Civil Servants in Malawi:
Mundane Acts of Appropriation and Resistance in the Shadow of Good Governance

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Good Governance and the "dysfunctional" African state

Today there is widespread consensus in circles of practitioners and academics that "dysfunctional" state bureaucracies constitute the biggest impediment to development. Excessive red-tape, opaque procedures and corrupt civil servants are perceived to delay and reroute badly needed aid. Already in 1989 a World Bank report (1989) blamed "bad governance" – a bloated bureaucracy, patrimonialism and corruption – for the elusiveness of economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa. In subsequent years the concept of Good Governance was developed as remedy. This process was soon dominated by the Bretton Woods institutions who devoted enormous resources to the promotion of tools to improve governance (IMF 1997, World Bank 1992, 1994, 2000a, 2000b). By the end of the 1990s the concept constituted one of the central elements of international development assistance in sub-Saharan Africa (Abrahamsen 2000).

The term Good Governance denotes a set of policy-measures intended to transform "dysfunctional" public institutions into efficient and transparent service-providers that will be accountable to the public and subject to the rule of law. Under Good Governance fall reforms of the police and the judiciary, decentralisation, civil service reform and anti-corruption measures. It has to be noted though, that although there seems to be a general consensus with regard to the desirability and scope of Good Governance laid down in documents such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers there is a huge variation in the definition, interpretation and application of the concept depending on donor agency, national government and situation.

This paper addresses one specific aspect of Good Governance, civil service reform, at a particular place in space and time, Malawi in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to explain why the implementation of the civil service in that country took the course it took. Although this is a exercise worth wile the implications for the analysis of the postcolonial state in Africa are more general. By drawing on detailed anthropological evidence gathered during fieldwork, however, I hope to avoid and criticise some common fallacies about the state in Africa.

"Police tear-gas house owners" – Resistance in the shadow of Good Governance

28 September 2000, I was on my way to the Ministry of Lands and Housing in Lilongwe's business district. While I was walking towards the ministry shots rang and clouds of teargas drifted down the street. People came running from the direction of the ministry. I was told that riot police had chased a group of protesters away with tear-gas and warning shots. The protesters were landlords who let their houses to the government, which allocated these houses to civil servants. A few months before the government had announced that it would terminate the lease agreements with the landlords. Instead it would pay housing allowances to civil servants instead who were supposed to pay for their accommodation themselves without interference from the government. The responsible ministry, the Ministry of Lands and Housing, however, had not paid rent to a

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number of landlords since April 2000 who finally decided to voice their concern. Therefore they had gathered at the ministry to demand payment. After waiting the whole night, the riot police arrived in the morning and dispersed them with tear-gas and warning shots.

This episode exemplifies many aspects of everyday life in urban Malawi in the second half of the 1990s. Demonstrations and strikes had become very common. Every group ranging from street vendors to civil servants with grievances was quick to take to the streets to voice their demands and concerns. This was unprecedented and would have been unthinkable under Kamuzu Banda's authoritarian regime. The frequent manifestations of discontent bore testimony to the new political liberties enjoyed since Malawi's transition to multi-party democracy in 1994 and the heavy-handed police response did not succeed in deterring people from exercising these rights. However, demonstrations as the one described above not only testified to new political liberties, they also reflected the widespread disillusionment and the dire economic situation in Malawi. Since market liberalisation in 1994 the economy had plummeted and many people were facing social decline or even abject poverty.

The incident on 28 September 2000 not only tells us something about the political and economic situation of Malawi at that time, it also illustrates the implementation of civil service reform. The termination of the lease agreements and the introduction of new housing allowances were elements of the civil service reform programme. The government's failure to pay the rents on time and the reaction by the disgruntled landlords were symptomatic for the implementation process. It was characterised by confusion and attempts of different groups defending their interests.

Departing from this vignette I could tell the familiar story of failure of policy reforms in Africa due to bad planning and the prevalence of particularistic interests. There is ample evidence to suggest that the implementation of civil service reform in Malawi could be considered a "success". In five years the government had succeeded in changing a system that had been entrenched since the colonial period. The long-standing policy of allocating houses to civil servants had been abandoned and several thousand employees had been made redundant. This is quite remarkable considering the challenges of institutional reform in Africa.

On the other hand, one could challenge this assessment and conclude that the implementation of the civil service reform programme had not resulted in the improvement of the performance of the civil service. But is the question whether it was a "success" or "failure" not beside the point? Success is a very relative concept, it is defined by policymakers and can change during the implementation phase. The common analyses of African states are based on a fundamental gap between the state, a transplant from the West, and African society, characterised by "primordial" affiliations. The state is paradoxically represented as motor for modernization and impediment to the development of society and the market. Good Governance resolves this paradox by emphasising the need to transform the state so that it can provide the "enabling environment" for the market. Failure, according to this model, results from this gap between "modern" state and "traditional" society.

Such a representation is flawed as my case study shows. The notion that the backwardness of African society is responsible for failure is wrong but comfortable for the planners of Good Governance. Only the understanding of the motives and interests of the relevant actors, including the representatives of the donor agencies, can elucidate the processes, which affected policy implementation. The case study will show that implementation of the civil service reform in Malawi was shaped by the internal dynamics of a deeply fragmented civil service. As a consequence of civil service reform the fault lines within the civil service were deepened, resulting in a more fragmented civil service as unintended consequence.

Implementation of the Civil Service Action Plan

In 1994 the newly elected government of Malawi embarked on an ambitious civil service reform financed by the World Bank. The Civil Service Action Plan constituted a crucial phase in this endeavour. The primary objectives of this plan were outsourcing and privatisation of non-core government functions, improvement of personnel and payroll management, introduction of accounting and auditing standards, retrenchment of redundant staff and improvement of performance (GoM 1996b). The objectives of the Action Plan reflect World Bank and IMF policies on governance (Dia 1993, 1996, IMF 1997, World Bank 1992, 1994b).

Many studies of policy intervention have shown that it is not as simple to determine the outcomes of policy intervention as the proponents of social engineering claim. The implementation of policy cannot be adequately captured with a linear model that distinguishes planning phase, implementation and outcomes. This simplistic approach isolates the "project" from the social "context". The inside and the outside of policy intervention might not be as easily separated as this model suggests (Long 1992, Shore/Wright 1997).

Instead the analysis of policy intervention must transcend the parameters defining the "space" and "time" of a particular policy measure and approach them as a subject of study rather than an *a priori* given. implementation of the civil service reform programme in Malawi in terms of complicated, contested and multi-stranded processes, "which involve the reinterpretation or transformation of policy during the implementation process, such that there is no straight line from policy to outcomes" (Long 1992:34). The empirical analysis of policy implementation has to include "factors" that seem to have no direct causal relationship with the particular policy intervention, on the one hand, and unintended outcomes, on the other (Ferguson 1994, Hirschman 1967, Long/Long 1992, Moore 1973). Bureaucracies can be conceived as fields in Bourdieu's sense. From the perspective of the people involved in and affected by the implementation process the civil service, ministries and departments constitute bureaucratic field where they contest and conflict utilizing different forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic) (Bourdieu 1994).

This paper presents a "vertical slice" (Nader 1980) of the implementation process gained through "studying up" (Nader 1972) based on various government and World Bank documents and fieldwork conducted in Lilongwe and Zomba during 1999, 2000 and 2002. It argues that the implementation of the civil service reform revealed and deepened already existing fault-lines within the bureaucracy. The policy intervention constituted a threat to the status quo and triggered various attempts of manipulation, co-optation, and appropriation from within the civil service. My account of the implementation process focuses on two central elements of the civil service reform, the retrenchment of redundant civil servants and the introduction of housing allowances.

These measures had the stated objective to make the civil service smaller, more efficient and transparent.

a) Retrenchment of Redundant Employees

From the perspective of the World Bank representatives and consultants staff composition in the Malawi civil service was seriously skewed. Lower grades such as watchmen, cleaners, workmen, messengers, etc. were overstaffed whereas senior positions often remained vacant for years due to the lack of suitable staff. Moreover, the exact number of junior civil servants in the Industrial Class (IC) and the Subordinate Class (SC) was unknown since the recruitment of the lowest grades were the responsibility of individual departments who used this authority to hire large numbers of clients[1] or to create so-called ghost-workers, non-existing employees whose salaries were pocketed by rackets led by senior civil servants. The remedy seemed clear: establish the exact number of employees in the IC and SC, reduce staff numbers in these grades through a retrenchment programme, improve personnel and payroll management and create more favourable salary structures for highly qualified professionals in senior posts (World Bank 1993, 1994).

In order to draw up plans for the execution of this plan World Bank and government negotiators agreed to establish the Public Sector Change Management Agency (PSCMA). PSCMA had the mandate to conduct functional reviews in all ministries and make recommendations on the improvement of performance, the internal command structure, the privatisation of non-core tasks and the reduction of staff levels "to cut the wage bill".

These objectives were then translated into circulars to the various ministries and departments. After many difficulties I was able to obtain permission to see the circulars issued by the Secretary of Human Resource Management and an interesting one, dated November, 3, 1997, ordered the retrenchment of redundant support staff by the end of December 1997. The IC had to be reduced to 16.000 employees and incorporated into the civil service establishment. The circular referred explicitly to "the IMF/World Bank agreement with the Malawi Government".[2] According to estimates in 1994, the civil service had employed about 50.000 IC employees. This meant that employees in the IC and the SC had to be reduced by 34.000, from 50.000 to 16.000. Since the government claimed that about 20.000 had already been laid off between February and September 1995 14.000 more people had to be made redundant. To reach this objective several thousand employees had been dismissed between 1996 and 2002. In 2002, however, the target had not been reached although most of the remaining IC and SC had been dismissed or incorporated into the civil service establishment.

The official numbers of retrenched civil servants should be treated with caution. There is no reliable data on the number of IC employees in 1994 and the number of 20.000 dismissed employees is not verifiable either. It was in the government's interest to report a high number of dismissed civil servants to the World Bank. The president and the cabinet were certainly aware of the fact that a high number of laid-off civil servants

[1] This differed from established posts, which had to be approved centrally by the Public Service Commission and the Department of Human Resource Management and Development.

[2] Ref. No. DHRMD/308/1/10, 3.11.1997 (Secretary B.B. Mawindo): *Incorporation of Industrial Class Employees into the Schedule of Establishment Offices.*

would present the government's effort to implement the civil service reform programme in a more favourable light.

Actual practice differed as I learned during fieldwork. I met many civil servants who, according to the official policy, should have been dismissed. Many junior officers who had been laid off during the retrenchment exercise were re-employed by the head of department as soon as the budget gave more leeway. I often met workers who had been dismissed months ago but who still hung around offices in hopes of getting their jobs back. By staying close to their former office they hoped to apply some pressure on their former superior officers by reminding them of their social obligation as master. Many of the superior officers proved to be receptive to this subtle pressure and re-employed their clients as soon as the budgetary pressure eased.

Superior officers were creative in finding ways to re-employ their clients and dependants. Although they could no longer employ support staff without approval by the Public Service Commission (PSC) they had retained the authority to employ project staff, which they used to re-employ their clients. Since the PSC was lagging behind with the authorisation of requests by heads of departments and did not have the capacities to monitor the individual departments many departments resorted to the old policy of hiring support staff.

PSCMA met resistance by the responsible managers in the so-called line ministries, the classic ministries such as Health and Agriculture, who resisted any outside interference in their affairs. The PSCMA often yielded to the resistance by the managers in the line ministries. The functional reviews therefore focused on the upgrading of positions rather than reduction of staff numbers. Most IC employees had already been dismissed between 1994 and 1997 before the PSCMA became operational. From the available documents it seems as if these retrenchment exercises had been implemented on an ad-hoc basis dictated by the need to cut costs since there had been no "transparent retrenchment criteria". According to the circulars I was able to access, departments were simply ordered to dismiss fifty percent of their support staff.

b) Introduction of the Housing Allowances Scheme

Housing provided by the government for civil servants has always been a central and sensitive issue in Malawi. Malawian civil servants considered the provision of housing as one of the most important benefits of government employment. The provision of housing was perceived to be one of the primary duties of the government as employer.

Government housing was a legacy of the colonial period when the administration offered generous housing to the expatriate officers, a considerable starin on the budget of the cash-stripped territory. The cost of institutional housing continued to be a burden after Malawi became an independent state. Already in 1963 the report of a commission of inquiry argued that rents for civil servants should be brought to an economic level and "to bring to an end the artificially created demand among civil servants for larger houses" in order to stop the "drain upon development funds" (Skinner 1963:§§ 240, 273). These recommendations were never implemented due to resistance among civil servants of the new state who regarded cheap institutional housing as a privilege of the colonial masters, to which they felt entitled after independence. To keep the bureaucratic elite of the country in line, Kamuzu Banda retained the colonial system of institutional housing after Malawi's independence.

The issue of housing resurfaced again in the early 1990s in the reports and recommendations of the World Bank. These reports noted that government housing was highly subsidised and that rents were only about 10 percent of market value (World Bank 1994a:49). In line with the neo-liberal perception that non-essential government functions such as the provision of housing for civil servants had to be privatised, the report recommended to monetise benefits like housing to make the salary structure more transparent and equitable (World Bank 1994b:85).

There were two categories of civil servants, on the one hand, those living in houses owned or leased by the government and, on the other, those who were not housed by the government and who received a housing allowance. In the first category fell civil servants living in houses owned by the government and those living in houses leased by the government from the MHC and private landlords. Most of the former were teachers in rural areas who lived in houses on the premises of the school, extension workers in rural areas, and soldiers and police officers living in staff quarters. The latter lived in houses leased by the government from the MHC and private landlords. Most of these houses were of a relatively high standard and were situated in the urban centres. Generally most of the senior ministerial staff lived in houses leased from the MHC and private landlords in one of the more up-market townships of Lilongwe and Zomba. Civil servants living in institutional and leased houses paid only a nominal rent of less than 10 percent of their salary equaling only a few US dollars.

Under the second category fell those civil servants who were not housed by the government. They received a housing allowance of 15 percent of the basic salary. This meant that most civil servants in this category received less than US$ 10 housing allowance in 2000. Most of the junior grades in Zomba and Lilongwe, such as support staff and clerks, did not live in houses leased by the government and were forced to find housing on the free market. Rents in Lilongwe and Zomba, however, were much higher than the housing allowances and most civil servants in the urban areas had serious difficulties in raising sufficient money for their monthly rents which often equalled the total monthly salary.

On June 30, 2000 the newly appointed Minister of Finance, a former World Bank economist, announced in a statement on the annual budget that the government intended to withdraw from the lease of houses for civil servants and to pay a housing allowance instead. In July 2000 the Ministry of Lands and Housing announced that all lease agreements between the government and landlords would be terminated by November 2000. This announcement signified the change of the long-standing policy of the government to provide housing for many civil servants. Theoretically all civil servants were eligible for government housing. But the government and the state-owned Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC) had never been able to build and maintain housing for all civil servants. There were no statistics available on the exact number of civil servants living in houses leased by the government, but the number was estimated at about 20 percent, most of whom held senior positions.

Two issues had the potential to cause considerable unrest among civil servants. First, the measure only applied to civil servants who lived in houses leased by the government and, second, the new policy entailed a complete restructuring of the whole system of government housing. Civil servants would no longer rent their houses from the government, which, in turn, leased them from the MHC or private landlords. Instead, they would rent their houses directly from the landlords without direct interference from the government. To this end they would receive housing allowances. The new policy would result in the reduction of capacities used to administer thousands of houses, one of the main objectives of civil service reform.

A few months after the initial announcement in July, the Secretary of Human Resource Management issued a circular on September 18, 2000, which introduced housing allowances for those civil servants previously living in houses leased by the government. It announced that the last rental payments to landlords would be made in October 2000.[3] The new rates were based on standard rents of the MHC, the largest provider of housing for civil servants and the only landlord with standard rents in the country. The allowances would be paid as a monthly lump sum. Payments would be based on the grade. Generally, the new rates exceeded basic salaries by 30 percent resulting *de facto* in an enormous increase in total monthly remuneration.[4] The circular provided that those civil servants who were not living in houses leased by the government and who had received the 15 percent monthly housing allowance would receive 25 percent of their basic salaries as housing allowance, an increase by 10 percent.

This measure resulted in a huge gap between housing allowances paid to those living in previously leased houses who would receive average 130 percent their monthly basic salary and those receiving only 25 percent of their basic salary per month. This discrimination was acknowledged in the circular that stated that “this rate will be revised subject to availability of resources in the next financial years with a view to bringing it in line with the allowance payable to employees who are currently housed”.

The Secretary of Human Resource Management’s circular disturbed a nest of hornets because of its bias in favour of the mostly senior civil servants living in houses leased by the government. In September 2000 I conducted an interview with a senior civil servant in the Office of the President and Cabinet. He admitted that the scheme was not equitable since it gave preferential treatment to a small group of civil servants. Another serious problem was the funding: the new scheme was estimated to cost about 100 percent more than the old scheme. However, no extra funds were made available, neither from donor agencies nor from domestic sources, and it was still unclear how the whole scheme would be financed.

As the October deadline for the introduction of the new housing allowances approached, the opposition gathered momentum. The junior civil servants, who did not enjoy the benefit of institutional housing, were especially critical of the new scheme and started to exert influence on the trade unions. They attacked the Civil Servants Trade Union (CSTU), which initially had supported the new rates, for failing to represent the interests of those who did not live in leased houses. Several former members of the CSTU accused the union leaders of “pure treachery” in the press.[5] They argued that the new scheme was unfair since it would create two categories of civil servants: those receiving 25 percent of their basic salary and those who would receive a lump sum,

[3] Circular of the Secretary of HRMD September 18, 2001 Ref/HRMD/102/4/OC/IV/22.
[4] Senior officers in the Superscale grades would receive MK 12000-15000 (about US$ 125-163 in July 2000), the middle administrative, technical and professional grades MK 6000-9000 (about US$ 75-113 in July 2000) and junior grades MK 2000 (about US$ 25 in July 2000).
[5] *The Nation*, 25 September 2000, “Civil Servants hit own union”.

which would be many times higher than what the rest would receive. The union's dissidents planned to hold a demonstration against the scheme on Capital Hill.

The introduction of the new housing allowances sparked considerable unrest, not only among civil servants. 28 September there were clashes between angry landlords who demanded payment of rents of the last 6 month for their houses leased by the government. Apparently the Ministry of Lands and the Ministry of Finance were unable to pay the rents. Before the lease agreements could be terminated as the government had planned, all outstanding debts would have to be paid, a fact known since the Ministry of Land's announcement in June.

The confusion around the new allowances grew when the press reported that the scheme had been put on hold till January 2001.[6] Finally the new housing allowances were paid in January 2001 to those civil servants living in houses formerly leased by the government. During 2001 government representatives negotiated with the representatives of the trade unions. The government representatives tried to exclude certain categories such as teachers living in government-owned houses in rural areas from the new scheme but the trade union representatives adopted an uncompromising stance and pushed for the payment of the new rates to all civil servants. Eventually the negotiators of the government resigned and introduced a new housing allowance scheme for all civil servants on January 1, 2002.[7]

Funding had been also secured in the meantime. Parallel to the negotiations with the representatives of the trade unions the functionaries of the Ministry of Finance and OPC had negotiated with the IMF representatives who agreed to compensate the extra burden on the budget as a result of the introduction of the new scheme with balance-of-payment support to support the implementation of Good Governance in Malawi. Due to the changes, the costs of the new schemes were about 100 percent higher than the old system and only the support of the IMF enabled the government to implement the new scheme 15 months later than originally planned.

Increasing Fragmentation of the Civil Service

As I have indicated at the outset of this paper I am not concerned with the question whether the policy measures were a "success" or not. Drawing on the empirical evidence gathered on the introduction of the two measures I will highlight two major fault lines or fissures within the civil service which shaped the implementation process and were, in turn, deepened. The first one is the competition between new agencies assigned the task of promoting the civil service reform and the classic line ministries where resistance against change formed. The second fault-line is the growing gap between the "bosses" who were in a position to benefit from the reform and the "juniors" who bore the brunt of the reform.

a) Enclaves vs. Line Ministries

In line with the "enclave approach" the World Bank singled out government departments and agencies that would function as enclaves. These enclaves were expected to operate as centres from where the reform would spread throughout the whole civil service. Enclaves

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[6] *The Nation*, 3 October 2000, "House allowance on hold".

[7] Circular of the Secretary of Human Resource Management, 2 January 2002, Ref. No. HRMD/4/1/7E/IX/21.

were either already existing ministries usually with cross-ministerial mandates such as the Ministry of Finance, the National Statistics Office (NSO) and the Department of Human Resource Management and the National Economic Council (NEC) or newly established agencies such as PSCMA with the mandate to implement the various measures of the civil service reform. These agencies were identified as "enclaves" by the World Bank and received logistical and financial support to implement the reforms.

Due to the financial and logistical support of the World Bank these "enclaves" tended to have more resources and better qualified staff at their disposal. The conditions of work in a project were considered much more attractive than regular work in the civil service: there were more workshops, more financial resources, better training possibilities, more vehicles, and more allowances than in departments that depended on government funding. Training courses abroad were especially attractive for civil servants, considering the limited possibilities within Malawi to receive training.

Generally, cooperation of individual government departments or agencies with donor agencies was often better than between government departments with different donors. Considerable differences exist between bureaucratic routines and requirements of the various multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, which result in different bureaucratic practices between and even inside ministries depending on the donor agency funding the projects.

With regard to the implementation of the civil service reform, conflicts emerged between the "enclave" agencies and parts of the senior staff of the classic line ministries who tended to resist what they perceived of as interference in their affairs. The partnership between the World Bank and the Ministry of Finance soon resulted in isolation of the latter from other ministries that were targeted by the reform programme (Botchewey et al. 1998:81). The heads of departments preferred to maintain as much discretion in running their departments as possible. The possibility to hire IC employees without outside interference constituted an opportunity to employ clients or enrich themselves through ghost-workers, not existing employees whose salaries could be pocketed. Hence, the departmental senior managers resisted the retrenchment exercises, the functional reviews, and the incorporation of IC employees into the civil service establishment.

Resistance was rarely open and the senior civil servants who rejected the reform opted for delay tactics such as ignoring the PSCMA and displaying indifference. No one challenged the retrenchment exercise. They had been too long in the civil service to jeopardise their positions by resisting openly and actively. They rather chose the chameleon-tactics of camouflage and survival they had found essential for survival under Kamuzu Banda's despotic rule and postponed what seemed to be inevitable without attracting undue attention (Dzimbiri 1998, Englund 2002, Mapanje 1981).

There is another dimension to the conflict between "enclave" agencies and classic line ministries. The "enclave" agencies employed a high percentage of younger university-trained economists who were adept at using econometric theory. By contrast, many of the senior civil servants in the line ministries belonged to an older generation and had made their careers in the 1970s. Most of them had enjoyed relatively little formal education and could be described as being promoted by virtue of seniority rather than because of outstanding performance.[8] Thus a younger generation of economists with university degrees in the “enclave” agencies that promoted reform with active support of the World Bank were pitted against top officials of the “traditional” ministries, many of them left over from the Banda era, who resisted any external interference in what they considered to be their affairs (Adamolekun et al. 1997:215-217). As a shorthand I denote the former as technocrats and the latter as old-school officials.

The fissure between technocrats and old-school ministerial officials reflects also a generation gap. Most of the technocrats were in their thirties and joined the service in the late 1980s while the latter had mostly joined the service in the 1970s under the autocratic Banda regime. Both categories belonged to Malawi’s tiny political and bureaucratic elite; in fact, the technocrats were the children of the old school ministerial officials. The technocrats had enjoyed college education, often abroad. They often identified with the emerging transnational class of consultants and bureaucrats who work for international organisations such as the World Bank, the IMF and various UN-organisations that set the example for the technocrats in terms of remuneration and career opportunities. The old-school bureaucrats, on the other hand, were usually less educated and had progressed slowly up the ranks by accumulating years of service. Their outlook was more focused at the national level and they primarily considered themselves as rooted in Malawian society. The younger technocrats were usually more in favour of reform than the older generation, although not necessarily always along the lines of the World Bank’s ideas. Often they met resistance from the older generation, which generally resisted change and reform.

In spite of these differences as suggested by Adamolekun et al. (1997) one should not exaggerate the opposition between young technocrats, who gained influence after the elections in 1994, and bureaucrats inherited from one-party rule. Many of the new generation of politicians and bureaucrats also held positions under the previous autocratic regime and their support for reforms was feeble at best.[9]

The issue of political sympathies of Malawi’s bureaucratic elite is complicated. Certainly, political affiliation and personal connections matter, and no senior civil servant who aspired to reach the highest grades of the civil service, the Superscale, (S/P 4 and higher) could afford to be too critical of ruling party or the president Bakili Muluzi since their appointment was subject to presidential approval. In October 2000 the government introduced three year performance contracts for the highest grades in the Superscale, causing concern among these officers who feared the new scheme might be used to remove people from the civil service on political grounds. At the time of writing it was not clear how much personal loyalty to the president was expected. One top official had already been removed for his public critique of the president’s policy and his ambitions to run as a candidate for a third term.

[8] This judgement is not mine but reflects the general opinion of my informants who usually belonged to the younger generation. It does not imply that there were no civil servants with outstanding performance in the older generation. It merely refers to the fact that a promotion would usually be due to seniority and conformity rather than performance.

[9] Most members of Malawi’s democratic political elite already yielded influence and wealth under Kamuzu Banda’s rule. Bakili Muluzi himself, for example, was secretary of the MCP until 1983 when he fell in disgrace and was removed from the post. Later he became one of Malawi’s most successful and wealthiest businessmen and has continued to expand his business since being elected president.

On the other hand, senior civil servants perceived of themselves as professionals who ought not be involved in party politics. There was a distinct civil service ethos among the top cadres of the civil service who held politicians in low esteem. This attitude was especially prevalent among the younger generation of highly qualified technocrats in the enclave ministries who saw politicians as uneducated fools with no expertise who were willing to sell their vote to the highest bidder.

Dezalay and Garth (2002) describe similar developments for Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico where economists trained in the elite universities of the United States formed bureaucratic and political elites in their countries of origin. These “technopols” or “Chicago Boys” are members of a transnational class of bureaucrats who “speak the same language, have similar educational experiences, know each other, and approach problems of economics and the state from precisely the same perspective” (Dezalay/Garth 2002:28). And, like their cousins in Malawi or elsewhere, they are connected to the older elites by kinship ties and share many similarities with their parents’ generation. With regard to Malawi, the influence of economists who have worked either for the World Bank or the IMF is striking: most of the senior posts in the key ministries of Finance and Economic Planning are held by economists and the Minister of Finance has worked for the World Bank. Bingu wa Mutharika, Muluzi’s successor is an economist who used to work at the World Bank.

b) The “Bosses” vs. the “Juniors”

Generally, authority in a hierarchical organisation is exercised from the top to the bottom by means of orders. Yet, it would be wrong to perceive of those who take orders as implementers without agency (Lipsky 1980, Long/Long 1992). Lower level bureaucrats tend to dodge orders if they run counter to their own interests. Within a highly hierarchical structure like the civil service, opposition by those who receive orders will rarely be overt. Rather, it might be expressed through a work as you earn attitude, absenteeism and other subversive tactics (Blau 1969, 1971, Lipsky 1980:13-25).

The implementation of both measures revealed a widening gap between top officials or managers, on the one hand, and the rank and file of the civil service, on the other hand. In the Malawian civil service the former were casually referred to as “bosses” and the latter as “juniors”. When my informants referred to the “bosses” they usually meant functionaries high up in the hierarchy who supervised subordinate staff and had the authority to issue orders. “Bosses” constituted not more than five percent of all civil servants, i.e. about 5000 persons (GoM 1996a:29). The mass of civil servants was casually referred to as “juniors” by my informants. Under this category fell all civil servants who were considered to be subordinate, constituting the rank and file of the civil service, including lower-ranking civil servants such as support staff, unskilled workers and extension workers with no or little formal education and middle-ranking officers such as teachers and clerks.

Both measures were disadvantageous to the “juniors”, the mass of civil servants occupying low- and middle-ranking positions. Only IC employees and other low-ranking civil servants were laid off during the retrenchment exercises. Prior to civil service reform, the civil service provided employment and social security for thousands of manual labourers, gardeners, security guards, receptionists and messengers. The IC, under which most of these employees fell, had grown continually since independence and constituted 26.1 percent (29509 employees) of the total number of civil servants in 1995. The Subordinate Class, under which messengers and most extension workers fell, accounted for 10.5 percent (1103 employees). Hence, more than 35 percent of all civil servants held lower ranks and had little or no formal education, whereas only five percent of civil servants occupied management and professional posts (GoM 1996a:27-31).

These people considered a job in the civil service as secure life-long position that entitled its holder to a regular - albeit small – salary and a whole range of benefits including paid sick leave and terminal benefits upon retirement. Superior officers in the ministries provided clients and kin with government jobs and because there was no effective control from the ministerial top or controlling departments the numbers of staff in the IC and SC could grow unchecked.

This changed in 1994 when the World Bank exercised growing pressure on the government to implement civil service reform (World Bank 1994b). The new president, who was more responsive to wishes of the donor agencies than Kamuzu Banda, adopted the recommendations of the World Bank missions and launched the Civil Service Action Plan financed by the World Bank and the IMF to reform the civil service. He must have been aware of the unrest this decision would cause among the tens of thousands of "juniors" who would be threatened with the loss of their jobs.

Therefore World Bank and IMF had to take the blame for the unpopular measure. The circular of the Secretary of Human Resource Management, for example, stated that the dismissal of IC employees was part of "the IMF/World Bank agreement with the Malawi Government".[10] Implying an influence beyond the control of the government was a deliberate attempt to deflect some of the expected critique from the "juniors" who were, after all, voters who could withdraw their support from the ruling party in the next elections. Malawi's new democratic rulers had come to fear the wrath of the civil servants who were willing to strike to lend weight to their demands.

There was no support for retrenchment among civil servants with resistance being fiercest from old-school officials and "juniors". Many senior officers, who saw it as threat to their authority and influence, attempted to undermine the retrenchment exercises. Out of concern for their own positions these senior civil servants did not make their views public and instead chose to employ delay tactics. Their influence was too weak to prevent the removal of several thousand "juniors", but it seems that they often succeeded in re-hiring their clients whom they had been forced to dismiss and it appears that many dismissed civil servants succeeded in re-entering the civil service with the help of senior officers who resisted the civil service reform.

Most of the senior functionaries who opposed retrenchment could be found in the line ministries such as Health, Agriculture or Labour. These old-school officials had been in the civil service for decades and had built up considerable circles of dependants during their career. They enjoyed the status of patrons and they wanted to do something for their kin, to assist them by providing them with government employment. The technocrats were different in that respect. Due to their young age and their more cosmopolitan focus, they had fewer clients and did not seem to be as keen as the old-school officials to act as patrons providing clients and kin with government jobs.

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[10] Ref. No. DHRMD/308/1/10, 3.11.1997 (Secretary B.B. Mawindo): *Incorporation of Industrial Class Employees into the Schedule of Establishment Offices.*

The introduction of the new housing allowance in 2000 provoked considerable resistance from the "juniors" who resented what they perceived of as an attempt of the "bosses" to use the introduction of a new housing allowance to their own benefit. Freed from oppression and the "culture of fear", they did not hesitate to make their voice heard and make threats. The original scheme as it was announced in June 2000 would have treated officers in the same salary grade differently. The minority of civil servants living in houses previously leased by the government would have received the new rates whereas the mass of middle- and lower-ranking civil servants would have only received a modest increase of their housing allowances.

The measure discriminated against those who did not enjoy government housing. The discrimination of the majority of civil servants was not a new phenomenon. There had always been two categories of civil servants: those who enjoyed the benefit of housing provided by the government and those who only received a 15 percent housing allowance. Hence, the proposed scheme would have merely continued an established custom. However, the junior civil servants resisted what they perceived of as an impertinent attempt of the "bosses" to enrich themselves through the new housing allowance scheme and seized the opportunity to demand equal allowances for all civil servants in a political climate that was more permissive and conducive to their demands.

The "juniors" who resisted the original scheme were able to mobilise the representatives of the trade unions who then applied mounting pressure on the government to extend the new rates to all civil servants. Prior to that the principal trade union CSTU had accepted the new housing allowance scheme on behalf of all civil servants as proposed by the Secretary of Human Resource Management and the Secretary of the President and the Cabinet. Opposition against the new scheme spread among the "juniors" who threatened to take action without the approval of the trade unions. Hence, to regain their influence, union leaders abandoned their conciliatory position and adopted a much harder line. This explains why the negotiators of the trade unions rejected the new housing allowance after it had been announced and why they demanded the new rates for all civil servants.

The president Bakili Muluzu and the ruling UDF (United Democratic Front) depended to a considerable degree on the civil servants. The position of the president had been considerably weakened after the elections in 1999, which had only won by a very narrow margin. He was desperate to rally more support from the electorate in the run-up to the local elections in September 2000. Hence, the government negotiators eventually gave in to the demands of the "juniors" who had been able to use the trade unions successfully to benefit from a policy measure the "bosses" had been able to manipulate to their benefit.

Rumours suggested that the CSTU had been co-opted by the ruling circle around the president. The funding of the trade unions was very precarious and they depended on financial support from the government. According to some sources, the president and the ruling UDF party exploited this dependence to gain influence on the trade unions (Manda 2000). The president of the CSTU was accused of being a mole, paid by senior functionaries of the ruling party or even the president himself. These allegations were made public in April 2000, just two months before the new housing allowance scheme was introduced. In March, the CSTU president announced that the union would leave the umbrella organisation Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) and join the Congress of Malawi Trade Unions (Comatu), an umbrella organisation that had been formed in February 2000 supposedly with government support. Comatu was supposed to form a moderate counterweight to the more radical MCTU. Several members of the board of CSTU protested against the decision to leave the MCTU. Under pressure from these members of the board, the CSTU left Comatu and rejoined the MCTU at end of April 2000.[11]

Conclusions

"Far from instilling compliant self-discipline, the capillary techniques of colonial states played a great part in sparking processes of challenge and riposte, of transgression, transformation and hybridisation; a greater part than did brute force" (Comaroff 2002:124). Attempts to establish management and control through civil service reform in Malawi in the 1990s "failed" in a similar way. All civil servants, whether they were high- or low-ranking, resisted civil service reform because it constituted a threat to the relatively privileged positions to which they had become accustomed under Kamuzu Banda's rule. This resistance, however, was not the result of a shared political agenda or class interest, and it remained uncoordinated, spontaneous and situational. Development anthropology is well aware of the unpredictable and subversive responses of "target populations" to policy intervention. De Vries aptly speaks of "unruly clients" with regard to the capability of the addressees of policy to thwart well-meant efforts to "develop" them (1997). The way civil servants in Malawi reacted to the advent of Good Governance and the resulting overhaul of their workplace was not different from resistances displayed by other "target populations". Their resistance transformed the implementation process transformed into something never intended by the architects of Good Governance in Washington, D.C.

To conclude that most civil servants perceived of the reforms as a threat to their privileged positions does not imply a common interest or the existence of a "strategic group" (Evers 1988). In spite of the frequent strikes, civil servants' resistance to the new policies never resulted in a co-ordinated political struggle against the neo-liberal reforms in general. The widespread discontent and anxiety in the civil service was more diffuse and self-oriented, and resistance to the civil service reform rarely transcended the mundane stratagem of individual civil servants who pursued their personal agendas. The countless individual acts, nevertheless, succeeded in transforming the implementation of the civil service reform programme.

The civil service proved to be fragmented and deeply divided. The World Bank's enclave approach had deepened the gap between the classic line ministries and the enclaves, agencies with cross-cutting mandates including more established ones such as the Ministry of Finance and a host of temporary task forces, often staffed by younger technocrats and supplied with ample funding by the "donor community". These centrifugal tendencies were exacerbated by other donor agencies that supported individual projects implemented by specific ministries and departments. As result, government agencies and departments were often better equipped to link up with their respective donor agencies than with other units of the civil service.

An important aspect of this fissure is the difference between an older generation of old-school officials who made their careers in the 1960s and 1970s and the younger

[11] *The Nation*, 28 April 2000, "Civil Servants back to MCTU".

generation of technocrats who enters the civil service in the 1980s and 1990s. The reorganisation of the civil service constituted a threat to the position of the older generation and the *modus operandi* to which they had become accustomed. The allegiance of the younger generation, however, has its limits. Many of them supported Malawi's transition to democracy but, in recent years, though few would like to return to autocracy, many have become disenchanted with democracy.

A far deeper fault-line existed between the "bosses", the bureaucratic elite, and the mass of middle-ranking and junior civil servants, a continuation of the colonial divide between expatriate senior officers and indigenous junior officers. The top officials in the ministerial headquarters were able to benefit from the implementation of civil service reform. The retrenchment exercise did not affect them and the monetarisation of benefits actually constituted a barely hidden salary increase for the highest grades. This was well understood by junior civil servants who were able to exert sufficient pressure on the government to ensure they were included in the new housing allowance scheme. The "juniors" observed the behaviour of their superiors with growing discontent and openly complained about their selfish "bosses" who behaved like "snakes". The government and the political leaders of Malawi seemed to be unable or unwilling to resist these demands and the political leadership chose a path of appeasement in order to retain the loyalty of an important electorate.

The trade unions played a decisive role in the conflicts although the representatives of the trade unions changed their position under pressure from disgruntled junior civil servants. Trade unions are a recent phenomenon in Malawi. Under Kamuzu Banda all independent trade unions were prohibited. After democratisation in 1994 a whole range of trade unions were established. However, they remained weak, with no administration, or funds, numbering only a few hundred members.

Malawian civil servants responded in a myriad of mundane ways to the dramatic political and economic changes Malawi experienced in the 1990s. Salaries had been eroding for years under the pressure of the high inflation rate and most civil servants could not depend exclusively on their salary. Visits to workshops and field trips became indispensable sources of income for many civil servants. Workshop culture was facilitated by a large influx of donor agencies after the transition to democracy in 1994. All these organisations organised workshops to train the civil servants in new skills. The civil servants responded enthusiastically – partly because of the new knowledge and partly because of the allowances.

Allowances and lucrative field trips were unevenly distributed in the civil service. Some departments had better access to workshops than others because of donor-funded projects. The senior civil servants, managers and professional cadres were in a better position to attend workshops than were the rank and file. Many senior civil servants earned many times their monthly salary through allowances. The junior civil servants complained about bosses who attended workshops and claimed generous allowances while they, the "juniors", had to "hunt" for allowances. This uneven distribution of allowances fuelled the alienation between "bosses" and "juniors".

Allowances were often linked to corruption. It was common to organise "ghost workshops", workshops that never actually took place, and distribute the profit among the senior staff and the accountants of a department. It was common practice to declare costs for field trips that never took place. The dependence on allowances exacerbated the dependence of subordinates on the goodwill of their superiors. Whereas a civil servant was entitled to a salary he or she was only eligible for a workshop. The superior officers decided whom to send to workshops and they could use this authority to ensure personal loyalty among their subordinates. Those who "showed respect" could count on the grace of their *bwana* but those who were perceived as disrespectful were often left out.

In the context of the attempts to exploit the reform to protect privileges the term "ownership", the government's responsibility for reforms, acquires a completely different meaning. There was no "ownership" as was evoked by the documents of the World Bank and the IMF. Instead, I understand the manipulation and appropriation of the civil service reform as mundane and subversive attempts to "own" the reform or at least parts of it to protect much more mundane interests. The fault-lines between the "enclaves" and the line ministries and the "bosses" and the "juniors" were defined by the danger of being excluded from certain privileges. The "bosses" in the line ministries resisted the efforts of the young technocrats in the "enclave" agencies because they feared an infringement of their own discretion and the "juniors" resisted the new rates because they wanted to receive the same benefits as their more privileged colleagues. From the perspective of everyday life the various attempts to resist or appropriate the reform were not the product of primordial sentiments or sheer parasitism but constituted efforts to come to terms with a volatile and insecure environment.

The Bretton Woods institutions and the national political and bureaucratic elites have an interest in maintaining the illusion of "ownership". "Ownership" creates an ambivalent space for "cunning states and unaccountable international institutions" (Randeria 2003) that can be exploited to evade responsibility either by pointing the accusing finger at the neo-colonialist international financial institutions that force their neo-liberal agenda down the throats of Third World governments or at the sovereign partner that is responsible for its "domestic affairs" and the implementation of the loan conditions.

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