

Jailing the Voiceless: Ex-migrant Workers and Popular Struggles in Malawi

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INTRODUCTION

This article starts with a description of an event and its causes, as reported in the **Malawi News**, Malawi's leading weekly paper, on March 21st 1998. The event took place at Zomba, the country's colonial capital. The story is that:

two ex-miners, Yusufu Yasini and William Malele, were recently sentenced to seven weeks in jail with hard labour for defying police orders to dismantle roadblocks mounted during a demonstration organized by ex-miners. The demonstration was to show displeasure with the government's reluctance to pay them their dues [*sic*: deferred payments, remittances and terminal benefits] for working in South Africa years back.... The amount involved is in the region of K270 million [*sic*: about US\$10.8 million]. Similar demonstrations took place in the districts of Mulanje and Nkhota kota [*sic*: also in Machinga, Mangochi and Salima].

On the day of the trial, the atmosphere outside the courtroom was tense, comparable only to the 1981-82 treason trial of the late Orton Ching'oli Chirwa and his wife Vera (Africa Watch 1990). Over a thousand ex-miners gathered outside the court, chanting and singing anti-government songs. Security was tight, heavily armed riot police and police dogs stood at vantage points, ready to move in the event of violence. As the accused persons arrived, there was cheering, whistling and *toyi toyi* dancing, reminiscent of the Soweto anti-apartheid youth in the 1970s and 1980s. The hearing took less than one-and-a-half hours, and judgement was passed. As the two sentenced ex-miners emerged from the courtroom in handcuffs, guarded by two police officers, the crowd gathered outside surged forward as if to welcome or send off a hero with great achievements. The riot police brandishing teargas canisters moved in with their police dogs to disperse the crowd. In a defiant mood the two 'prisoners' stopped for a while, waved to their colleagues with clinched fists, a sign of popular struggle, solidarity and united force.

The newspaper called the incident "an epitome of evil". The passing of the custodial sentence was characterized as "the jailing of the voiceless" and a suppression of the struggle of people who were acting in desperation after "having exhausted all other avenues". "The ex-miners are not criminals", argued the paper. They are "family men who went to South Africa to earn an honest living". By

jailing them the "government has shown [that] it is insensitive to the plight of the common people; that it is prepared to use its security apparatus to enforce its will no matter how misplaced it may be" (Ibid.: 13). This, is "coming at a time the government professes to be democratic and that it is committed to the observance of the rule of law and justice, it is sad indeed!", concluded the paper.

This article places the above event within the context of the ex-miner's popular struggles and their socio-economic plight. It intends to demonstrate that these struggles are part of a wider popular movement that acted as a driving motor of the process of democratization in the country. The ex-miner's wrangle with the government is itself a struggle for political space through which to pursue and defend their economic interests. During the period of transition from one-party to multi-party rule between 1992 and 1994, the driving motor of the political process were the socio-economic under classes with specific interests. Notable in this respect were the urban poor, the *lumpen* proletariat, adversely affected by the effects of structural adjustment (Kaluwa 1992: 49-59); the rural peasants, suffering from land pressure, poor crop prices, and adverse effects of successive droughts (Lele 1989; Gulhati 1989; GOM and UN 1993); and the repatriated ex-miners, deprived of a stable source of income (Chirwa 1996, 1997a and 1998a). This article deals with the last group.

The argument that the ex-miners had particular economic interests in the democratization process is drawn from oral interviews with these people in three districts, one in each region of the country: Nkhata Bay in the north, Nkhota kota in the centre and Mulanje in the south. A total of 195 ex-miners were interviewed in these districts in three separate studies between 1989 and 1990, in 1993 and in 1997.¹ The information on which the article is based thus presents the views and interests of the informants at and after the time of the loss of their jobs in South Africa. This was also the time of unprecedented political changes in Malawi. A one-party dictatorship was openly changed in 1992, followed by a national referendum in the following year, and presidential and parliamentary general elections in 1994. There is here a conjuncture of political and economic events in which to locate the interests and aspirations of the ex-miners. The paper thus further argues that the democratization process was interest driven.

Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle (1997: 12) have recently argued that:

The distinctive feature of democracy is not that it is better than authoritarian rule at raising or equalizing living standards but that it provides political access to decision making for ordinary citizens. Thus, our understanding of democracy refers to a set of political *procedures*, or rule *by* people; we disassociate it from

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rule *for* the people, which implies, substantively, a distributive socioeconomic order.

They thus further argue that democracy should be defined in terms of the "*minimal* set of political *procedures*" by which citizens in a modern state are able to govern themselves. "The most basic requirement for democracy is that citizens be empowered to choose and remove leaders...[and] it requires only that incumbents and opponents acknowledge, however reluctantly, the acceptability of electoral contest for leadership" (Ibid.: 12-13). By emphasizing "*political procedures*", Bratton and van de Walle underplay the economic interests in the citizens' participation in the democratization process.

The present paper argues that the pursuit of democracy cannot be separated from the pursuit of a distributive socio-economic order. The struggle for the *raising* and *equalizing* of living standards is the key reason for the *ordinary people's* fight for access to decision making. If "democratization presupposes political liberalization, that is, the provision of civil liberties", it follows that the same process should also presuppose socio-economic liberalization: a fair access to, and distribution of resources governed by the principle of social and economic justice. The levelling of the economic ground ensures that the political play is fair for all.

The ex-miners interviewed for this study emphatically argued that they voted in the referendum in 1993 and the presidential and parliamentary general elections in 1994 to have a multi-party government that would negotiate with the South African Chamber of Mines (COM) to resume recruiting mine labour in the country (Chirwa 1997a: 642-645). "We knew politics played a role in the closure of TEBA² and our repatriation from South Africa" observed Veyara Chirwa of Ching'anya village, in the area of chief Mankhambira in Nkhata Bay district. "But we could not strike or take any other action because we were afraid of [our] country's leadership at that time. Had it happened today, we would have questioned such an action.... We felt the political changes would bring hope to us, that is why we voted", he added (interview on 23/7/97). "With the promises made, we had hopes that the new government would help us... After all, Muluzi assured us that we will go back and get our money, so we believed him.... That time we thought the opportunity had come, now that chance is nowhere to be seen" (interview with Ellia Kamanga on 16/7/97). During the democratization campaign, the ex-miners "were told and convinced that the previous regime closed TEBA because it knew that it would be booted out of power, so Kamuzu [the former president] wanted to frustrate the government that would come in, and that is why we were repatriated from South Africa" (interview with Robert Chirwa on 18/7/97). For his part, Fred Kamanga, of Phiri Mugorozero village, chief Mkumbira, "would love to see president Bakili Muluzi help [the ex-miners] receive [their] money" (interview on 17/7/97). The

² TEBA is an acronym for The Employment Bureau of Africa, the official recruiting organ of the South African Chamber of Mines. In Malawian popular language, it also means labour migration in general.

reason for such expectations is that labour migration gave the ex-miners and their families a stable income, and the returns of migrancy bolstered peasant agriculture and a variety of micro-enterprises in the local economies (interviews with George Kapote on 29/9/89; Mwazeni Mtira on 29/9/89; Amon Mwale on 1/9/93 and 5/9/93; Dickson Chitunga on 5/9/93; Blackson Kaunda on 11/8/93; Alick Nyirenda on 12/8/93 and Lloyd Chilewe on 8/12/93).

The account below examines the political effects of the ex-miners' repatriation. It argues that this development has shaped, and will continue to shape, political discourse in the country. The "TEBA issue", as it is often referred to, has become "a very sticky issue" in Malawi's politics (Chirwa 1997a: 628-654). Over the last four years, there have been numerous public demonstrations at the offices of the Labour Department throughout the country, visits to the State President, petitions to the Ministry of Labour, and heated debates in parliament over the issue. These seemingly simple, but potentially volatile and embarrassing political events tend to be sidelined by scholars interested in the country's political change. Migrant workers, despite the very positive role they played during the transition from the one-party dictatorial regime to a multi-party democracy, have become a "forgotten constituency". However, whenever they have asserted themselves, and have come into the open to remind the government of their existence, the government has panicked; making unrealistic promises and telling lies, and sometimes coming hard on the ex-miners as indicated by the event outlined above.

From a different view point, this article demonstrates that the process of political change in the country was driven by linkages between different struggles. The first was that of the elitist movement of human rights activists, supported by international actors: donors, international human rights organizations and diplomatic missions (Africa Watch 1990). The second was the struggle of the *petit bourgeois*: the clergy, lawyers, scholars and other urban workers interested in a freer and just political system (Lwanda 1993 and 1996; Nzunda and Ross 1995; Phiri and Ross 1998). The third was that of the propertied and merchant classes which at the end of the day ceased power from the land-based political bureaucracy (Chirwa 1994 and 1998b). Affected by the economic crisis of the 1980s, the merchant class ceased power to recover from the crisis, consolidate its position, and create new avenues for accumulation. The fourth was the popular movement of the under classes, the struggling urban and rural poor, interested in a fairer distributive socio-economic order. The last group was the driving motor of the political process in the country. It is the combination of these "many struggles" that constituted the democratization force as a political movement. This is a common characteristic of transition politics, and especially the transitions from authoritarian to open regimes (Hellen 1996). They are characterized by linkages and combinations of various struggles with varying and diverse interests. For this reason, they tend to contain inherent and salient tensions and fissures that become overt whenever the interests are in conflict, or when the interests of one group are jeopardized.

1. THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

Viewed from the southern Africa regional context, the Malawi case is important because it provides insights into the possible political implications of the shrinking labour market in the region. Migrant labour has always been an issue of political contentions in both the supplier and the receiver countries, and between the latter and the former. For example, in 1974, when 74 returning Malawian mine migrant workers died in a plane crash in Francistown, Botswana, the then Malawi President Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda banned recruiting in his country. Protracted debates ensued between the Malawi government and the South Africa Chamber of Mines backed by the South African government. When recruiting resumed in 1977, the numbers of Malawian workers on the South African mines were drastically reduced, forcing the mining industry to look to Lesotho, Mozambique and the 'Bantustans' as the more reliable sources of labour (Yudelma and Jeeves 1986; Crush et al. 1991; James 1992).

Between 1980 and 1983, the Malawi government and the South African labour recruiters engaged in another protracted debate over the system of Valid Re-employment Guarantee (VRG) which enabled 'career miners' to repeatedly return to their work after short 'holiday' breaks at home (Chirwa 1996: 634-638). Between 1986 and 1992, the debate between the Malawi Government and the South African labour recruiters and employers centred on issues of HIV/AIDS (Chirwa 1995, 1997a, 1997b and 1998a). In March 1988, the COM stopped recruiting Malawian workers because over the previous two years some of them had tested HIV/AIDS positive (Crush et al. 1991: 120-121; Chirwa 1998a). The Malawi government was asked to screen all potential recruits for HIV/AIDS at home before leaving for employment in South Africa. The request was turned down on legal and moral grounds (Chirwa 1995, 1997b and 1998a). The COM responded by repatriating all the 13,000 Malawian workers it employed in its member mines. Again, protracted legal debates ensued between the Malawi government and TEBA, the official recruiting organ of the COM (Chirwa 1998a).

Politically charged debates on migrant labour in the region have not been confined to Malawi and South Africa alone. During the late 1970s, "as regional and international pressure on South Africa escalated, the front-line states faced the policy dilemma of their own citizens migrating to South Africa" (Crush et al. 1991: 121). Two rather contradictory policy proposals were put forward. The first was to campaign for improvements in the lot of foreign workers in South Africa. These were outlined in the "Charter of Rights for Migrant Workers in Southern Africa" adopted at a conference in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1978. The second was the commitment to "a concerted and collective effort... at the national, subregional, regional and international levels to hold the labour-supplying states to withdraw and finally to abolish their supply of migratory labour to South Africa" (Ibid.:121). In 1980, the Southern African Labour Commission (SALC) was formed, with the objective of operating "as a labour cartel which, by adopting a united stand, could

more effectively protect the migrants' interests" (de Vletter 1987: 202). At the same time, the International Labour Organization (ILO) "drew up plans for a suppliers' cartel to be called the Association of Home Countries of Migrants that would commit itself to the phased withdrawal of mine labour from South Africa" (Crush et al. 1991: 121).

The South African Chamber of Mines responded to the proposals with "a detailed rebuttal" sent to the governments of Lesotho, Mozambique, and Botswana, urging them "not to go along with the plan" (Ibid.: 122). It developed its own plans to expel foreign workers over a period of about five years. "Neither plan was ever implemented." SALC continued to denounce the migrant labour system, but no concrete action was taken. Only Zimbabwe recalled its mine workers from South Africa in 1981 (de Vletter 1987: 202; Crush et al. 1991: 122). The decision was motivated by that country's political independence from settler-colonial rule in the previous year; which was followed by a strong anti-apartheid stance by the new Zimbabwe government. It would have been a serious political contradiction for the new government to officially allow its people to contract with the COM amidst anti-apartheid proclamations.

Throughout the 1980s the employment of foreign migrant workers in South Africa continued to be "an important political bargaining counter" between the apartheid government and the vocal southern African states. Fion de Vletter has observed that "one of the attractions for Mozambique signing the Nkomati Accord [in 1984] was the prospect of increased mine recruiting" (de Vletter 1987: 202). The Accord was followed by "various high-level meetings between Mozambique and South Africa... to formulate a new labour agreement", which, unfortunately, was never signed. From the mid-1980s the sanctions debate brought the issue of foreign workers on to the international stage. The South African government repeatedly threatened to repatriate these workers if the international community imposed sanctions on it. As if to emphasize the gravity of the matter, in 1986, in retaliation for a landmine blast on the Mozambique-South Africa border, the South African government announced the expulsion of some 60,000 Mozambican migrant mine workers on termination of their contracts (Ibid.: 199).

2. VOLATILE LABOUR MARKETS

The factors outlined above show the political volatility of the southern African labour markets. With the current political and economic changes in the region, this will assume new dimensions in which "migrant labour will be one of the thorniest questions of regional relations to be confronted after apartheid" (Davies 1990; Coplan 1995: 51). The end of liberation and civil wars, the process of democratization and the poor economic performance of the majority of the southern African states have created a new political environment in which migrant labour and other forms of cross-border migrations will be debated. It is therefore in this wider

context that we need to locate the debates on migrant labour currently taking place in Malawi.

Over the last decade, the southern African labour markets have experienced major changes. Employment levels have gone down, resulting in "a labour crisis" (de Vletter 1994: 7). Much of this is blamed on poor economic performance arising from the effects of structural adjustment policies, recession, the debt burden, drought and political and civil strife. Both private and public sectors "have been unable to maintain high rates of labour absorption" (Adepoju 1995: 6). Conversely, the labour force has rapidly grown, with "sharp increases in the numbers of entrants into the labour market annually", coupled with a massive rural-to-urban exodus. These, in turn, "have [further] fuelled the job crisis creating a sustained pressure for labour emigration" (Ibid.: 6). On the positive side, declining employment in the 'formal sector' has opened up opportunities for employment in the 'informal sector' at both the national and regional levels. This, in turn, has increased the mobility of people, creating a new form of 'labour migration' in the form of skilled labour (the brain drain), itinerant traders and other forms of undocumented migration patterns (Leistner 1993; Crush 1997). Given the economic imbalances between the countries of the region, the migration tends to be towards the economically more developed countries of South Africa and Zimbabwe, creating new tensions in the informal sector between the foreign and the local entrepreneurs, street vendors, hawkers, and others. Competition has also increased in the formal job market between foreign and local workers (Southall 1994).

Available evidence suggests that the decline of formal recruiting has resulted in increasing levels of clandestine migration which conflict with the immigration laws of the countries of the region (Crush 1997). As the 'informal sector' expands across political boundaries, there are no clear distinctions between itinerant cross-border traders and 'illegal aliens'. These changes in the labour markets are occurring in all the countries of the region, causing political panic in government circles. Of particular concern is the decline in employment opportunities in the mining industries of the region, and especially that of South Africa. For over a century, the South African mining industry has provided employment to hundreds of thousands of workers from the countries of the region (Bohning 1981; Legassick and de Clercq 1984; Jeeves 1985; Yudelman and Jeeves 1986; Crush 1987). Over the last decade, this has continued to decline. For example, between 1987 and 1993, "a total of 201,617 jobs was lost in the gold and coal mining industry. Of these 60,699 were the jobs of foreign workers" (Head 1995: 92; Crush 1995a: 129-138). It was estimated that by the end of the 1990s, the industry could lose another 150,000 jobs or more to downscaling and retrenchments (Crush 1995b: 21; Seidman 1993: 14-34). A combination of static gold price, recession, and increasing operational costs has forced many mines to rethink their hiring strategies. As many mines struggle for their survival, they have retrenched large numbers of workers, leading to a general decline in employment in the mining industry. At the same time, they have shifted toward internal recruiting and stabilization of their labour force (James 1992).

The retrenchment of foreign workers in the South African mining industry is not totally welcomed by the migrant labour supplying states of the region (de Vletter 1987: 215; Coplan 1995: 49-50; Sechaba Consultants 1997). It has created political tensions between the migrant workers and their governments, in addition to heightening levels of unemployment. In the case of Malawi, the tensions have become part and parcel of the new culture of openness, and thus shaping the country's political discourse in the transition from a one-party dictatorship to a multi-party democracy. Issues of migrant labour are at the centre of political competition between contending parties. They have become campaign tools for whipping up support from the rural communities that used to benefit from labour migration.

During the transition from a one-party regime to a multi-party democracy between 1992 and 1994, ex-migrant workers joined the newly-formed opposition parties *en masse*. Their hope was that once these parties won, they would renegotiate for the resumption of labour recruiting in the country. In their campaigns, some of these parties - especially the UDF "went all the way to promise the resumption of TEBA recruiting once it was voted to power". This promise enabled the UDF to easily win parliamentary seats in some districts of the southern region. "We voted for the UDF to re-open TEBA for us", declared Aubrey Maganga of Chief Mabuka in Mulanje. "If the UDF government does not re-open TEBA, we will not vote for it in the future", he added (Ibid.: 104).

3. MIGRANCY AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

After the general elections, both the opposition parties and the ex-miners expected the UDF-led government to deliver on its campaign promise. During the first meeting of the thirtieth session of parliament in July 1994, which was the first sitting after multi-party general elections, a heated debate arose on the possibility of the resumption of recruiting of the country's labour by the South African mining companies. "The government must spell out the TEBA issue", a member of the opposition Malawi Congress Party (MCP) demanded. "We want to know when President Muluzi is going to go down to South Africa for this TEBA deal", added another MCP member (National Assembly of Malawi 1994: 150). These honourable members were, however, quite aware that "the Republic of South Africa had dismissed the TEBA prospects for Malawi and other countries in the region" but they insisted that the government must "tell the country the truth" (1994: 161).

Three factors accounted for this insistence. First, the opposition parties wanted to hold the UDF accountable for its promises. The reason was that the ruling party had hijacked the popular interests of the ex-miners in order to win the elections. Thus, the opposition members of parliament, and the Malawian people in general, wanted "a confirmation [from] Government that it is so", and the migrant workers can "start preparing to go to TEBA" (1994: 183). Second, the issue of migrant labour has always been at the centre of Malawian politics. In the previous regime,

any official attempts to curtail the recruiting of the country's labour for the South African mines were met with hostile reactions from ex-miners and their households. The government had to "think politically" and ensure that the miners "are pleased" (Chirwa 1996: 632). For a country where labour migration absorbed not less than 15 per cent of the economically active population at the national level, and more than 35 per cent in some individual districts suffering from land pressure, any debate on labour recruiting became politically charged. Third, and most important, it has to do with the manner in which Malawian workers were repatriated from South Africa between 1988 and 1992 (Chirwa 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b and 1998a). Stover Ngwira of Kaboko Village in the area of chief Mkumbira in Nkhata Bay district referred to the repatriation as "the expulsion of the dirty and the profane". "We were never told about it, we were given leave grants, but when we inquired about our return to work, they just laughed at us.... When the leave period was over and we wanted to go back, we were told we could not go because our government was the one that decided that TEBA should be closed to all Malawians..." (interview on 16/7/97). It was the unaccountable manner in which the repatriation occurred that infuriated most Malawian miners. For this reason, they wanted, and still want to know who should be held responsible: is it the Malawi government, the South African government, TEBA, the COM, or the miners themselves? None of these has admitted the responsibility.

Within Malawi, there are three sides to the debates: the first is that of the government, struggling to keep its campaign promises; the second are the opposition parties, forcing the government to fulfil its promises and discrediting it as an irresponsible and lying government; and the third is the side of the migrant workers themselves, waiting anxiously for the day they will start trekking to the mines. Within the migrant workers are two camps: the younger prospective migrants, and the older retired ones. The former are interested in employment opportunities while the latter are concerned about the government not giving them their employment benefits from the mines. A closer analysis of the issues in the debates suggests that these parties do not have the same agenda. Each of them tries to tilt the balance of advantage towards itself by wooing at least one party to its side.

In order to live up to its words, the UDF government has made desperate attempts to convince its ex-migrant worker constituency that some agreements are being discussed with foreign governments. It claims that attempts have been made with the governments of Mauritius, Namibia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, but the focus remains on South Africa. For example, when the Malawi President Bakili Muluzi met with the South African President Nelson Mandela at the OAU meeting in Tunisia, the former is said to have raised the 'TEBA issue' with the latter. Mandela, according to Muluzi, "responded positively to the idea of resuming [the] importation of labour from Malawi" (Chirwa 1994: 108). The UDF functionaries in Malawi and the pro-government press carried colourful reports on this "good news" to the people of the country (**The Herald**, June 1994; **The Nation**, July 4th and December 16th 1994).

The Malawi Congress Party, which was in power at the time of the ban on recruiting, now in the opposition, was not convinced. It publicly criticized the ruling UDF and the State President as "naïve", and lacking foresight: "the people of my constituency used to go to South Africa to work in the mines before [TEBA] was closed," lamented V.G. Chinere, MCP Member of Parliament, "after it was closed, they concentrated on working in the field and completely forgot about TEBA", he further argued:

But when it was announced in Tunisia... that our State President and the South African President had struck a deal to reopen TEBA to Malawians, the people of my constituency [became] anxious to go, and are asking when they should expect to take up their contracts (National Assembly of Malawi 1994:247).

The MCP's strategy is to use the same tool the UDF had used in its campaign in order to discredit it. The State President, capitalizing on his popularity during the campaign period, and his victory in the elections, responded by personally committing himself to negotiations with the South Africans, but the opposition remain unconvinced:

President Muluzi, at the height of the campaign... told people that he had resolved the TEBA issue with President Mandela. However, what surprised most of us [who listened] to the remarks critically, was that the President said he could not trust any of his Ministers to go to South Africa to finalize the TEBA deal, but that he was going to go down there himself to South Africa, to finalize this deal personally....It's bad enough... for the president not to have that much confidence in his ministers.... We feel a little bit uncomfortable about those remarks being revealed in public. We are afraid that might indeed undermine the confidence that the public should have in these Cabinet Ministers (Ibid.: 161).

The aim of the MCP and the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), the two opposition parties in parliament, is simply to show that this is not a government that can be trusted. It lacks negotiating skills, and has no vision for the future. It was interested in simply using the "TEBA issue as a campaign tool", without taking into consideration the plight and interests of those directly affected. According to the opposition, these people "now suspect that there is something clearly wrong in government" (Chirwa 1994: 108).

4. GOVERNMENT DISHONESTY

The ex-miners are themselves aware of the politicking involved in these issues: "we know it is all about politics... it is quite clear that the whole issue is about politics... it is about multi-party politics... and we are kicked around like a ball by players in the game" (interviews with Fred Kamanga on 17/7/97 and Boniface Phiri on 18/7/97). They believe that now the issue is no longer about the resumption of

recruiting, but about competition between the ruling and the opposition parties in the country (interview with James Chirwa on 18/7/97). In their opinion, it is important to separate the issues involved in the debate. These are three: the government's insincerity in its promises, its failure to give them their 'pensions' and employment benefits; and the competition for power among the political parties. Of interest to them are the first two. "Our President always lies to us concerning TEBA," they argue, "we are therefore led to think that his government embezzled our money" (interview with MacMesha Chiweta on 22/7/97). His government is insincere and dishonest because:

President Muluzi told us during the campaign for the general elections that we would resume going to South Africa if we voted for him. So we did just that. We voted him to power because we were convinced that Kamuzu had closed TEBA. So by voting Muluzi to power we thought TEBA would be re-opened. But up to this day his promises are not fulfilled. Now we just want him to give us our money. It is ours, we toiled for it (Ibid.)

There is ample evidence that some money had been paid by the TEBA/COM for the Malawian ex-miners in the form of pensions, retrenchment benefits, and compensation for deaths and accidents. For example, not less than 1.3 million South Africa Rands (equivalent to more than 3 million Malawi Kwacha at the time) was paid for these purposes between 1994 and 1995 (TEBA 1995). "This money was not accounted for by the Malawi authorities - at least up to December 1995" (Chirwa 1997a: 647). Media and official reports from within Malawi also confirm this:

It may be recalled that an audit inspection conducted at the Malawi [High Commission's] Office in South Africa revealed that 5 million Kwacha [about US\$ 200,000] ex-miner's money had allegedly been misappropriated by a cabinet minister. The minister of course denied the allegation, saying he had used the money on an urgent official trip to South East Asia and also to buy "speakers" for the new State House in Lilongwe... (**The Malawi News**, March 21-27th 1998: 13).

What the minister denied was the allegation that he, personally, 'misappropriated' the money. He did not categorically deny that the money was paid by the TEBA/COM and was meant for the ex-miners. The Auditor General's report was, itself, very clear on the source of the money and the purposes for which it was paid. The minister's, and his government's view is that the money was used for a noble 'national purpose'.

The diversion of the money by the government raised another heated debate in parliament in August, 1997, with opposition members accusing government of corruption and insensitivity. Two members from the opposition were booted out of the house in the course of the debate. One of them was physically manhandled by a colleague from the ruling party for making strong remarks on the government's corrupt dealings with the ex-miner's money. At the centre of the debate is the

question of morality. The opposition parties hold that the ruling party and its government are manipulating and riding on the plight and predicament of vulnerable groups to sustain their power. This view is also held by both the ex-miners themselves, and the independent observers in the country. A good example of the latter is the media, which argues that:

the whole thing smacks of moral bankruptcy. It is tantamount to a rich man stealing from a poor fellow, something everybody abhors. Yet here is an entire government doing it.... Without belittling them, it must be mentioned that these miners are a class of people living at the edge of poverty. Being without any steady source of income at home, they travelled all the way to South Africa where they worked under hazardous conditions underground. There is no justification therefore for the government to withhold this payment, more so when the mining authorities in South Africa admit they sent the money to Malawi (Ibid.: 13).

On its part, the current government argues that it has no obligation to the ex-miners. The issue was between them and the previous government, on the one hand, and, on the other, these and the combination of the TEBA and the COM, in South Africa. In any case, the discussions between the previous government and the concerned parties in South Africa were closed in the late 1980s. The current government has no legal and political basis to re-open the case. Furthermore, the government claims that the ex-miners have not come up with legal documents to support their case. However, this argument is not true. There are ex-miners with documents that show that they are owed money (Interviews with Lloyd Chilewe on 8/12/89; Executive Committee Members of The Malawi Fukulani Union on 9/12/93; Robert Chirwa on 18/7/97). Some of them are even aware that their lives were insured, and they question "why nothing has been given to us from the insurance" (interview with John Longwe on 16/7/97).

The Malawi government, both in the past and at present, has never been honest with the ex-miners' payments. It has never given them their full long-service, disability, providence, severance and retrenchment benefits. Some of them "had to wait up to five months before receiving their deferred pay." This, according to TEBA officials, "was a serious default on the part of the Malawi authorities" (Chirwa 1997a: 105). Analysts have further observed that "there was too much red tape and skimming from the workers' earnings by the bureaucracy, so much that some never got their just reward while others remain unpaid to this day" (Ibid.: 105). Of late, opposition parties have capitalized on this. They have called on the government to give a full account of how much money the government received from the South African employers of Malawian labour and how the money has been disbursed. During a recent sitting of parliament (in August 1997), the Labour Minister attempted to give an explanation, but the figures he cited were far below what the opposition members and the ex-miners expected to hear.

Early in June 1998, the Malawi President paid an official visit to South Africa where he held discussions with government officials and members of the business

community, selling his country to them as a place with great potential for investments. Among his major promises were "the abundance of cheap labour" in his country, his personal commitment to the processing of employment permits, and the facilitation of movement of capital and personnel. To emphasize the seriousness with which he approached these issues, he jokingly concluded that "if you decide tonight, I will give you a lift on my plane tomorrow". This type of message finds fertile ground in those South Africans who argue that to control illegal immigration into that country, their government should encourage investment in the countries of the region. This, they argue, would reduce economic imbalances and create employment opportunities at the regional level; and in the process illegal immigrations will be controlled. The South African government is thus encourage to extend its post-apartheid Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) beyond its political borders as both a political and economic tool for regional interaction, cooperation and integration.

5. THE MEDIA IN THE DEBATE

The Malawi government's handling of the ex-miner's issue has received a lot of criticism from the media, and especially the pro-opposition newspapers (**The Daily Times**, December 16th 1994 and June 8th 1998; **The Malawi News**, June 4-10th and July 23-29th 1994; March 21-27th and June 6-12th 1998; **The Malawian**, July 2-4th 1994; **The Michiru Sun**, January 7-13th 1994; **The Weekly Mail**, June 23rd 1994). During a press conference on his return from South Africa, the Malawi president was asked to clarify the official position on the resumption of the recruiting of the country's labour by South African employers; and the money owed to the ex-miners. His response was:

I did not discuss the TEBA matter with the South African President, Mr Nelson Mandela, during this visit. The correct position is that country is also facing a high unemployment rate.... We are also of the view that we should create a conducive atmosphere in our country to generate enough jobs for our people...[but] I do not want you to twist the story and say: "No TEBA!", I am not saying there is no TEBA (**The Malawi News**, June 6-12th 1998: 1-2).

The media called this "good executive thinking, but poor speed"; and they quickly capitalized on the contradiction in the president's response:

If the South African government is not prepared to accept Malawians to work in that country in view of the high percentage of unemployment among South Africans, what justification is there for the state president to dispute the fact that there is no TEBA for Malawian mine workers? Is he not contradicting himself? This shows that President Muluzi is not willing to change his habit of promising people things he knows are not practical.... The UDF government must learn to tell the truth.... President Muluzi's contradictory statement on the TEBA issue

should open the eyes of Malawians that it is dealing with a government which just promises them the moon when in reality it knows that it is just cheating people to live by false hopes. Who does Muluzi want to please? It is better to be honest than to promise people lies to maintain himself in power (**The Daily Times**, June 8th 1998: 8).

The leading opposition newspapers in the country, **The Malawi News** and **The Daily Times**, further carried a cartoon of the Malawi leader kneeling in front of a stern-looking President Mandela of South Africa with the words: "how about the TEBA issue, Sir?" (**The Malawi News**, June 6-12th 1998: 4); and "of course, you asked me to tell my people the truth about TEBA, but just how do I do it?" (**The Daily Times**, June 8th 1998: 8). For this, the two papers received a harsh reprimand from the president personally and from officials of his ruling party, followed by threats targeted at the editors and key reporters of the papers. One of the editors reprimanded remained undaunted:

[The] question is: has it not always been pointless to tell the people that the UDF will re-introduce TEBA? Has it not always been pointless for the President and his men to discuss TEBA with their South African counterparts? *It has always been pointless!* Only that Muluzi and his men saw a point where there was none. And it has taken them four years to realise that the point they had been seeing was actually not there. Again, the question is: if it takes four years for this president to see what has been there for years, can he really see into the future? Is he capable of planning ahead? It worries me! (**The Daily Times**, June 8th 1998: 8).

The TEBA issue has thus put the Malawi president's and his government's credibility at stake, causing official and public embarrassment. Ex-mine workers continue to gather outside offices of the Labour Department throughout the country. Petitions are dispatched to the President and the Ministry of Labour almost every month. Associations of ex-miners have been formed in various districts in the country (Chirwa 1997a: 105-106). The purpose is to put pressure on the government to address the plight of these people. Given the culture of openness, and the freedoms of speech and association that have accompanied the coming of multi-party democracy, these associations have the potential of becoming influential pressure groups. The issues of labour migration will thus continue to shape the country's political discourse in future. In an attempt to narrow down the fissures in the popular movement, the press has recently called upon the human rights organizations to join the ex-miners struggle: "it is most disconcerting to observe that despite the presence of several human rights groups in the country, nobody is prepared to speak for the miners. No one cares for their situation.... They are being jailed. And everybody is quiet" (**The Malawi News**, March 21-27th 1998: 13). This kind of populist appeal was typical of human rights organizations during the campaign for political change in the early 1990s (Africa Watch 1990: 4-5). It is

thus very likely to receive attention from rights activists and other concerned groups.

6. CONCLUSION

The case of the ex-miners discussed here demonstrates the interest bases of the popular forces in Malawian politics; their struggle for political space in the democratization process; and how the powerful political actors manipulate them. Much as the ex-miners have demonstrated their ability, albeit with limitations, to resist manipulation by the ruling party, and to hold the government responsible, accountable and transparent, they are still in an awkward position of being taken advantage of by the opposition parties and the media for the furtherance of their own interests. The constant lies by the ruling party and its government demonstrate the realization that it is important to maintain the support of the under classes as the driving motor of the democratization process. Viewed from the point of the ex-miners, the foregoing discussion shows that democracy is more than a political practice. It is also a moral value or imperative; a permanent aspiration for freedom and for a better socio-economic and political order. "People always feel the need to improve their material conditions of life as well as to feel freer.... This need becomes a necessity, or even a political demand for a new social project when their situation deteriorates, or when they are in a period of crisis" (Nzongola-Ntalaja 1997: 11). The case of the Malawian ex-miners thus demonstrates how a group of people is struggling for space to make a political demand, and to set a new social project. The underlying principle is to have some tangible material benefits from their political labour in the democratization process.

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