

Malawi's Muslim Communities in their Local and Global Context

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MUSLIMS AND ISLAM IN AFRICA

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Introduction

From their inception, and throughout their history, the way in which Malawi's Muslim communities have developed has been the result of people individually and collectively making choices about their identity, about their code for living, about how they can best have control over their lives, about how the world is to be understood, about their social, economic and political aspirations and how they might best achieve them. They have made, and are making, these choices, under the influence and within the constraints of ideas, pressures and events from within Malawi and from the wider world, from within the realm of Islam and from outside it.

For long periods of their history Malawi's Muslim communities, as a result of the interplay of the factors mentioned above and of choices made by themselves and others, came to be to a large extent marginalised not only from the rest of the Islamic world both in terms of communications and of the nature of the beliefs and practices adopted, but also from many aspects of social, economic and political life within Malawi.

Comparatively recently the range of choices open to Malawi's Muslims has been much broadened by a number of events, trends and developments from inside Malawi and without.

This paper has three main aims. The first is to outline and explain the origins, establishment and development and the distinctive characteristics of Malawi's indigenous Muslim communities. The second is to describe and account for the Islamic revival that challenged, and to some degree transformed them. The third is to describe and analyse how, in the present era, local and global factors are circumscribing and influencing the status, the actions, the aspirations and the vision of different individuals and sections of the Muslim communities particularly as they relate to the state and to other groupings within Malawi.

The origins and establishment of Muslim communities in Malawi

Malawi's Muslim communities trace their earliest beginnings to influences from the coast of East Africa. From pre-Islamic time part of the Indian Ocean trade circuit, the intermingling there of Arab and African has given rise to the Swahili language, culture and civilisation with Islam as the religion of its people. Over the centuries the Swahili built up various forms of contact with peoples of the interior around the Great Lakes for purposes of trade. By at least as early as 1700 C.E. one of the tribal groups most involved were the Yao, of whom much more will be written later in this paper.

In the area that is now Malawi, before about the second half of the 19th Century, contact with the Swahili does not seem to have left more than faint traces of communities having been touched by Islamic influences. The catalyst for the eventual establishment of Muslim communities in Malawi may well have been the flowering in the early 19th Century of the Umani dynasty in Zanzibar. With more finance available to the traders in this part of their empire they began to mount their own expeditions into the interior of eastern Africa, still tending to co-operate with the partners they had already known there.

The planting and growth of Muslim communities in what was to become Malawi followed two patterns. The first was where coastal traders established areas of control on the shores of Lake Malawi and influenced local people to adopt their religion, as was the case in Nkhotakota¹ in the Central region and to a lesser extent in Karonga in the North. More significant though was the choice of a large section of

¹ G. Shepperson, "The Jumbes of Kota Kota and some Aspects of the History of Islam in British Central Africa", in I.M. Lewis (ed.), *Islam in Tropical Africa*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp.193-205, and F. Kwaule, "Kandenda and the Swahili Challenge" in D.S. Bone (ed.), *Malawi's Muslims*, Blantyre: CLAIM, 2000, pp.64-68.

the Yao, a major tribal group, to become Muslims.² An understanding of how they came to do this and what it came to mean for them will require a certain amount of detailed explanation.

Long association with the coast, which came to represent the outside world and the source of wealth and status, had given many in Yao society a predisposition to admire and emulate the ways of its people. When David Livingstone visited their area in 1868 he commented on how the Yao chose to copy the 'coastalists' in their way of dressing, their style of building and even the crops they planted.³ Around this time, if not before, the Yao chiefs, for a variety of reasons, political, economic and perhaps religious, began to adopt their religion.

The speed with which, and the manner in which their subjects followed them was heavily influenced by the intrusion of another set of representatives of a global power, the British, who had their own religious, commercial and, eventually, political agenda.⁴

Inspired by the ambition of David Livingstone to plant a Christian civilisation in the interior of Africa by establishing what he termed 'legitimate trade' to replace the existing trade that he saw as dominated by slavery, two Scottish Churches had, by 1876, sent missionaries to the Lake Malawi region. These were followed shortly by traders, some sponsored by an almost identical group of Scottish industrialists. The Yao chiefs and their Swahili allies quickly and correctly decided that the trading patterns of these incomers posed a direct threat to those of their own.⁵ Early rivalry

² E.A. Alpers, "Towards a History of the Expansion of Islam in East Africa: The Matrilineal Peoples of the Southern Interior", in T.O. Ranger and I. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion*, London: Heinemann, 1973, pp 172-201.

³ D. Livingstone, *Last Journals*, London: J Murray, 1974, 1, p 74.

⁴ W.P. Johnson, "Mohammedanism and the Yaos", *Central Africa*, 29, 1911, pp. 57-61, pp 101-105 and in *Malawi's Muslims*, pp. 173-180.

⁵ J.K. McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 41.

between the two parties was mainly of a commercial rather than a religious nature but fairly soon developed into a struggle for military and political supremacy.

The missionaries persuaded a rather reluctant British Government to declare the area a Protectorate in 1891. When the British Commissioner demanded that the Muslim Yao chiefs acknowledge his authority, they were faced with the choice between throwing in their lot with one of two external powers, the Swahili, their long time economic partners on whom their wealth was based and with whom they already shared their religion, or the British. Momentously they chose the former and led their people in determined armed resistance till they were eventually 'pacified' in 1895.

While this military defeat was a serious setback to these communities and their leaders, curtailing their military power and, especially with the withdrawal of the Swahili presence, their economic strength, what it did not destroy was their pride in their ethnic and cultural identity. In Islam they were to choose a way of expressing and reinforcing these very qualities.

Key players in the initial stage of people identifying with Islam were the chiefs and one of the instruments they used was their control of the traditional initiation ceremonies, which included circumcision for boys. By incorporating certain Islamic elements into the ceremonies they succeeded in making them the gateway for their young men into both Yao adulthood and into identification with Islam.⁶

The responsibility for introducing and establishing the beliefs and practices that came to be long characteristic of Malawi's Muslim communities belonged largely to another group, the Sheikhs. Mostly Malawians themselves, though often trained at the coast, these Muslim missionaries travelled round the lake and throughout the chieftaincies, with the enthusiastic support of the chiefs, giving instruction in Islamic belief and

⁶ A.H.P. Thorold, "The Yao Muslims", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1995, pp.99-133.

practice, establishing mosques and *madrassas*⁷ and training up young men as Mu'allims⁸ and Sheikhs.⁹

By soon after the turn of the 20th Century Malawi's Muslim communities were solidly and recognisably established. Each Muslim village would have its own mosque, Ramadan would be observed, with varying degrees of strictness, the two Eids would be celebrated, animals would be slaughtered in the approved manner and pork avoided. Many men would wear the caps and robes of the coast as a mark of identity and status.¹⁰

However with regard to life's main events the form of Islam that was developed by Malawi's Muslim communities was highly accommodative of local tradition. The guidance of the Shariah about the regulation of practices surrounding birth, marriage and death tended only to be followed where it was compatible with that of traditional tribal custom.¹¹

A further stimulus to the development, vitality and perhaps the eventual fragmentation of Malawi's Muslim communities came from within the world of Islam but from outside of Malawi and this was the introduction of the ideas and practices of two Sufi Brotherhoods the Shadhiliyya and the Qadiriyya. Both were introduced from the coast by returning Malawian Sheikhs in the early decades of the 20th Century. As well as the energy and enthusiasm they brought to the dissemination of Islam they also introduced certain Sufi practices, happily accepted by the Muslim communities, such as the carrying of flags at funerals, the observance of the Prophet's birthday and a form of *dhikr*, in the Yao language *sikiri*, widely practiced at weddings and

⁷ In the Malawian context the term *madrassa* always refers to a place for Islamic instruction.

⁸ Mu'allim (Arabic) teacher.

⁹ R.C. Greenstein, "The Nyasaland Government's Policy Towards African Muslims 1900-1927, in R.J. MacDonald (ed.) *From Nyasaland to Malawi*, Nairobi; East African Publishing House, 1975, pp. 145-247.

¹⁰ A.L. Hofmeyr, *Het land langs het meer*, Stellenbosch: De Studenten Christen Vereniging van Zuid Afrika, 1910 pp. 105-114 and in *Malawi's Muslims*, pp 165-172.

¹¹ J.N.D. Anderson, *Islamic Law in Africa*, London: Frank Cass 1970, p.166.

festivals.¹² Relations between adherents of the two brotherhoods were often characterised by disputes over whose practices were allowable.

A final significant contribution to the establishment of Islam in Malawi has been that of its Asian Muslim population. In the country from even before colonial times, while remaining socially separate from their African co-religionists, they supported their religious endeavours by financing the construction of mosques and *madrassas*. As they spread throughout the country, often taking their Malawian Muslim workers with them, they were also responsible for building mosques and for planting small Muslim communities in many trading centres. By the census of 1931 the percentage of Muslims in the country was reckoned at 8.4%.¹³

Factors that inhibited a more extensive foundation of Muslim communities in areas beyond the homelands described included the presence of many Christian denominations in the country some of whom actively tried to contain their spread, and to convert to Christianity those who had already become Muslims.¹⁴ In this they were much more successful at the former than the latter. In addition the education systems that the missionaries ran, which offered numeracy and literacy in the vernacular and in English, and thus advancement within the wage earning section of the colonial economy, generally proved more attractive than did the *madrassa* system to tribal groupings which did not have the same investment in Islam.

The Muslims in their turn overwhelmingly chose to reject the option of western education not because they failed to recognise its value, but because it was for long almost exclusively provided by the various Christian missions who tended to use their schools as a means of recruiting people to their own denominations. Muslim parents justifiably regarded these schools as hostile to their religion and liable to estrange

¹² A.H.P. Thorold, "The Yao Muslims" pp. 103-157.

¹³ Nyasaland, *Report of the Census of 1931*, Zomba; Government Printer, 1932.

¹⁴ D.S. Bone, "The Development of Islam in Malawi and the Response of the Christian Churches c.1860-1986", in *Malawi's Muslims*, pp.113-153.

their children from them. The attempts of Muslims to provide western education themselves and to persuade the Government to make it available free of mission influence were largely ineffectual till relatively modern times.¹⁵

While what amounted to a virtual boycott of mission schools may have helped to keep Muslim communities more cohesive, it went a long way to ensure their virtual exclusion from positions of status, wealth and influence to which possession of western education was the key. It also had the effect of ensuring for the Muslim communities a long lasting legacy of social, economic and political marginalisation.¹⁶

With relatively little contact with the rest of the Muslim world the history of Malawi's Muslims for the rest of the colonial period, and well beyond, was largely the outworking of existing forces and of choices the communities had already made.

Revival

Independence in 1964 inevitably brought many changes in Malawi. Probably the most significant for Malawi's Muslims was the decision of the first President, Dr Kamuzu Banda to fulfil a pledge to end to what he called 'the marriage between education and religion'.¹⁷ Recognising, as did African leaders at that time, the importance of 'nation building', the President was concerned with the lack of development amongst the country's Muslims and determined to remove barriers to their advancement.

While this reform did not transform the situation overnight, the ethos, the curriculum and the teachers themselves in the schools remaining predominantly Christian, an

¹⁵ I.C. Lamba, *The History of Post-war Western Education in Colonial Malawi, 1945-61*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1984, pp.181-215.

¹⁶ D.S. Bone, "Modernists and Marginalisation in Malawi", in *Malawi's Muslims*, pp.69-89.

¹⁷ Malawi Congress Party, *Manifesto*, 1962 p.7.

increasing number of Muslim young people, mostly boys, did begin to progress through the school system. From this group emerged the generation which was to play a key role in the revival of Islam that was to become so visible from the 1980s onward.

This revival of Islam in Malawi was of course part of a world-wide phenomenon. Its stirrings were first felt among the country's Asian Muslims in the 1960s when they began to feel the influence of the *tabligh* movement¹⁸ from the Indian subcontinent. One of the manifestations of a keener interest in their faith was to increase their support of the education of their Malawian co-religionists, often with help from South Africa.¹⁹ By the end of the 1970s the Muslim Association of Malawi, an umbrella body that had been set up to represent all Muslims, through its Youth Committee, and sponsored by Asian Muslims in Malawi and South Africa was active in financing the construction of mosques and providing bursaries for school fees for Muslim children.

The revival was also fed by the opportunities given to a growing number of young educated Malawian Muslims to come into contact with the wider Islamic world through travel, attending international conferences, and studying in Muslim countries such as Sudan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Even those educated Muslims who didn't get these opportunities were able to gain direct access to information, in English, about orthodox Muslim belief and practice. This exposure to an experience of how Islam was practiced within the wider Muslim world led them to realise how far the worship and practice of most Malawian Muslims fell short of the orthodox Islamic ideal as prescribed in the Shariah.

Possession of a good standard of western education also gave an increased number of Muslims access to tertiary education, salaried, professional and managerial posts

¹⁸ The *Tabligh* is a grassroots *da'wa* movement whose members travel around calling Muslims to a full and correct practice of their faith.

¹⁹ I.A.G. Panjwani, "Muslims in Malawi", *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* Vol. 1:2, 1979, pp.158-169, and in *Malawi's Muslims*, pp.188-202.

and, with this, a growing awareness of how far the communities from which they came were socially and economically and even politically marginalised. With this perception of how disadvantaged Muslims were in so many spheres, and how far they differed from the orthodox Islamic ideal, came the determination of many of them to bring about change.

In the early 1980s a new stimulus for revival came in the form of an injection of finance and expertise from the Gulf region of the Middle East, mainly through the African Muslims' Agency (A.M.A.) a progressive, development oriented, *da'wa*²⁰ organisation based in Kuwait. Working through its professional administrators the A.M.A. co-operated with the Muslim Association of Malawi and the growing number of young, skilled, committed western educated Malawian Muslims who were ready, willing and able to further their shared aims of improving the standing of the Muslim communities, increasing their people's knowledge of Islam and 'purifying' its practice amongst them. This partnership, though not the only player, was at the heart of many of the developments that did much not only to transform the Muslim communities but also other people's perception of them.

One initiative was the construction of scores of impressive mosques, very conspicuously situated along main roads. Along with the refurbishment of existing mosques this was a move to give confidence to Muslims and notice to others of the presence and strength of the religion in Malawi.

Another initiative was represented by the *madrassas* that were built beside these mosques. With their curriculum of Qur'an, Hadith, *fiqh*²¹ and *lughah*,²² though there were many factors that worked against their effectiveness,²³ they represented an

²⁰ *Da'wa*, (Arabic), the fulfilment of the Quranic injunction to Muslims to call people to the path of Allah.

²¹ *Fiqh* (Arabic) the study of Islamic Jurisprudence.

²² *Lughah* (Arabic), the study of lexicography.

²³ A.J. Matiki, "Problems of Islamic Education in Malawi. *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* , 12(1) 1991, 127-134, and in *Malawi's Muslims* 159-167,

attempt to build up the Islamic knowledge of the coming generation. Additionally the A.M.A. and other groups and individuals provided funding for the establishment of Islamic Centres for higher learning, some of them staffed by expatriate scholars. These were used to train up students in secular and Islamic studies to a level that they could advance to Islamic institutes abroad, very often in Sudan. The Centres were also used to provide in service training, with a reformist agenda, for instructors for the growing number of *madrassas*.

A clear emphasis was also put on the promotion of western style education among Muslim children. Many more primary schools were established under Muslim proprietorship and still more bursaries awarded to pay fees for Muslim children attending Church and Government owned schools. In order to help and encourage their young people to learn more about their faith and to keep their identity in schools and colleges, where Christians predominated, in 1982 the Muslim Students' Association was formed,²⁴ an organisation with its origins in 1960s North America.

The 1980s also saw a proliferation of Islamic literature available in Malawi. Apart from English translations of the Qur'an there was also a wide range of apologetic and didactic books and pamphlets, many of them published in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Particularly popular were publications of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations and the writings of Abu a'la Maududi. Between 1978 and 1985 The Muslim Association in Malawi claimed to have itself distributed over half a million copies of booklets in Chichewa, the national language, explaining the principal beliefs and giving instruction in the practices of Islam.²⁵

²⁴ N. Nkhata, "Muslim Students Associations in Malawi", *Ramadan and Eid Annual*, 1986, p.127.

²⁵ Report of the Chairman of the Youth Committee accompanying the Eid Magazine of the Muslim Association in Malawi, 1985.

Reactions

The speed and the scope of these developments and others in the Muslim communities, which many had tended to discount as non-progressive, and even backward, caught many in the wider Malawian society by surprise, and were met with a variety of responses.

The Government, dominated at all levels by Christians and, under President Banda, obsessively authoritarian, was always careful to affirm its commitment to freedom of worship for all religions. However its security forces kept close scrutiny on the Muslim communities and on any links with Muslim countries, especially those suspected of promoting revolution, and often imposed restrictions on travel to and from them.

Malawi's church establishment which had long regarded itself as the 'gatekeeper'²⁶ and arbiter of what should be accepted and what tolerated in matters of religion was, on the whole, not particularly welcoming of the revival. Some church leaders interpreted Muslims' new assertiveness as 'aggressive' and expressed an anxiety, which was shared by some other sections of society that activism might lead eventually to militancy.²⁷

The most determined resistance to some aspects of the Islamic revival actually came from within certain sections of the Muslim communities who were not willing to give up the form of their religion which was so well integrated to their way of life and had come to be so much part of their identity. This resistance was led some of the traditional *ulama*,²⁸ particularly those belonging to the Qadiriyya brotherhood. Long regarded by the Muslim communities as the religious leaders and as authorities on matters of belief and practice, many of the older Sheikhs felt their position was being

²⁶ J.Tengatenga, "Religious Pluralism in Malawi; A Challenge to the church", in *Religion in Malawi*, 8, 1998, pp.16-23.

²⁷ *Odini*, 6th-19th June 1986 p. 4.

²⁸ *Ulama* (Arabic) the class of learned people within the Muslim community.

undermined by these foreign representatives of global Islam and their young Malawian allies teaching in the Islamic institutes and contending with them in public debates that many aspects of traditional practice were in fact *bid'a*, innovation. They also resented the fact that many of their own number were being bought over, by the financial advantage the reformists' overseas connections gave them, to teach in the *madrassas* which were proliferating throughout the county.²⁹

Though seemingly at a disadvantage, in view of the reformists' superior organisational and financial strength and their superior knowledge of the Shariah, the traditionalist Sheikhs put up a spirited resistance. They challenged the reformists by turning the charge of *bid'a* against them, claiming it was the reformist themselves who, by setting aside long established practices were not only bringing in innovation but by so doing were confusing Muslims and destabilising their communities.³⁰ Elements from within the Qadiriyya movement eventually engineered the deportation of the main representative of the A.M.A. which led to that organisation withdrawing from Malawi severely disrupting for a time the effectiveness of the Muslim Association of Malawi.

Malawi under a Muslim President

The next major change in Malawi, and the one which ushered in its modern era, was the move to multi-party democracy and the subsequent election of a President who was himself a Muslim. It was brought about by both internal and external factors and Muslim communities were involved in the process and affected by it.

In 1992, after thirty years of quirkily authoritarian rule President Banda was challenged on a number of counts of misgovernment, first by the Catholic Bishops

²⁹ V. Musa, Islam in Malawi before and after Christianity, unpublished manuscript, pp.93-95.

³⁰ *Daily Times*, 5th June, 1984, p. 1.

then in quick support, the Muslim and Church leadership, the legal establishment, workers' organisations and much of the business community. The Muslim Association of Malawi played a full part in the Public Affairs Committee (P.A.C.), a coalition that was formed, with help from Malawian and non-Malawian supporters outside the country, to campaign for the setting up of a referendum on multi-party elections.³¹ The U.S. and its western allies, no longer feeling that, with the demise of the Soviet Union, they needed President Banda's regime as a bulwark against communism in the region, helped to put pressure on him to allow first the referendum then, in 1994, the elections themselves.

The major political parties that emerged to contest this election were based, predictably for Malawi, largely on regional lines and the leader to emerge for the Southern Region dominated United Democratic Front (U.D.F.) was an experienced senior politician who also happened to be a Muslim Yao, Bakili Muluzi.

In the electoral campaign that followed, for the first time in Malawi's history, Islam became a party political issue when some of the U.D.F.'s opponents attempted to suggest that Muluzi in fact had a covert agenda and that a vote for him would carry the risk that Malawi would eventually be Islamised.³² In the event this tactic had little effect on the regional nature of the voting and Bakili Muluzi, was elected the second President of Malawi, with probably twice as many non-Muslims as Muslims voting for him. The election was followed by the drawing up of a new constitution the terms of which safeguarded the democratic process, put an end to detention without trial and laid great emphasis on civil liberties, including freedom of the press.

The removal of a culture of fear induced conformity and silence on any matter that might be deemed to have 'political' overtones had great significance for Muslims as it

³¹ K.R. Ross, "The Transformation of Power in Malawi 1993-94; the Role of the Christian Churches" in K.R. Ross (ed.), *God, People and Power in Malawi*, Blantyre, CLAIM 1996, pp. 15-40.

³² *The Nation*, 21st July 1994, p. 1.

did for all Malawians. After three decades of an increasingly rigidly controlled society, in this new and freer environment, whoever had been elected President, it could have been expected that all groups would feel more at liberty to express their identity, their claims and ambitions. Certainly with a Muslim as President, Muslims and various indicators of Islamic influences gained a higher profile.

Within the country, while Christians still were vastly numerically predominant in the Government, Parliament, the legal establishment, the civil service and security forces, high posts in all of them were given to a larger, but not disproportionate number of Muslims.³³ Eid-ul-Fitr was recognised as a public holiday. Malawian Muslim women in greater numbers began to wear the *hijab*, a practice that had been looked upon with some suspicion in the Banda era. With the liberation of the press from strict censorship and control, a Muslim monthly journal, *Al Muslim*, was one among many new publications to hit the streets. There was also, as was the case throughout Malawian society, a trend towards the establishment of new non-governmental organisations, and a decentralisation of control within those that already existed. Qadiriyya Muslims set up the Qadiriyya Muslim Association of Malawi as a rival to the existing umbrella body a development that would have probably been officially discouraged in Banda's time for bringing 'confusion'. This era saw a further proliferation of Muslim groups, many of them with funding from abroad, which shared in the work of mosque building and promoting development and educational projects. Though this was a trend that was well established in the Banda era, the perception was fairly widespread that this was a development of a new order.

At an international level diplomatic and economic ties were established with Islamic states such as Libya, Malaysia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Cars on Malawi's roads with Dubai number plates were commonplace for a while. Presidential

³³ According to the 1998 Malawi Population and Housing Census Muslims constituted 12.8% of the total population. *Report on Final Census Results*, National Statistics Office, Zomba, 2000, p.72.

visits were exchanged with several Islamic countries. In 1995 a state visit to Kuwait was followed by an announcement of a \$315 million loan to Malawi from the Kuwait Development Fund. The President visited Libya and this was reciprocated by Colonel Gaddafi who promised large amounts of aid in money and in kind. In August 1997 it was the turn of President Umar al Bashir of Sudan to come to Malawi. These developments from within and without the country, along with unsubstantiated but widely believed rumours of oil money flowing clandestinely into the President's coffers from donors who wished to promote Islam, were taken by his political opponents as evidence substantiating their claims that he had an Islamist agenda.

Four incidents during Muluzi's Presidency are worthy of mention for the light they throw on the position of the Muslim communities during that time, and beyond.

The first was a *fatwa* (binding declaration) on 'Anti-Islamic Propaganda Machineries' issued in August 1998 by the Muslim Association of Malawi to the Government, all political parties, the media, civil society groups and all mosques.³⁴ It described itself as an 'early warning' against what its writers perceived as the continued prejudiced defamation and negative stereotyping of Islam and Muslims particularly by political opponents and by large sections of the press, as well as the apathy and inactivity on behalf of the state in the face of it. Pointing out that having a Muslim President did not make Malawi a Muslim state and repudiating claims of his having an Islamic agenda, the writers of the *fatwa* made an appeal not for exemption from criticism of Muslims but for balance and fairness, not for a change in the Constitution of Malawi but that it be upheld and applied for the protection for all its citizens.

Specifically it made an appeal to Government for protection against defamatory use of the accusation of Islamisation, and to politicians not to use Muslims as a punchbag or treat them 'as second class citizens or as a threat to a country of their own origin'. It appealed to the press that they should avoid identifying the religion of Islam with

³⁴ V. Musa, *Islam in Malawi before and after Christianity*, Appendix V, pp. 201-205.

words like ‘terrorist’ or ‘fundamentalist’ and should report affairs even-handedly. It appealed to the general public that they seek information from qualified Muslims before making pronouncements and for all peoples to regard themselves as Malawians first and as members of their faith communities after that. It appealed to Muslims at all times to exercise restraint, endurance and self control, not to fight over insults in the press but to report them to the proper authorities. As a last resort, if proper redress were to be denied, Muslims would be called to a, vaguely defined ‘Cultural Revolution’.

The second of these concerns the 1999 election campaign which, despite the warning of the *fatwa* in the previous year, was again characterised by the politicisation of the issue that one of the candidates was a Muslim, accusations resurfacing that he had an Islamist agenda. What was different from the 1994 election was its aftermath. Only days after the results were announced, in the Northern Region there was a coordinated series of attacks on mosques and the destruction of property of people from the South. Though this hostility was directed partly at the U.D.F. it was Muslims who fairly indiscriminately bore the brunt of its effects. The Muslim leadership worked hard at successfully damping any danger of a violent reaction from their communities throughout Malawi. However the fact that the violence had actually taken place, the lack of urgency in the response of the police and the lukewarm condemnation of the attacks from the majority of the Church leaders added to Muslims’ perception of the hostility of other sections of society and of their vulnerability to it.³⁵

The third incident surrounded the attempted replacement in Secondary Schools of the subject of Bible Knowledge with Religious and Moral Studies, which included teaching about Malawi’s three major religious traditions Christianity, Islam and

³⁵ I. Milazi, “The burning of Mosques in the North”, *Religion in Malawi*, 9, 1999, p.43.

African Traditional Religion.³⁶ The process which led to this change had started in 1978, well within the Banda era, and the proposals, having been worked on by a group of educationists from a variety of religious backgrounds had gone through the regular channels. However the Minister of Education being a Muslim at the time it was introduced, and in a climate of conspiracy theory, this move was interpreted by sections of the Churches as direct evidence of a plan to Islamise Malawi. The case of the opponents of the change was fairly long on hysteria and special pleading and short on cogent argument, being undermined by the fact that they had made no objections when very similar changes had been effected at primary teacher training level in President Banda's time. However they managed to make the issue so controversial and to lobby so hard that the President was pressured into suspending its implementation.

Muslims had generally welcomed the change as at last giving teaching about their religion its rightful place within the Secondary School system, in line with the practice of many other countries in the region. When the syllabus was suspended some groups were only persuaded from not taking to the streets in protest by a combination of firm police action and the restraining hand of their national leadership. Yet again this incident confirmed the belief of many Muslims the Christian establishment would lose no opportunity to continue to use their influence to keep them marginalised.

While the three incidents described above were essentially internal matters. The fourth had a distinctly global dimension. In April 2002, in the wake of 9/11 and as part of the U.S.'s self-styled 'war on terror', five Muslim foreign nationals residing in the city of Blantyre were arrested at the behest of the United States on the suspicion, which later events proved groundless, that they had links to the al Qaeda

³⁶ M.F. Salanjira, "The Introduction and Reception of Religious and Moral Education in Malawi Secondary Schools, unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Malawi, July 2003.

movement.³⁷ Despite court injunctions served in Malawi the five were illegally removed from the country. The President felt under so much pressure from the Americans that he was powerless to prevent this happening, as he later explained in an apology to the relatives of the detainees. The reaction of the Muslim communities untypically involved a certain amount of violence, especially from some Qadiriyya, with stoning and burning not only of Christian and foreign targets but also buildings of the U.D.F. and the M.A.M.

For many non-Muslims these disturbances were evidence of what they were ready to believe was the inherently violent nature of the followers of Islam. For many Muslims on the other hand, the whole affair was perceived as yet more evidence of the hostility of the United States to Islam and Muslims everywhere. The President's unwillingness or inability to protect the deportees was taken as a sign of his lack of commitment to the protection of the rights of the whole Muslim community and was followed by threats of withdrawal of electoral support in the next presidential elections by some Qadiriyya.

President Muluzi's time in power came to an end in 2004. Though he and his supporters attempted have the constitution amended to allow him to run for a third term of office they were thwarted by a coalition that had most of the Christian Churches well to the fore. Muluzi hand-picked the U.D.F. candidate, a Christian, Bingu wa Mutharika, but himself retained the position of chairman of the party. At the polls wa Mutharika was elected as the country's third President, with a Muslim, Cassim Chilumpha, as his Vice, this ticket having gained the electoral support of most of Malawi's Muslims, including the Qadiriyya despite their earlier threats.

³⁷ V.Musa, "Islam in Malawi before and after Christianity, pp.177-186.

The present situation

Despite the change of President in the position of Muslims in 2007 within wider society has not changed radically and their social, economic and political aspirations seem remarkably similar to what they were twenty years ago.

Soon after entering office President wa Mutharika severed his links with the U.D.F. and with the man who effectively put him in office. Politically the present President is well aware that the Muslim vote helped to bring him to power. He has made it known that he has Muslim grandparents and has boasted to the M.A.M. that he has more Muslims in his Government than his predecessor had. Nonetheless his public proclamation that he regards Jesus as the king in Malawi has drawn protests from the M.A.M. that what he was saying was unconstitutional. In the same context the Secretary General of the Association was reported to have stated that Malawi's Muslims do not want religious laws, whether Christian or Islamic, imposed on the country.³⁸

To promote the social, economic and political development of Muslim communities the reformist wing still puts great emphasis on western style education at every level, often in an Islamic environment, as the key to advancement. Private primary and secondary schools under the proprietorship of a wide range of Muslim organisations flourish often with sponsorship from individuals and groups from outside the country and sometimes with teachers from countries such as Sudan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. These schools have been successful to the extent that, reversing the previous trend, some Christians have chosen to send their children to schools under Muslim control to get their education. Muslim children are still sponsored to go to other schools and an increasing though, comparatively small number, compared with

³⁸ Ecumenical News Service, 11th October 2005.

other religious groups, are making their way onto the campuses of Malawi's Universities and Colleges. About two hundred others are presently studying abroad in countries such as, in Zanzibar, Uganda, Kuwait, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Malaysia and South Africa funded by money, mostly from wealthy individuals, many of them Malawian Asians, and administered by the Islamic Zakat Fund based in Blantyre.³⁹

The Muslim leadership, through the students' organisations, are particularly keen that Muslim students identify themselves as such and give a good image of Islam as being progressive and committed to service to and the development not only of their own communities but to the country as a whole. To this end they are encouraged to study disciplines such as medicine, engineering, law and journalism. In order to stimulate this further the M.A.M. would like there to be an Islamic University and also a modern hospital but realises that funds and staffing for these ventures would have to come largely from donors abroad.

Though probably seen by reformist Muslims as secondary in importance to its western style counterpart, they still put plenty of stress on *madrassa* education and there are opportunities for boys, very often from poorer families in rural districts, to go on to institutions which offer them higher learning and the chance to qualify themselves as Sheikhs, or if they are fortunate, to further their studies abroad, especially in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ The thrust of the Islamic education is that students know not only the correct practice of Islam but also know the passages of the Quran and the Hadith on which they are based. Though it is aspects of the Shariah that are being taught, the word itself is scarcely used and there is no talk from Muslims of a desire for having it given any formal place in the state's legal system.

³⁹ Personal communication, Secretary General, Muslim Association of Malawi, May 2007.

⁴⁰ Personal communication, Secretary General M.A.M., May 2007.

One of the signs of continuing division between the reformists and the Qadiriyya is that while the latter are generally ready to send their children to schools that offer western education they are sometimes reluctant to send their children to the *madrassas* which are mostly run by reformist organisations. This is so for much the same reason that their great grandparents avoided mission schools, the fear that the teaching there will alienate their children from them and from the very beliefs and practices and values that help to make them who and what they are. As young Muslim Sheikh explained, 'What is trusted in the heart is difficult to change'.⁴¹

In fact for many people, especially in the rural districts, it is at a personal and familial level that some of the most important choices have to be made between what is familiar and trusted as represented by 'traditional Islam' and the new, globally influenced, and still partly exotic as represented by the Islam of the reformists. The return of young men from training in one sphere to living back with their families in the village can sometimes lead to intergenerational conflict and sometimes to the older generation starting to adopt the ways of the young, perhaps even depending on the nature of the relationship between the people concerned.⁴² The choices people make are not determined but only influenced by what is around them.

Conclusion

Though the unpredictability of events to come and the difficulty in foreseeing changes in the process of change make forecasting problematic, it seems that the future of Muslim communities in Malawi will depend as much on choices made by non-Muslims as by Muslims themselves.

⁴¹ Sheikh Wahid, Naisi, Zomba, interviewed by Wiilemijn de Kol, May 2007.

⁴² W.de Kol, personal communication, MAY 2007, to whom I am most grateful for a generous sharing of research information.

Malawian Muslims seem to have great pride in their nationality and their leaders lay considerable stress on their desire to build up the capacity of their communities not only for their own good but for the good of their nation. They claim with some pride that the proportion of Muslims who come back from their studies to actually serve in Malawi is higher than for other groups. If this is so such people will have influence far beyond their numbers as role models and in terms of how they will enhance the image of Islam.

With regard to non-Muslims the attitudes, stances, and activities against which the 1998 *fatwa* warned are still fairly prevalent. When non-Muslims in Malawi talk about the impact of Islam on countries abroad they speak of Darfur not of Dubai, of Somalia not of Singapore, of Iraq, of Afghanistan and of Nigeria. The international events that get reported and the way in which they are reported lead many to think of Islam as a religion that predisposes people to violence and they too readily associate Islam and Muslims with the tiny minority of fanatics who commit atrocities in its name. When many non-Muslims see the developments described above they have a fairly unspecific anxiety that allowing Muslim communities to advance as they wish to will somehow put their peace and security at risk and many conclude that it is not in their own interests that they be encouraged.

In broad terms it can be argued that people and groups within the Christian dominated, non-Muslim section of Malawian society have to decide whether to encourage, or at least not stand in the way of the Muslim communities' aspirations, or to be actively or passively obstructive. If they choose the latter paths and try to deny Muslims the space to be full stakeholders in Malawian society, on the non-radical terms that the Muslims are now proposing, they do so at some risk. Given the models that are current in other parts of the continent and worldwide, they may find that this will actually lead to development of the very situation they are trying to avoid.