

# When Exploitation is Camouflaged as Women Empowerment: The case of Malawi's first female president Joyce Banda

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## Introduction

Despite many years of struggles to get out of the malaise of underdevelopment, the African continent is still trapped in conditions that dehumanize and marginalize a large segment of the population, particularly women. The motivation for writing this paper stems from our realization that exploitation of women in politics can sometimes be camouflaged as “women’s empowerment”. This is illustrated by the experience of Malawi’s first female president, Joyce Banda, who was initially used instrumentally to advance President Bingu wa Mutharika’s ambition for a second presidential term of office. Once Mutharika had been elected, Joyce Banda was harassed, castigated and marginalized and ultimately fired from the ruling party in 2010. Despite this, the constitution allowed her to stay on as vice state president, much to the disappointment of President Bingu wa Mutharika, who had hoped that removing her from the ruling party would create room for his younger brother, Peter Mutharika, to run as the ruling party’s presidential candidate in 2014. However, Bingu wa Mutharika died suddenly of cardiac arrest in 2012, and in accordance with the constitutional provision, Joyce Banda was sworn in as president to complete the presidential term of office. In the ensuing presidential elections of May 2014, Joyce Banda lost to Peter Mutharika. Joyce Banda, while not elected in her own right, was Malawi’s and the Southern African Development Community’s first female president, and second female president on the African continent. In this paper we critically examine what this case reveals about African politics, noting that both SADC and the African Union have expressed commitments to gender equality in politics, and further declared 2015 the year of the African Woman.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, there was a very deep concern with issues related to women in power and decision-

making. To this end, the Beijing Platform for Action came up with two goals. The first goal was to take practical measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making. The second goal was to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making. These two noble goals are echoed, for example, in Malawi's policy on gender (Malawi Government, 2008), in the Southern African Development Community (2008) and the African Union (2009). As Tenthani notes:

Mutharika's decision to appoint her as his running mate for the 2009 elections surprised many in Malawi's mainly conservative, male-dominated society – which had never before had a female vice-president (Tenthani, 2012).

By choosing Joyce Banda as his presidential running mate, Bingu wa Mutharika could be seen to be advancing women's role in decision making but skeptics argue that the move was disingenuous. Mutharika's move was actually instrumental – designed to draw votes from women to take advantage of their numerical strength on the voters' register. In what follows, we examine the political landscape within which Joyce Banda's political career can be situated and the gender dynamics of her experience discussed.

Since independence in 1964 up to 1993, Malawi was a one-party state with gross abuse of human rights. Dissatisfaction with authoritarian rule eventually led to a referendum in which Malawians were asked to choose either a multi-party system of government or the continuation of the one party state system. On 14 June 1993, two-thirds of the Malawians voted in favor of multi-party democracy. On 17 May 1994, Bakili Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF) was elected state president of Malawi (Posner, 1995; Kaspin, 1995). Bakili Muluzi ruled for two consecutive presidential terms from 1994 to 2004. It is during the UDF rule that Joyce Banda showed her political ambitions by serving as a Member of Parliament (MP) for Zomba-Malosa constituency. She also served as a cabinet minister in more than one ministry. From May 2004, president Bingu wa Mutharika took power from Bakili Muluzi within the same Party (UDF). However after some disagreements, Bingu wa Mutharika broke away from the UDF and formed the Democratic Peoples' Party (DPP), leading to the migration of some UDF members of parliament to the new party. Joyce Banda was one of these MPs.

Prior to becoming the first female Vice President of Malawi, Joyce Banda had a track record of fighting for women's empowerment, she also served as Minister of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Services before being

appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. As Minister of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Services, she worked hard to enact the Domestic Violence Bill. She also designed the National Platform for Action on Orphans and Vulnerable Children and Zero Tolerance Campaign against Child Abuse. In 2009, President Bingu wa Mutharika won the hearts of many people who believe in gender justice when he chose Joyce Banda as his presidential running mate. The choice of a female presidential running mate extended Mutharika popularity and praise. The move was also seen to be in line with the National Gender Policy (Malawi Government, 2008), the Constitution of Malawi, the SADC Protocol on Gender (Southern African Development Community, 2008) and the African Union (2009). Both Mutharika and his DPP won the elections, resulting in Mutharika and Joyce Banda taking office as president and vice-president respectively. History had been made. For the first time in Malawi's history, the country had a woman as a vice-president, and hopes for having a woman president started to grow.

At some stage, the relationship between Joyce Banda and the president became sour. The relationship had become increasingly tense as the President's desire to position his younger brother, Peter Mutharika, as the next president became obvious. Joyce Banda ceased to be useful, and now had to be cleared out of the way for Peter Mutharika. Peter Mutharika had previously served as the Legal Advisor to the President and also served terms as Minister of Education and Minister of Foreign Affairs, so he was eligible to assume the position of presidential candidate for the DPP in 2014. The state media (radio and television) were utilized as campaign tools for Peter Mutharika's election to the Presidency. The public TV programme, "The road to 2014", for example was dominated by the Peter Mutharika campaign. In this programme, TV presenters went out asking DPP members and traditional chiefs whether they supported Peter Mutharika as the next presidential candidate for the 2014 elections. Joyce Banda's vocal resistance to the rise of Peter Mutharika, together with Khumbo Kachali, the second vice president of the DPP, led to her ousting from the position of Vice President of the ruling DPP party on 12th December 2010. Although she was ousted from the party, she continued to serve as the vice president of the Republic of Malawi, in accordance with the Constitution of Malawi. However, with the deteriorating relationship and increased tension, the conditions were unfavorable for the vice president to perform her duties and her full potential.

According to media reports, there were attempts to silence Joyce Banda and eventually drive her into resigning from the office of vice-president. One of the strategies included a plot to arrest her on trumped up treason charges. This, however, did not happen. Another alleged plan was to enact legislation that would empower the president to fire his/her vice-president. The Constitution does not give the president the power to fire his/her vice president. The constitution stipulates that the vice president shall hold office from the date of the administration of the oath until the end of end of the president's term of office.

What was clear is that Banda's security detail was reduced and some official cars were withdrawn from her use. Further, as Tenthani (2012) notes, she was "subjected to daily doses of derision at public rallies and on Malawi's state airwaves". A senior politician categorically declared that Malawi "was not ready for a female president" (Tenthani, 2012). The then First Lady, Callista Mutharika, joined the verbal attacks, referring to Banda as *wophika mandasi* (one who bakes fritters), in derisive reference to Joyce Banda's involvement in women in small businesses. The First Lady is quoted as saying: "She will never be president, how can a *mandasi* [fritter] seller be president?" To this, Joyce Banda responded: "Yes, she's right, I'm indeed a *mandasi* seller and I'm proud of it because the majority of women in Malawi are like us, *mandasi* sellers" (Tenthani, 2012).

The African Renaissance seeks new ways of thinking and feeling about African men and women, their histories, economic, social and political statuses. In other words, the African Renaissance should be a process towards the decolonization of the gender-biased mind, and the resolve to redress ideologies of differential power relations between men and women and the gendered socialization that continue to marginalize, oppress and discriminate against women. Women in Africa must be treated as full-fledged citizens and be given every opportunity to use their potential fully including in political power.

Ironically, at the occasion marking Malawi's 50 years of independence on 6 July 2014, President Peter Mutharika (and younger brother of the late President Bingu wa Mutharika) praised his late brother for choosing Joyce Banda as presidential running mate, saying that the appointment was a step in line with the empowerment of women. He further said: "I take it as no mean achievement that in the first fifty (50) years of our independence,

Malawians have had a female president, Dr Joyce Banda” (Dumbula, 2014). It is clear that the choice of Joyce Banda for presidential running mate in 2009 was a well-calculated political maneuver that was aimed at assisting Bingu wa Mutharika to win the votes, in the context of a global discourse favoring the empowerment of women in leadership. Once in power, Bingu wa Mutharika’s unceremonious shift towards Joyce Banda underscored the way political systems treat and instrumentalise women.

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### *Malawian newspapers*

*Malawi News*

*The Nation*

*Daily Times*

*Nyasa Times*

### *Malawian radios*

Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)

Radio 2 FM

Zodiak Radio