



# 2007 RE-OPENING OF MALAWI'S DIPLOMATIC MISSION IN NEW DELHI UNDER PRESIDENT BINGU WA- MUTHALIKA: DISCUSSING THE CRITICAL JUNCTURES

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## ABSTRACT

*Malawi and India improved their bilateral ties during the presidency of Bingu wa Muthalika that run from 2004 to 2012. Thus in 2007 Malawi opened its resident mission in New Delhi, followed by the re-opening of India's diplomatic mission in Lilongwe in 2012. Several critical junctures pushed Bingu wa Muthalika, president of Malawi then, to resurrect diplomatic engagement with India. The notable critical junctures being the lust for accelerated economic growth and the weaning off of trust by the western traditional donors due to registered human rights violations that engulfed his regime. Bingu chose India for the enhanced relations because India had allowing principles of foreign policy that included policy of non-intrusion and policy of solidarity with the third world countries, which looked welcoming to Bingu's interests and desires. Needless to say, Bingu's strategic interest with India was that of aid to finance flagship developmental projects for his political survival and legacy, the same way the first president of Malawi, Kamuzu Banda manoeuvred by benefiting economically from the apartheid South Africa and Israel. The study used library research, employing secondary data sources in form of journal articles, books, newspapers and You Tube videos to collect content for analysis. Individual level of analysis in International Relations was favoured to adequately examine the character of Bingu wa Muthalika.*

**KEY WORDS:** Aid, Critical Juncture, Principles of Foreign Policy, Path Dependency, Strategic Interests

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

India and Malawi share strong and cordial bilateral relations since 1964. The two countries are also similar in a way, as both countries were colonised by the British, both countries are active democracies and that both countries promote domestic and international cooperation in all spheres of life including human rights. According to a published article by the High Commission of Malawi to India [2023], Malawi opened its diplomatic mission in Delhi in 2007 whilst India opened its diplomatic mission much earlier in Lilongwe, Malawi in 1964. However, 'due to some administrative reasons, the Indian High Commission in Malawi was closed in 1993, though India continued to have diplomatic relations with Malawi. During this period, Malawi was concurrently accredited to India's mission in Zambia until February 2007. The resident mission was re-opened in March, 2012 in Lilongwe, Malawi' [High Commission of India to Malawi [2017].

### 1.1 BINGU WA-MUTHALIKA 2004-2012

In 2004, Bingu wa-Muthalika, an Economics professor, trained in India, was voted president of Malawi with full support of Bakili Muluzi, whose two term mandate had just finished. However, Bingu ditched Muluzi's party, the United Democratic Front [UDF], that ushered him into power and formed his own Democratic Progressive Party [DPP] in 2005.

The change of the ruling party also meant the change of the administration's foreign policy choice and direction from that of Bakili Muluzi. Bingu centred much on the foreign policy principles of South-South cooperation and regional integration, which were relatively in tandem with those of India [Kayuni et al, 2020 ].

Although Bingu believed in regional integration and South-South cooperation policies, his rule was characterised by irrational and debatable decisions on relations with other countries including bordering Tanzania on lake boundary issues and Mozambique on the Nsanje Shire -Zambezi water way project to the Indian ocean which Bingu wanted to implement without proper diplomatic engagement with Mozambique [Kayuni, 2019]. Muthalika, also, ended diplomatic ties with Taiwan in an abrupt manner and opted for mainland China in 2008 [Ott, 2013].

Bingu sought relief during his first term in office, from the East, mainly India and China and benefited from trade and investment, aid and grants to the extent that his government built flagship infrastructure projects in Malawi that made his rule noteworthy. This was in agreement with what IR scholars argue that personalised decisions by the ruling elite mainly the



president, in foreign policy decision making, is deliberate with the aim of leaving behind a legacy [Sikri, 2009]

Bingu's foreign policy direction showed signs of shifting from West dependency to East dependency mainly because of the East's policy of non intrusion to domestic matters of other countries than the West's policy of intrusion into domestic affairs and a pack of sanctions that awaits a defaulting country. He visited India and strengthened bilateral relations in April 2008, where several cultural and economic agreements were made. The same year, 2008, Malawi received from India a line of credit of 30 million USD . The funds were used for irrigation activities, tobacco threshing and the popular one village one product project. According to Targeted News Service [2010], Malawi's bilateral trade with India during Bingu's rule stood at 185 million USD. The joining of Malawi of the duty free tariff preference scheme in 2008, made it possible for Malawi to increase and expand its volume of trade with India.

It may be argued that Bingu's love towards India deepened as he studied economics in India, making him an affiliate of India ever since. Individual interest overpowered any other interest in the making of foreign policy decisions [Sagawa, 2011]. However, there were emerging key turning points, called in this article as critical junctures, that forced Bingu wa Muthalika to cast the net of foreign relations wider, and not only depending on traditional partners from the West. These critical junctures have to be discussed in detail.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this study was to find out the critical junctures that motivated Bingu wa Muthalika to open Malawi's diplomatic mission in New Delhi in 2007 and renewed the bilateral ties between the two countries. The second objective was to unearth the reasons behind the choice of India for the revamped relations and the third objective was to understand Bingu's strategic interests from India during his tenure of office as Malawi president.

## 3.0 CRITICAL JUNCTURES THAT MADE BINGU RE-OPEN MALAWI MISSION IN NEW DELHI IN 2007

The critical juncture concept is academically in place to explain why some of the frequent changes occur in a country's foreign policy decision making in addition to path dependency concept which 'describes the reasons for a certain predictability, coherence or stability in foreign policy decision making and policies' [Kayuni, 2020]. It has to be noted that Bingu, pushed much of his effort in international cooperation with India and China during his tenure of office from 2004 to 2012. What were some of these critical junctures that made Bingu start eying India more than the traditional donors from the West.

The first critical juncture was Bingu's undemocratic style of governance and lack of respect to institutionalism. Bingu wa Muthalika regime was synonymous with autocratic rule though Malawi was already a democracy. Bingu's strong

handedness on domestic politics started to shape his foreign policy principles. It was during the regime of Bingu that Malawi saw the declaration of British High Commissioner, Fergus Cochrane-Dyett, as a persona non grata and his subsequent expulsion from Malawi for reporting to London about Malawi's undemocratic treatment on its own citizens including arrests of civil society members, opposition party members and any other government critic. Cochrane-dyett was quoted in a leaked cable describing Bingu as 'ever more autocratic and intolerant of criticism' [The Guardian, 2011].

It was therefore, India's policy of non intrusion and solidarity with the third world, that gave Malawi and Bingu an edge to still attract development partners while democracy in Malawi was not that consolidated. The West were full of sanctions to countries undermining the tenets of democracy and suppressing human rights of its citizens. Bingu administration was known with oppressing rights of individuals, unfriendliness with neighbours including Tanzania and Mozambique, and that getting a helping hand from the East was essential as the West was out of the equation since human rights record of citizens was one of the West's conditions for aid and trade [Ott, 2013].

The top foreign policy principles of India during the Manmohan Singh tenure of office were those of non intrusion and solidarity with the third world. Bingu and Singh had in common their approach and link of foreign policy to domestic policies that included ending poverty, ignorance and disease in their respective countries [Rajiv, 2015]. So, the policy of non intrusion was working to Bingu's advantage so enhanced relations with India was vital for continued relations in all spheres including trade and investment. India vice president Mohammad Ansari, then was quoted as saying 'We would like to work together to ensure that the vital interests of developing countries are protected and no barriers are placed that could constrain their developmental aspirations' [HT Digital Streams Limited 2010].

However, by accommodating third world countries in its foreign policy principles, India was not in the ally of joining countries that impinge on the rights of its citizens and not follow democratic principles. India vice president Ansari in his address during a state banquet in Malawi where Bingu was present said 'Common commitment to democratic governance, rule of law, respect for human rights and inclusive development, free and fair elections are the backbone of democracy. It is a credit of strength of democratic institutions and maturity of our peoples' [HT Digital streams Limited 2010]. However, India had its own interests in maintaining relations with as many countries as possible which included creation of more trading partners and exercise global power as much as the US and other super powers.

The second critical juncture was Bingu's desire for global recognition through megaphone tactic. Bingu wanted to create such a hype for himself as a leader so important, that countries may rely on to be helped in influencing global decisions. Bingu wanted to place himself on a global map that he was a



leader to reckon with, that he interacts and convinces leading powers like China, India and the US, so that his interests in the SADC region may also be easily agreed upon. Bingu had in mind critical projects like Nsanje inland port where tactical diplomacy had to be done for Mozambique to provide Malawi's desirable sea way to the Indian ocean. Bingu while conducting himself important in the SADC region, he also needed that exposure with India and China for his course to carry more weight.

Thus, it was during Bingu's visit to Delhi in 2010, when he was Africa Union Chair, that he took it upon himself to enhance active engagement in multilateral forums like AU, SADC and COMESA to popularise his megaphone tactic as well. 'Muthalika as chair of Africa Union [AU] in the current year has played a positive role in strengthening the ties between India and the African Union. His visit would provide an opportunity to enhance not only our engagement bilaterally with Malawi but to reiterate our commitment to working with Africa as a whole. We see in Malawi a valuable democratic partner in Africa. It has played an energetic role in COMESA, SADC and provided leadership to the African union' [Targeted News Service 2010].

Bingu also took advantage of India's quest for UN security council reform as an opportunistic time to step in and request for a stronger relationship with India by supporting India's quest for a permanent seat in the UN security council. UN security council consist of five permanent members who are the US, the UK, France, China and Russia and 10 non permanent members who are elected on a rotational two year term. Indian vice president Ansari argued 'India and Africa can no longer be excluded from their rightful place of the permanent membership of the UN security Council. How can we expect legitimacy from a governance structure that excludes the entire African continent and a country which represents one-sixth of humanity?' [Targeted News Service 2010].

Therefore, as AU Chair then, Bingu took advantage of the situation to show solidarity and garner support from all African countries to rally behind India's desire to be in the elite UN security council while on the other hand, Bingu was using that 'noise' or megaphone tactic, to brand himself as a giant in diplomacy even for the interests of strong countries. This branding was to make himself known to the world and to give himself a sense of confidence and importance to push for his own strategic decisions in international relations for his own benefit.

Furthermore, as chair of AU, Bingu wanted to leave a legacy that he was a significant figure during his tenure to the extent that he fostered the starting as well as the implementation of multilateral projects within the region and beyond for the benefit of several countries and not only Malawi [Targeted News Agency, 2010]. The Nsanje inland port for example was being implemented, with Bingu's megaphone tactic, for the beneficiary of Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe as well as DRC. The pomp was important for Bingu's political

prowess in Malawi and his dream of expanding Malawi and making the country maritime.

The third critical juncture was that of accelerated economic growth and infrastructure development. It may further be argued that Historical Institutionalism guided Bingu wa Muthalika's rule as he seemingly followed the path of Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi. Bingu wanted to continue where Kamuzu had left. Historical Institutionalism put much emphasis on 'the current consequences of the processes which are entrenched in institutions. This entrenchment in institutions can be in different forms such as policies, norms or simply rules. In other words, historical institutionalism is as a way of capturing some of the longer-term social-political dynamics' [Kayuni, 2020]. Therefore Bingu wanted to continue all the infrastructure developments Kamuzu Banda left on the cards, including the Nsanje inland port project.

While Kamuzu found solace in South Africa, Portuguese East Africa and Israel, Bingu enjoyed relations with India and China and did harvest the economic gains equal to what Kamuzu Banda reaped from South Africa and Israel from 1964 to 1994. With soft loans from South Africa, Kamuzu built the Capital Hill in Lilongwe, and many other mega projects including rail network to Nacala [Kayuni et al, 2020]. Bingu on the other hand, secured aid from China and lined up a number of state of the art infrastructure projects that transformed Malawi immensely including the Karonga - Chitipa road, Bingu national stadium, Hotel and conference centre in Lilongwe, Parliament building in Lilongwe and Malawi University of science and technology in Thyolo southern region [Zhou, 2022]. As Kamuzu left an economic development mark, Bingu also wanted to leave behind projects that people may point at, no wonder his motto was 'the work of my hands shall speak for me'. With the bilateral ties with India, Bingu and Malawians in general benefited from increased returns in trade and investment, capacity building scholarships as well as cultural relations [High Commission of India to Malawi, 2017].

The fourth critical juncture was the weaning off of trust from traditional donors. During Bingu presidency, Aid disbursement from the traditional donors was being delayed as there were growing concerns on public financial management. Furthermore, tense personal relations between Bingu wa Muthalika and the major international partners, including US, the UK and Norway meant ties with the Western donors were strained. The solution for Bingu was to seek support from non-traditional partners including China and India [Targeted news Service 2010]. As Malawi relied on donor support, it was difficult to evade donor expectations. This was the more reason Bingu had to align Malawi with India and China where donor conditions were insignificant [BTI, 2012].

Other issues that did not please the traditional donors included the non committal on the recommendation to devalue the Malawi currency to align with the parallel market price, the



declaration of the British High Commissioner, then, as a persona non-grata, the evidently corrupt practices by Bingu's party zealots and the non intra-party democracy by trying to impose his brother Peter to take over from him when he was done with his constitutional two terms presidential limit [Otti, 2013]. Therefore Bingu decided to head to India and enrich the existing relations with India to fill the gap being created by the traditional donors.

The fifth critical juncture was that of political relevance. Bingu knew that visible flagship developments will make him politically relevant to Malawians and be voted again in power when seeking for his second term in office. The development projects from China were evenly distributed across Malawi to garner support from all corners. The state of the art tarmac road was built in the northern region district of Karonga and Chitipa which was a stronghold of the opposition party AFORD. The magnificent parliament building, Five Star Hotel and an International Conference Centre were constructed in the capital City, Lilongwe, the stronghold of the main opposition party, MCP, to claim relevance and win political support. The State of the art football stadium was planned for the Southern Region, Bingu's stronghold, though the decision was reversed by Bingu's predecessor, Joyce Banda and was constructed in the Capital City, Lilongwe. Furthermore, the towering Malawi University of Science and Technology [MUST] was purposefully constructed in the Southern Region to balance the equation. These five mega projects were described by the Chinese ambassador to Malawi Long Zhou in 2022 as landmark projects embodying China-Malawi friendship [Zhou, 2022].

In Bingu's mind was second term of office and the uplifting of his brother to presidency after his constitutional term limit. So to be politically relevant and outshine his opponent, quick infrastructure projects, economic and trade transformation was a must for his political significance. Likewise, India's development projects in the field of agriculture were registering a significant mark on the local farmer in Malawi. The ready market to India meant production security for pigeon peas and cotton for local farmers. This security meant good capital return to the farmers which translated to workable government policies on cotton and pigeon pea production. The sore individual to win political praise and recognition was to be Bingu wa Muthalika. So, political relevance was one of the key critical junctures for Malawi's renewed relations with India and indeed another key eastern country China, which is deliberately not being given much platform in this paper.

#### **4.0 WHY DID BINGU FOCUS ON INDIA FOR RENEWED DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION?**

Favourable Principles of foreign policy was the first reason Bingu wa Muthalika settled for India for renewed diplomatic ties. Sikri [2014] discussed that the south-south cooperation and the solidarity with the third world countries, were some of the principles of foreign policy that were enabling India to enter into relations with the political world. With this foreign policy, India was in cordial political relationship with

countries from the South including Asia and Africa. With these relations, India was able to push for its political agendas. The notable agenda that was being pushed during the regime of Bingu wa Muthalika, was that of the UN security council seat. India, was vying for this seat, and needed all South-South countries to support the course for India to have a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. This seat was supposedly to work to the advantage of all countries India was in relations with. Malawi's Bingu wa Muthalika was quick to seize the opportunity by improving bilateral ties with India to benefit from India's returns.

Additionally, India's foreign policy principle of non intrusion, but consultation, attracted relations with other countries. Quoting Mukerji [2023], India's principles of foreign policy were unlike of the West that intruded in other countries' internal affairs and dictated on the rule of law, imposing sanctions whenever they felt other issues were not being implemented the way they deemed fit, mainly on human rights issues. India however, did not meddle in the internal affairs of other countries, be it quasi states, and that the policy of non intrusion had made India worthwhile and attractive.

Supporting the point of allowing principles of foreign policy, is the point of respect of state sovereignty. India, does not make decisions for their partner countries, as was the case with the West which political scholars refer to as neo colonialism. The West did dictate a country for example to adopt minority rights policies if that country was to be considered for aid and other economic assistance. In contrast, 'India gives autonomy to partner countries to make their own political, social and economic decisions that benefits the local populous including promotion of their culture and tradition' [Bhattacharya, 2010].

Increasing diplomatic links was another political reason Bingu re-opened Malawi's diplomatic mission in New Delhi in 2007. Countries do increase their diplomatic links for many reasons including the economic benefits in form of trade and investment, social benefits in the realm of cultural relations and capacity building and also political benefits in form of peace and security [Mawdsley, E & McCann, G. [2010]. Thus Malawi wanted to increase its diplomatic links with renowned countries, taking a global lead in economic recovery and growth, national security growth as well as in democracy consolidation. So the eminent pillars of growth in global engagement that Bingu desired the most included sustaining capital inflows to increase investment efforts, scientific and technological developments and accessibility of natural resources. To achieve these heights, global cooperation with a strategic partner like India was essential.

#### **5.0 MALAWI'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS FROM INDIA DURING BINGU'S PRESIDENCY**

Malawi during the presidency of Bingu wa Muthalika, had many interests in the outside world in all the spheres of significance be it political, social, economical, cultural, security, environmental and more. Of strategic interest from India was aid in form of loans and grants and development





cooperation. As already discussed, Bingu's desire was to register an accelerated economic growth mainly in infrastructure to continue where Malawi's first president Kamuzu Banda left. With Bingu's record of human rights oppression to Malawians including the civil society, the church and the opposition political parties, getting economic support from the traditional donors like Britain and the US was a tall order. Likewise with the traditional lenders like the IMF and the World Bank. The easiest and more available option was to open diplomatic ties with China and end the existing ties with Taiwan, to please Mainland China, and also to strengthen the existing ties with India. Bingu graduated from an Indian University, Delhi University, as such he had at personal level a strong attachment to India and its values. Therefore to easily access aid in form of loans and grants and to facilitate trade mainly through agriculture, India and China were suitable to realise Bingu's megaphone tactic as a top notch leader in governance and development. Furthermore, India was an option for Malawi to survive even in times of weaning off of donor confidence from the West. The coming in of India and China also acted as a cover up to his leadership style of undemocratic governance as India mainly was implementing a foreign policy principle of non intrusion in domestic affairs of other countries. He was therefore certain that he was not going to be taken to task for his undemocratic style of leadership. The other reason for Bingu's strategic interest of aid from India was that of leaving an indelible mark of Malawi's accelerated growth during his tenure of office.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Bingu wa Muthalika, overpowered Malawi's foreign policy decision making with his individual interest, rather than the interest of the country. What Bingu had in mind was the creation and leaving behind of a legacy of flagship infrastructure projects which will make his tenure of office unique. As a result, he strategically and individually pushed for foreign policy decisions that correlated well with his agenda and interests. As Bingu was not in good books with the traditional donors from the West, he employed, according to Kayuni et al [2020] a path dependency concept, 'an approach that describes the reasons for a certain predictability, coherence or stability in foreign policy decision making and policies'. Path dependency concept was also practiced by the first president of Malawi, Kamuzu Banda, and made his period in office a success. The critical junctures made Bingu re-open diplomatic mission with India, close ties with Taiwan and open with Mainland China all in an effort to satisfy his ego of leaving a reputable legacy through trade mark infrastructure projects. The main strategic reason for the enhanced relations with India, as well as new ties with China as it occurred during the same period, was to acquire aid for speedy accomplishment of the infrastructure projects for Bingu's political survival and legacy. A leader, on his own, according to Sagawa, 2011, has the ability to influence foreign policy decisions to accommodate his ego and desires by letting his individual interest overpower any other interest in the making of foreign policy decisions.

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