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SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

Malawi on Edge as the 'Warm Heart' Mourns the Head of State

By *Matthew P. Dearing*

Journal Article | Apr 6 2012 - 12:15pm

On April 5th, the Malawi Head of State, President Bingu wa Mutharika, 78, died at Kamuzu Central Hospital of cardiac arrest. While initial reports claim his body was flown to South Africa as a “formality,” it is likely senior members of the Cabinet and ruling party are buying time to manipulate the succession process before making an official announcement. Given the complexity of personalities and polarity within the Cabinet, Malawi faces a period of political uncertainty and the potential for sporadic instability.

Panic and uncertainty is escalating in the small east-African nation that has seen little violence since the 1964 independence. The latest spate of violence was in July 2011, when police killed 20 anti-government protestors. On Thursday, police were deployed throughout Lilongwe and 15 soldiers were placed outside Vice-President Joyce Banda’s residence. It is not clear whether they are there to secure the VP residence or to prevent Banda from leaving – essentially placing her under house arrest.

According to the Constitution, First Vice-President Joyce Banda will take over as the new head of state. However, her swearing in will likely occur under great turmoil. In 2010, Mutharika sacked her from the ruling Democratic People’s Party (DPP) based on disagreements over the 2014 election. Mutharika arranged to position his brother Peter, the nation’s foreign minister as the DPP presidential candidate in 2014. Adding to the Cabinet complexities, Joyce Banda remained as vice-president since it is an elected position. Banda subsequently created her own People’s Party to compete in parliament. If sworn in, she will be the first female head of state in Malawi. However, sources claim that a meeting is to be held next week by senior members of the cabinet to change the constitution so that the speaker of the Parliament, Henry Chimunthu Banda becomes President. This would present a detrimental Constitutional crisis that could drive the impoverished nation into further disarray.

The passing of Mutharika brings an already ambiguous future into doubt. Mutharika made critical economic and foreign policy blunders and turned increasingly erratic over his tenure. In April 2011, Mutharika booted the UK High Commissioner, Fergus Cochrane-Dyet, from Malawi after accusations of autocracy and intolerance were leaked from diplomatic cables. Mutharika cursed foreign donor nations this year, telling them to “go to hell.” In response to the violent government crackdowns in July, the US cut a \$350 million aid package set to rebuild a power grid.

The end of Mutharika’s era offers significant opportunities to rebuild relations with foreign donors. Joyce Banda, with a strong record of supporting the constitution and human rights, stands outside the dirty politics within DPP and could offer a fig leaf to donors tired of corruption and implacable leadership.

However, the powerful DPP stands in her way. While Banda’s inauguration would be historic and opportunistic for change, it will likely be stifled by individuals in the DPP fearful of losing their grip on

power.

About the Author



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Matthew P. Dearing is a research associate completing a PhD in the National Security Affairs Department at the Naval Postgraduate School. His dissertation focuses on the variation of paramilitary groups in Afghanistan. He is a prior-service Marine with a BA from UC Berkeley and MA from the Naval Postgraduate School. His interests have taken him throughout Afghanistan, Belarus, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Malawi.

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