

Chapter 6

Events on Polling Day

Opening of the Poll

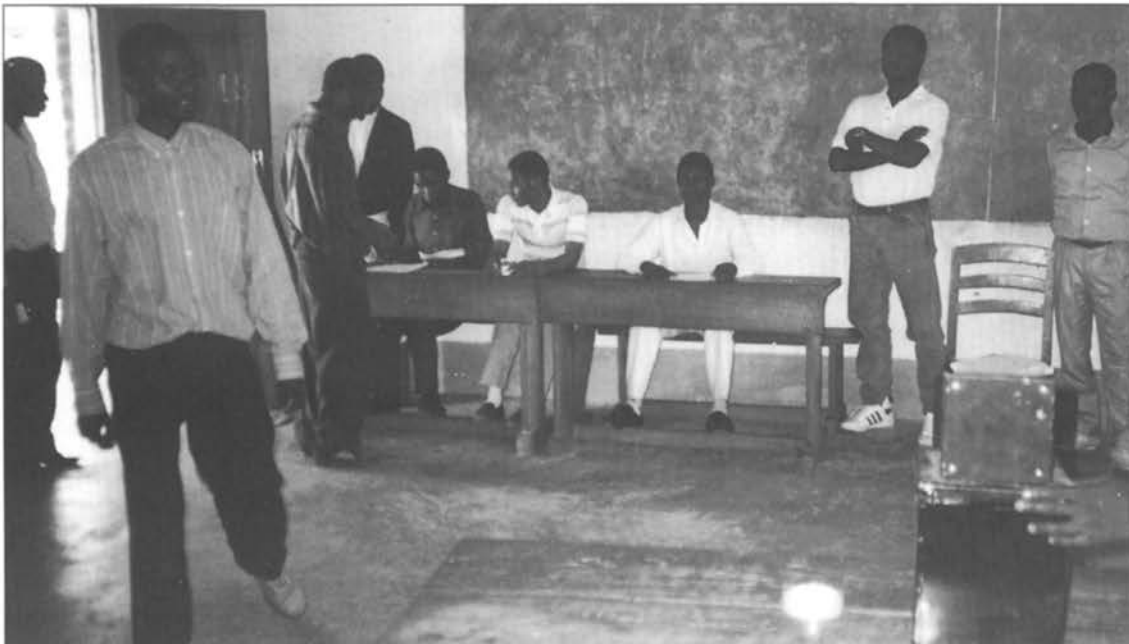
It was in the bright sunshine of a Tuesday morning that Malawi held its first multi-party elections since independence. Well before sunrise, long queues of voters had formed outside polling stations. Hundreds, in some cases thousands, of voters had gathered in long, orderly lines. Our teams which were deployed throughout the country to observe the opening of the poll at various centres almost invariably found that even before dawn their arrival had been preceded by a significant proportion of voters. We were told by some voters that they had arrived as early as midnight.

Polling staff often stayed overnight at their polling stations to make final preparations and ensure that materials were properly distributed. Most polling centres opened punctually at 6.00 a.m. or within a few minutes of that time. The procedures for the opening of the poll were followed substantially at all the stations visited. The ballot boxes were opened, held high and shown to the polling officers, party monitors and others present. The polling officers and party monitors voted first and then the other registered voters were allowed to vote.

The early arrival of so many voters at polling stations across the country testified to a widespread enthusiasm to exercise the democratic franchise. So significant a proportion of early voters also suggested that turnout would be high, a fact which was later confirmed in the parliamentary election with a recorded participation of 80.39 per cent of registered voters (3,034,800 voters) and a similar high figure in the presidential election where the turnout was 80.54 per cent of registered voters (3,040,665 voters).

Layout and Facilities

Voting centres were set up in schools, public buildings or in the open air. In the case of the open air stations, there was the advantage that adequate space was available for a station to



Preparing for the polls... polling officials 'rehearse' the system on the eve of polling day



Commonwealth Observers Hugh Templeton and S K Singh (centre) watch election materials arrive at a station in Mzuzu

be properly laid out. The open air arrangement provided transparency in procedures and protection of secrecy. Even when the stations were in enclosed spaces the layout was generally good. The facilities were on the whole satisfactory – adequate tables and chairs were provided for polling staff and party monitors. In a few cases, however, some of the polling centres in public buildings and schools were overcrowded.

We welcomed the enterprise often shown by polling staff in making sure that the siting of the parliamentary and presidential ballot boxes contributed to the smooth processing of voters, avoiding the confusion that could have arisen if the boxes were not physically well apart.

Even before the poll, it was clear that Returning Officers sought to ensure that polling stations were adequately staffed and equipped, that transport was mobilised and necessary liaison maintained with political parties in constituencies. We were satisfied that adequate arrangements were made not only to provide sufficient polling staff but to deliver the necessary equipment and materials to the stations even in remote areas. We were able to see the assistance given by a military helicopter which took off from the Northern Region to supply Likoma and Chizumulu islands.

There appeared to be an impressive degree of integrated working arrangements between those in the field and those at the headquarters of the Electoral Commission. Indeed, on the eve of the poll, the compounds of the offices of the Returning Officers had become veritable hives of activity as officials and volunteers gathered together to undertake the complex tasks inherent in an election, from overseeing the distribution of materials to the construction of polling booths.

Performance of Electoral Officials

Any account of the events of polling day would be inadequate without acknowledging the managerial and logistical skills of electoral officials at all levels. These events represent a remarkable effort by polling staff, monitors and voters alike to breathe vitality and a renascent spirit of democracy into the national life of Malawi.



Orderly lines of voters began forming, sometimes from well before dawn

We found that polling staff undertook their duties with confidence, displaying a high degree of competence and professionalism. The spirit of impartiality and dedication among the polling staff helped to promote a favourable atmosphere in polling stations where any problems that arose were fully discussed and, where possible, resolved. Polling staff were courteous and helpful to voters, party monitors and observers. They performed a critical role in educating voters on the spot, making patient efforts to explain the voting process to each voter. It was usual to find that at least two poll clerks could speak the local language.

The polling officials made serious efforts to see that the electoral law and procedures were observed. As many had served as electoral officials in the June 1993 Referendum, the experience was still fresh in their minds and they were able to use it to good effect.

There were discrepancies in the way polling staff interpreted rules and procedures, a feature common enough in elections. What was commendable was that where problems did arise there was often open discussion and consultation with monitors in seeking solutions to these problems. The spontaneity of such interchanges bodes well for deepening a culture of consultation. Where there were lapses at polling stations, this was the result of human error rather than the product of corrupt intent.

As noted earlier in this Report, many of the polling staff were teachers and civil servants holding positions of trust in the local community. This factor helped to bolster public confidence in the electoral process.

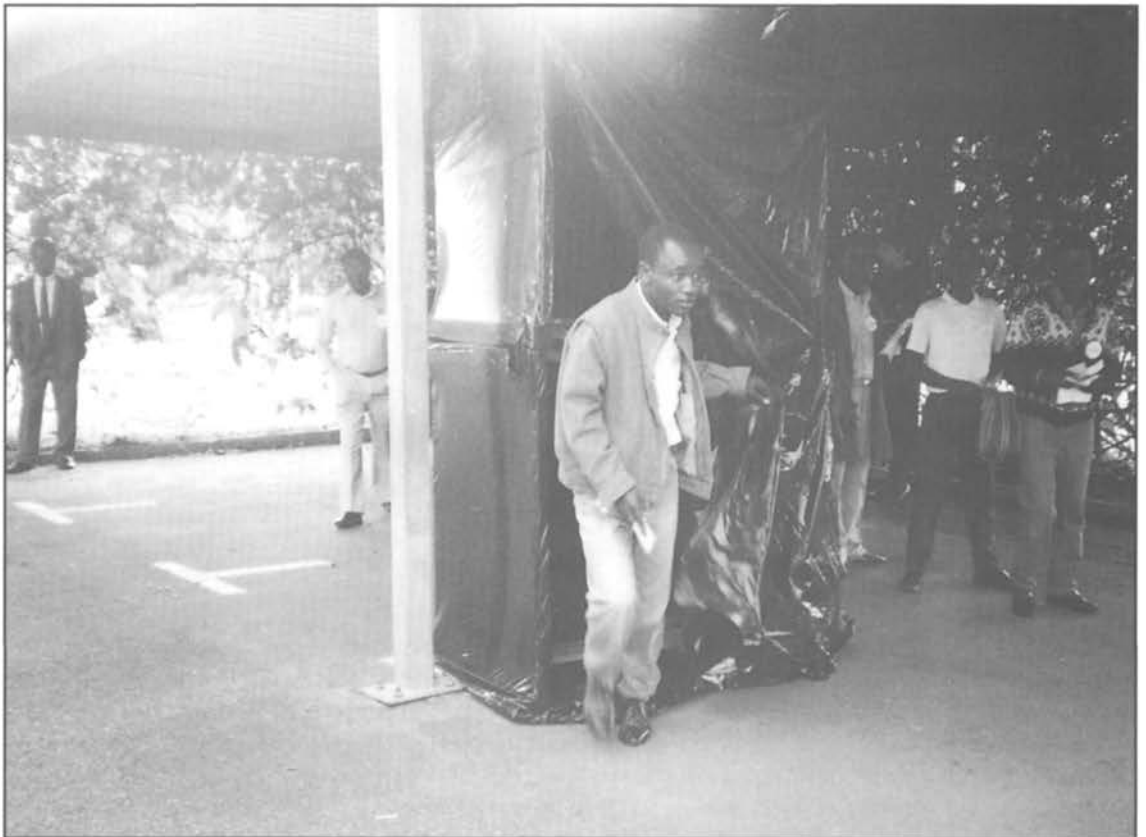
Party Monitors

The party monitors, particularly those representing the three big parties, namely MCP, UDF and AFORD, were always present at the polling stations visited. They were quiet, but appeared purposeful in their task of observing the procedures and looking out for any irregularities. It has been said that party representatives at polling stations are the 'front line' of democracy. Their vigilance is crucial to the integrity of the process.

A significant illustration was the way in which party representatives, regardless of political affiliation, often consulted together before raising any concern with a Presiding Officer. They adopted a constructive approach to problems, avoiding raising unwarranted queries, and



Before polling began, polling officials showed the empty ballot boxes to party agents, observers and voters. The boxes were then sealed



Voting booths were sometimes wooden frames covered with plastic



Polling officials explain the voting process... they were very conscientious about their responsibilities

were quick to admit to Observers that the polling had been conducted smoothly and there was no cause for complaint. They were assisted in their task by the efficiency of the polling staff and the apparently good quality of the register which resulted in few complaints being raised. The monitors were clearly identified by special badges provided by the Electoral Commission. Very few complaints were made by party monitors to us.

The absence of antipathy between party representatives at the local level was an encouraging sign that a culture of mutual tolerance has already taken root in Malawi society, a matter of some significance in developing democratic processes. By and large, parties also respected the prohibition on campaigning 48 hours before the elections.

Voters

The voters did Malawi proud. Barring very few exceptions, they displayed the best qualities of orderliness, patience and good humour that could be expected in the circumstances. Despite the relatively complex voting procedure, the voters coped with quiet dignity even when assistance was requested from polling officers. However, the inability of some voters to understand the voting procedure, probably because of the relatively short period for the implementation of the voter education programme, resulted in a few ballot papers being placed in the discard boxes rather than in the appropriate ballot boxes. Nevertheless, despite deficiencies in the voter education programme and instances of incorrect voting procedures being followed, the voters of Malawi demonstrated a clear awareness of their democratic duties and knowledge of voting procedures.

Security Presence

The deployment of members of the security forces won the admiration of many of our Observers. The police presence at polling stations was visible but discreet. There was scarcely any hint of intrusiveness by the police or other security personnel. The police were courteous and helpful in the main to voters and also played a useful role in maintaining queues in situations where overcrowding might have led to confusion at some polling stations. Given the good mood and trust that prevailed, nobody felt intimidated by the security presence.

Security of the Ballot

The voting procedure, layout and facilities all served to ensure the security of the ballot. We received no complaints of potential or actual breach of secrecy at any polling station. The voting booths had wooden frames covered with fabric or plastic and were quite adequate for polling purposes, providing adequate protection to preserve the secrecy of the ballot. The siting of the booths was particularly important given the fact that two balloting procedures had to be accommodated in fairly confined spaces, but again practical measures were applied by polling staff to ensure secrecy.

There was no evidence of any organised irregularities on polling day; nor were there any complaints of voter intimidation, fraud or deliberate disenfranchisement.

The Discard Box

The employment of a discard box placed in the voting booths for discarded ballots caused a degree of confusion, with some voters putting their sealed envelopes into the discard box instead of the proper ballot box. Part of the problem arose from the fact that the discard box had two apertures which apparently led some voters to think that one was meant for the

envelope containing the ballot paper. Some polling officials anticipated or reacted to this problem by sealing one of the apertures of the discard box.

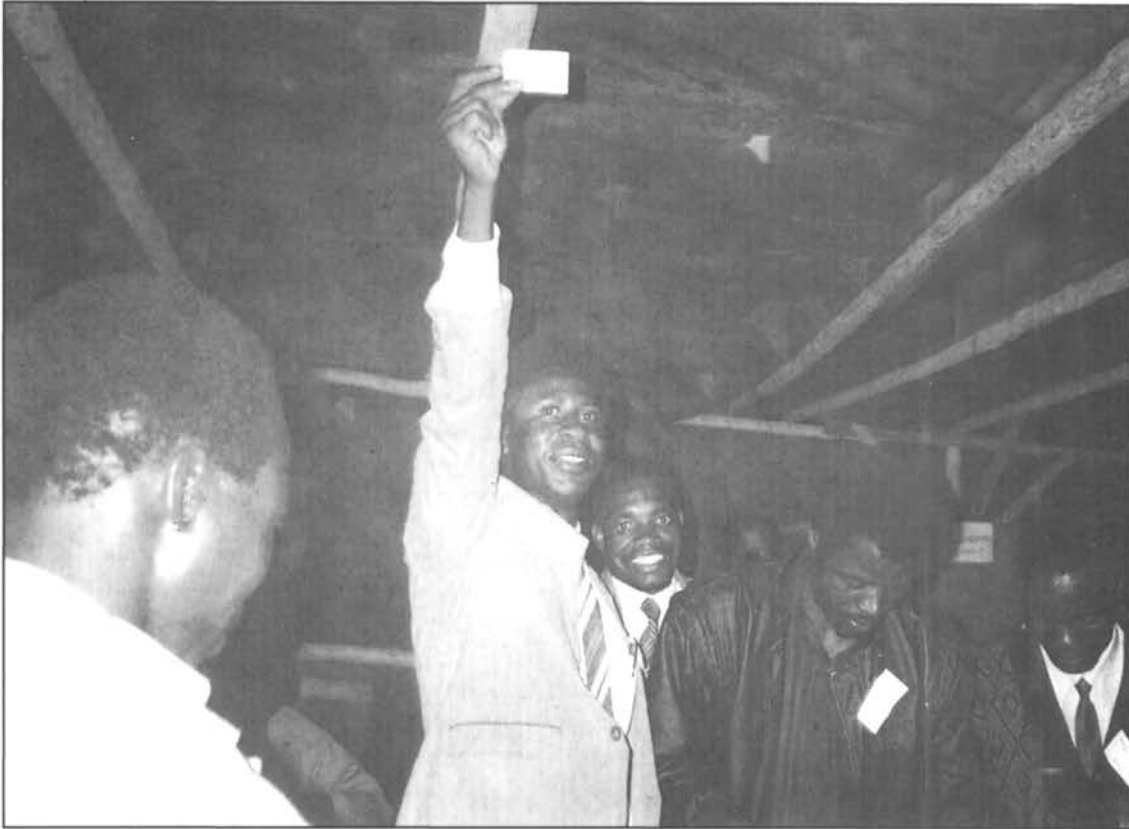


Discard papers were burnt with some ceremony in Mbayani

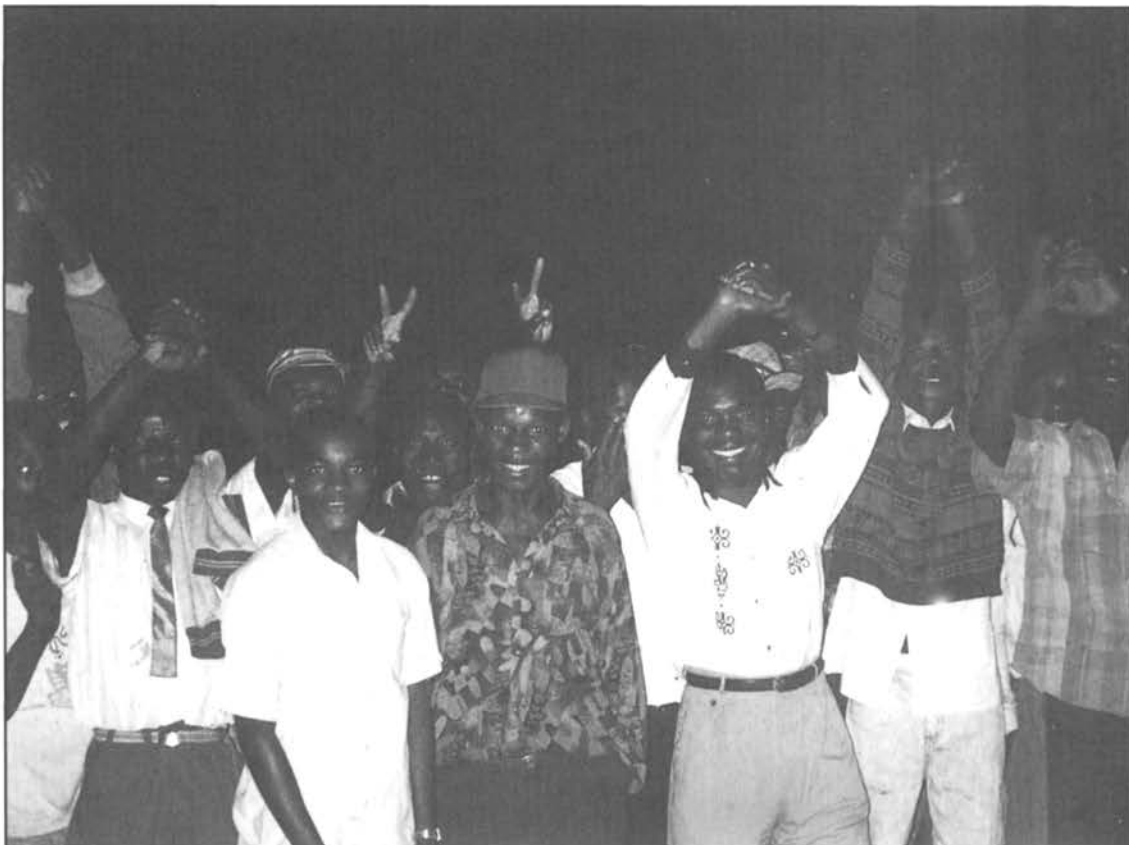
The Count

In most areas the poll closed promptly at 6.00 p.m. Counting was conducted with procedural care being exercised, the *Polling Station Officers' Manual* being consulted at successive steps. The counting environment was generally peaceful, orderly and calm. Parliamentary votes were counted first and counting of the presidential ballots followed immediately thereafter. Polling staff also counted the number of unused, spoilt and null and void ballots in order to provide a final reconciliation. Presiding Officers were scrupulous in showing party agents every ballot opened and placing them in the right pile.

The degree of illumination at counting centres varied and in some cases was inadequate. The Presiding Officer supervised destruction of the contents of the discard box before the count commenced. Counting at stations was conducted in slightly different ways. The



Counting the votes in Mbayani



Supporters gathered outside the counting stations cheered as the results were announced... note the 'V' signs for AFORD and the 'clasped hands' for the UDF

contents of the discard box were examined prior to burning and we noticed in some instances that ballots which had been wrongly placed in the discard box had been counted. Despite the problem of the discard box, the number of null and void ballots was insignificant at less than 2 per cent nationally.

There were difficulties in the process of the consolidation of results following the poll. This resulted from a mix of factors including problems in transportation of boxes from Polling Centre to Returning Officer, and exhaustion of polling officials.

An Illustration

A striking example of the atmosphere on polling day was provided by the Polling Centre at Mbayani Ground, in Blantyre City West, which was an example of the determination and enterprise shown in so many areas to make the elections a success. Mbayani is a densely populated area without a building suitable for use as a polling station. When we visited the chosen ground the day before polling a few stakes and some tarpaulin lay on the grass and the Supervisory Presiding Officer and some of his staff were beginning to build a seven-station centre for 7,000 voters. No materials had arrived.

Yet when polling opened just 43 minutes late the next day, the stations were properly manned and equipped, with thousands of voters forming seven orderly queues. When the polls closed promptly at 6.00 p.m. all voting had been completed and boxes secured. Soon the discarded ballots were being burned in front of a wildly excited crowd. Counting began in each station by the light of hurricane lamps, portable battery lamps, one or two candles and a solitary electric bulb supplied by a long lead trailed across the field from a well-wisher's house.

The crowd yelled as each vote was held high before being dropped into the appropriate cardboard tray. The party monitors crowded round to watch that every vote was correctly sorted. One station was particularly badly lit and at one point members of the crowd protested to us that the vote counting was not transparent. The Supervisory Presiding Officer quickly rearranged the lighting and everyone was satisfied.

One by one each station announced the results of the parliamentary and then of the presidential polls and by 9.00 p.m. the work on Mbayani Ground was completed to the persistent cheers and dancing of the crowd. Throughout the noisy and sometimes confused proceedings, the Supervisory Presiding Officer remained calm, firm and on top of his task.