020). In Malawi, although many local and international actors played a role in bringing about the much-needed change from Banda's dictatorship, the 'Pastoral Letter' issued by the Catholic bishops on March 8, 1992, is hailed as the document that set the momentum for change. Support for the Malawian Church came from churches in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and other countries. The pastoral letter was a very effective tool in social mobilisation. National church leaders, with external support, played a pivotal role. The Church came out as a formidable actor in the arena of good governance. After that initial phase, church organisations received significant support for their development and governance programmes.

The University of Malawi, particularly the Chancellor College campus, was at the epicentre of the protest to end the ruthless one-party state regime and usher in democracy. The Malawian academics like Prof. Pascal Kishindo, Dr Edge Fedelis Kanyongolo, Dr Mathews Chikaonda were ably joined and supported by their colleagues in the diaspora, like Dunduzu Chisiza, Prof. Thandika Mkandawire and others. The academic diaspora from the west managed to smuggle pamphlets to three institutions – the Old Mutual, Elect and National Bank of Malawi- as only these three had fax machines in the early 1990s. Some particular individuals in these organisations duplicated the material that was deemed seditious.¹ The academic diaspora established good links with the International Red Cross, Article 19, Africa Watch, Index on Censorship, and Amnesty International.

Prof. Thandika Mkandawire, a global Pan-African luminary, was a prominent voice on the Nyasa Net forum, the first internet medium in Malawi. It facilitated the dissemination of information on a wide range of topics, including Malawi's history, African politics, and global economics, through an email listserv for Malawians in the diaspora. Prof. Thandika Mkandawire joined the nationalist struggle for independence

¹ Interview with Wiseman Chijere Chirwa, a PhD student in the late 1980s in Canada, a former professor in History at Chancellor College, University of Malawi.

while working as a journalist, but was exiled by Kamuzu Banda in 1965, ultimately becoming a political refugee in Sweden (Mandaza, 2020). Guy Mhone was another well-known economist based in South Africa. His works strongly resisted the colonial Central African Federation's (comprising of Zambia, Zimbabwe and Nyasaland) repression and then the brutality of the Banda era.

The years from 1992 to 1994 marked a transitional period, setting the stage for multiparty elections and the establishment of a democratic order. Prominent political leaders from exile, such as Chakufwa Chihana and Brown Mpinganjira, among others, returned home as political parties emerged as legal entities. These political leaders were at the forefront of the transition. A referendum on reintroducing multiparty democracy was held in June 1993, which succeeded with an overwhelming majority. The referendum set the motion for holding competitive elections, accompanied by legal reforms, within the framework of a liberal constitution. The making of the Constitution of Malawi came into force in 1994 and had the involvement of legal experts from the diaspora, such as Prof. Arthur Peter Mutharika, a U.S.-based Malawian legal academic, who later became the President of the Republic of Malawi from 31st May 2014 to 28th June 2020.

The Malawi Action Committee (MAC) was one of the diaspora forums comprising Malawian exiles in the United States and Canada, dedicated to the struggle to end one-party dictatorship in Malawi. The MAC was formed on 4 April 1992. These forums had been working in small groups to lobby governments and international organisations, raising awareness of human rights abuses in Malawi.

The Committee had a membership of some legal professionals who drafted propaganda memos, which were faxed to Malawian contacts and distributed nationwide in leaflets. More prominent members of the MAC, like Arthur Peter Mutharika, carried out diplomatic lobbying to pressure foreign governments to disassociate themselves from the Kamuzu Banda regime.

The multiparty era

After the transition from an authoritarian regime to an electoral democracy in 1994, the subsequent process was the consolidation of democracy. While the transition process is geared towards undermining an authoritarian regime and the emergence of nascent democratic institutions and procedures, the consolidation process entails a much broader and more complex process of institutionalising the new democratic rules and framework.

Democratisation evolves at two levels: procedural and substantive. The procedural aspect engages with elements of democracy, including free and fair elections, turnover of power, and support for various political actors, such as the media, political parties, the election management body, and civil society. The substantive one deals with supporting liberal elements of democracy, such as freedom of speech, free media,

freedom of assembly, and initiatives that transcend regional and ethnic factors. The second aspect of democracy requires a participatory citizenry that is active throughout the time between elections to ensure the promotion of good governance. Until the time the two elements of democracy move in tandem and one acts as a check on the other, the functioning of democracy is in peril.

The democratic constitution of Malawi, like most constitutions drawn after the 1990s transition, sets a limit on the tenure of the Presidency to two terms of five years each. These term-limit laws aimed to promote turnover in the executive office and foster horizontal accountability between government branches in the new democratic regime. At the time of adoption, there was a commitment from all those involved in bringing about the change to end the tradition of "presidents for life," which had long undermined constitutionalism and the rule of law. However, within a decade, the term "extension bid" put democracy's cart in reverse gear, suggesting that a transition does not always lead to consolidation.

African Presidents, such as those of Zambia, Namibia, Uganda, and Malawi, among others, sought to reverse this constitutional provision by extending their term of office. They resorted to various methods, including amending the Constitution and buying votes to defeat motions in parliament. Some succeeded, like Museveni of Uganda and Sam Nujoma of Namibia, and some failed, like Muluzi of Malawi and Chiluba of Zambia. Malawi is one of the cases where the term extension bid failed, and the Constitution was upheld. It was a critical juncture in Malawi's nascent democracy, faced collectively by many players, with the Church playing a leading role, joined by civil society organisations (CSOs) and the media.

Governance challenges and the Diaspora response

From 2010 – 2012, Malawi, under the presidency of Bingu Wa Mutharika, faced a 'crisis of governance'. Mutharika first became President in 2004 and retained power in 2009 with his party securing an overwhelming second-term electoral majority. Soon after assuming office for the second term, Mutharika enacted a series of legislations that essentially clamped down on civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. Freedom of speech and expression, association and academic freedom were under serious threat. The economy was grossly mismanaged, resulting in acute fuel shortages and a decline in foreign exchange. A zero-deficit budget approach significantly impacted the lives of most impoverished Malawians. Donor aid, which constituted 40% of the national budget, was suspended due to Mutharika's antagonistic attitude towards Western donors, including Britain, a major donor country. The most vigorous opposition to President Bingu Mutharika was the group of donors under the CABS (Common Approach to Budgetary Support), comprising the European Union, the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, the African Development Bank, and the World Bank. This group funds more than 40 % of Malawi's national budget.

On 20 July 2011, Malawi was engulfed by protests and riots in the cities of Lilongwe, Blantyre and Mzuzu against President Bingu wa Mutharika's increasingly autocratic regime and the dire state of the economy. On the second day of riots, the army was deployed. The riots left eighteen people dead, many others injured and massive destruction of property across the country's major cities- Blantyre, Lilongwe and Mzuzu. The causes of public frustration were worsening economic mismanagement manifested in shortages of fuel and foreign exchange, power outages, rising unemployment and inflation; the dangerous mobilisation of ethnicity as evident in the redistribution of jobs in the public sector to favour people from the president's ethnic group; and desperate attempts to manipulate the president's succession for his brother Peter Mutharika. The turmoil over academic freedom began in February 2011, when Inspector General of Police Peter Mukhito summoned Chancellor College political science lecturer Prof. Blessings Chinsinga for interrogation over a discussion he led in class where parallels were drawn between Malawi's fuel crisis and popular uprisings in North Africa. Prof. Chinsinga was accused of inciting students to demonstrate against the government. The lecturer proceeded on leave, and his colleagues boycotted classrooms, demanding a guarantee of academic freedom from the government. This was not provided, and what ensued was a string of injunctions filed by the University lecturers, multiple court cases, and the dismissal of Prof. Chinsinga and three leaders of the Academic Staff Union: Dr Garton Kamchedzera, Mr Franz Amin, and Dr Jessie Kabwila. A string of demonstrations by staff and students ensued, with the police intervening with live bullets and tear gas and the closing of university campuses.

Diaspora support or solidarity manifested during this period of governance crisis in Malawi in 2011. An Agenda for Change Summit held in Nottingham, UK, called upon "all Malawians across the UK, particularly in England, to come to this essential conference to put our heads together and advance further a strong 'agenda for change' for Malawi. Malawi is in dire straits, needing urgent change; otherwise, the country will become a totally failed state under Bingu wa Mutharika. We can no longer wait for more bloodshed when we have the power and mandate to change things now" (Nyasa Times, Agenda for Change Summit in UK's Nottingham, August 6, 2011). The Malawian diaspora in Scotland, under the umbrella organisation of the Association of Malawians in Scotland, is formally involved in the Malawi Partnership Programme (MPP) in various aspects of democracy. Association of Malawians in Scotland actively engages the Malawian diaspora in strengthening Malawi-Scotland ties, which emphasises promoting good governance by sharing government and parliamentary experience at both local and central government levels and sharing legal and financial expertise by collaborating with national bodies and civil society. Since its creation, the SMP has been particularly interested in encouraging Malawian residents in Scotland to become active members, join the SMP board, and attend events, with significant time, energy, and resources invested in promoting diaspora engagement. Overall, the Malawian diaspora associations in the UK, Scotland, and the

U.S. were formally established in various cities. They have become visible and vocal. The broad internet access has made the connection with the homeland faster, easier and more effective.

This digital connectivity has enabled diaspora members to follow political developments in real-time, provide commentary, and mobilise international support, aligning with Skrbis's (2017) observations on diasporic agency in shaping homeland politics.

Several social media platforms have played a pivotal role in this digital activism. For instance, Facebook groups such as "Concerned Malawians Abroad" and Twitter/X hashtags like #MalawiDemocracy and #TonseAlliance have emerged as spaces where diaspora communities debate policy issues, share petitions, and disseminate information about governance failures. WhatsApp groups have also become central to real-time coordination of protests and fundraising for democratic causes. Others include Umodzi Diaspora Network (2017), The UK – Malawi Business Group (2017), The Diaspora Portal (2019), Diaspora Mobilisation after Tropical Cyclone Freddy (2023), and The Malawi Diaspora Investment Survey (2023).

Government initiatives towards diaspora engagement

Diasporas have emerged as powerful actors called the 'soft power' with a complex impact on local, national, and global political processes. The recent past has witnessed the government initiating diaspora policies and setting up diaspora institutions to enhance state-diaspora relations, like voting rights, dual citizenship and others. These initiatives are indeed a recognition of the role that diasporas have played in governance for a long time, mainly through remittances and providing public services like building hospitals, schools, etc. It has been observed that 'states' diaspora initiatives are part of wider international efforts to govern global migration. Advised and urged by experts in think tanks and international organisations to seek "migration for development, governments are steered towards an appreciation of how engaging diasporas furthers their interests" (Gamlen, 2014, p. 184).

In 2017 the government of Malawi came out with a diaspora policy. The policy statement notes that over the years,

some have managed to organise themselves for social networking, but the absence of a formal programme of engagement has rendered such initiatives less effective and unsustainable as their activities have mostly been informal. The Diaspora initiatives have not been formally integrated into the country's development strategies. As such, the country has lost the opportunity to develop using this huge resource (National Diaspora Engagement, 2017).

Over the last ten years, the Malawian government has made significant strides in implementing a diaspora engagement framework, opening pathways for targeted contributions and structured interactions with the Malawian diaspora focused on

socio-economic development. While institutional efforts also respond to an increased recognition of the diaspora across the migration-development nexus, specific measures such as dual citizenship, the recognition of foreign-acquired higher education diplomas, access to portfolio investments in Malawi, or the provision of consular services abroad act to incentivise a deeper engagement. The Malawian diaspora, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, has demonstrated high levels of organisation and networked mobilisation in the wake of natural disasters, but also in support of healthcare needs and/or national development projects. With a diaspora engagement framework in place and diaspora organisations actively contributing to the country's welfare, Malawi is favourably positioned to continue building on this diverse social capital, which could ultimately translate into tangible reforms, more effective development planning, brain gain and return migration.

The Embassy of Malawi in Washington, D.C. convened a Malawi diaspora conference in 2018 with President Arthur Peter Mutharika as the guest of honour. The forum was intended to be the first step in promoting working relationships between the government and its diaspora in the USA, enabling them to be involved in Malawi's development. It was realised that the number of Malawians in the diaspora who have the potential to play strategic roles in Malawi's growth has increased with globalisation and transnationalism in identity and practice over the past few years. The conference endeavoured to create a relationship of trust between the diaspora and the Malawi government. The objective was to enhance a common understanding of the development challenges at home, facilitating diaspora intervention through the transfer of experience, knowledge, and skills after ascertaining the available professional and technical resources within diaspora communities.

Nonetheless, the culture of a one-party state has continued in the conduct of both domestic and foreign affairs. The Heads of foreign missions were political appointees of the President and, therefore, the President's spies abroad. This legacy has continued even after the setting in of democracy. The foreign offices, as extended arms of the government, had confined the relations between them and the diasporic communities. Over the years, democratic reforms in domestic and foreign policies, particularly the recognition of diasporas as instrumental in national development, have begun to alter the relationships between foreign offices and the communities.

This shift reflects the dynamics of long-distance nationalism, where diasporas are no longer passive actors but strategically engage in homeland politics, as Demmers (2002) and Alunni (2019) highlight in their analyses of diaspora-state relations.

Electoral Politics and the Diaspora

The increased role of social media in the 2010s significantly impacted the political process in Malawi. There is a greater engagement of youth in policy and public affairs. The general dissatisfaction and frustration in the aftermath of the 2019 general

elections in Malawi, owing to flawed electoral results management, drew a strong public outcry. The civil society, headed by the Human Rights Defenders Forum (HRDC) with opposition political parties, mounted a protest movement for electoral justice. The Malawian diaspora played an active role in the process by extending support to the drive for electoral justice. Political parties received support in the form of uniforms, batches and other campaign material. Nyangulu and Sharra (2023) document how diaspora political influencers on Facebook mobilised narratives of justice and accountability, framing the Tonse Alliance as a break from past regimes while demanding real reform.

There appears to be a growing trend towards establishing diaspora wings within political parties in some host countries. In the U.K., Mr. Chalo Mvula, a UK-based Malawian Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) expert and spokesperson for the Malawi Congress Party Diaspora Wing, opined that the government has its work cut out in attracting investors, as it has a large number of active people in the diaspora who will play an instrumental role in the government's endeavours.²

The new government formed in 2020, known as the Tonse Alliance Government, began its reign to usher Malawi to new levels of development. The potential influx of foreign direct investment is one area geared to push the fulfilment of the famous manifesto pledge of creating one million jobs. Malawi has struggled to attract investors in the past five years, a situation that has hit the country's economy. The Malawian diaspora, whose role in Malawi's economy has primarily been through remittances, has been identified as a critical group in unlocking trade and investment opportunities for Malawi. However, current sentiments within the diaspora over the Tonse Alliance Government have become increasingly disillusioned. While initially hopeful, many diaspora activists have criticised the government's failure to tackle corruption, uphold transparency, and deliver on key reforms. Platforms such as diaspora-run online media and discussion forums reflect a sense of betrayal, calling for a new citizen-led accountability framework. As Aydın (2021) and Onyemechalu & Ejiofor (2024) argue, diasporas can transform from nationalists to sharp critics when democratic expectations are unmet, indicating a shift from loyal support to vocal scrutiny.

Conclusion

The Malawian diasporic community is growing in number and is spread across the globe. The traditional practice of sending remittances back to families at home remains and has continued to increase. However, there has also been a rise in support and collaboration with the home country in other fields.

² Malawi Diaspora Key for Tonse Govt Unlocking of Foreign Direct Investment
<https://allafrica.com/stories/202007120041.html> 122th July 2020

The paper has traced the involvement of the diaspora in the political evolution process from colonial days to the one-party era and how it expanded after the emergence of the multiparty era. During times of crisis in governance, such as in 2011 and 2012, the diaspora's support was significant. Over the last decade, the social media landscape has offered a broad scope for diaspora engagement. The case of the 2019 post-election conflict and its aftermath demonstrates the involvement of the diaspora in the affairs of their homeland.

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