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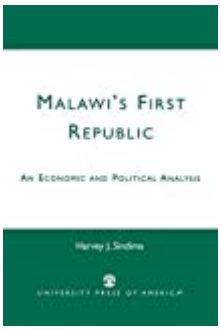

Harvey J. Sindima. *Malawi's First Republic: An Economic and Political Analysis.* Lanham: University Press of America, 2002. xv + 260 pp. $37.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7618-2332-2.

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How is political history written these days? This is perhaps an unfair question to ask of any single book, though admittedly it was the main question that circulated through my mind as I read *Malawi's First Republic: An Economic and Political Analysis*. Authored by Harvey J. Sindima, a professor of philosophy and religion at Colgate University, this book holds the distinction of being the first full-length study to address the postcolonial history of Malawi under the rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda, from independence in 1964 to the country's first multi-party elections in 1994.[1] Given the notoriety of the Banda regime, this is a rich topic to explore, one which Sindima approaches with a holistic sensibility. Consequently, an abundance of issues are covered, from patterns of economic development to regional foreign policy to the Young Pioneers, for example, which creates both strengths and weaknesses within the text.

The book consists of eleven chapters. The first three chapters provide historical background, from the precolonial period up through the Central African Federation period of the 1950s and early 1960s. This kind of depth is perhaps unnecessary, though this section does provide a useful account of a now well-established historical narrative, synthesizing a number of previously published books and articles. Sindima's writing is clear and informative. However, once the postcolonial period is reached, the style of the book shifts quite abruptly from a fluid chronology to chapters based on specific themes. Though the book continues to move forward in time, the general result is that political and economic analyses are not as integrated as they might be, forcing readers to connect the dots on their own.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 give an economic analysis of postcolonial Malawi through an overview of development strategies, an assessment of local agricultural production and manufacturing, and a discussion of external trade, investment, and World Bank/IMF loans. These chapters offer valuable summaries of these issues, though the information is often presented in a dry and somewhat stilted fashion. For example, a number of tables are provided regarding government revenue, export value, and the rate of economic growth, though much of the information listed is from the 1980s and 1990s. Hard statistical data from the early postcolonial period is much scantier.[2] Furthermore, frequent currency listings in Kwacha may leave local and international readers alike scratching their heads: numbers go up and down but the real meaning is elusive without corroborative evidence to measure change in value over time. More broadly, Sindima's general economic analysis is based on the world systems paradigm and dependency theory. Through this framework, he outlines how Malawi's economy experienced a

period of continued growth during the 1960s and 1970s and then began to slide during the late 1970s as foreign borrowing and debt increased. This analysis would be a useful introduction to such concepts for undergraduate students, though it reads generically for specialists.

The spirit of the book picks up for the remaining five chapters. Chapter 7 backtracks to the early independence period of the 1960s, in particular the Cabinet Crisis of 1964-65 and the political fallout from it. Sindima provides a detailed account of this crisis through which Banda expelled political challengers and consolidated his hold on power, and, in chapter 8, he discusses how this complex beginning affected regional and domestic policy for the next several decades. As a postcolonial leader, Banda was a curious anomaly, as is well-known, through his softer stance in regard to the white governments of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, and his personal distance from African leaders such as Nkrumah and Nyerere. Sindima draws instructive connections between the Cabinet Crisis, Banda's independent-mindedness, and Malawi's idiosyncratic relations with regional neighbors. Banda's philosophy of rule might be best summed up as a form of autocratic pragmatism: a demonstrable concern for domestic control matched by a reluctance to undermine this power through international commitments, a combined situation that was further dictated by personal taste. In Banda's words, from a speech to the OAU in 1964, "while I feel strongly against imperialism and colonialism in any form, while I am just as anxious as anyone in this conference to help our brothers and sisters–Malawi's power, my own power to help are limited and circumscribed by geographical position" (p. 184).

Of course, Banda's power was hardly limited from a domestic standpoint. Chapter 9 delves into this topic, describing the inner workings of the Malawi Congress Party, the Young Pioneers, the prison system, and the more gruesome moments of this period. As one example, Sindima writes:

"At 4 in the morning, one September morning in 1973, the security forces raided Moto village in Mangochi. They took 567 people, children and the aged included, on ten trucks for detention in Dzeleka. Their homes were completely destroyed, their property (cattle, sheep, goats, boats, sewing machines, beds and other things) forfeited. Out of 567 only 371 returned after ten months of detention. The rest had died of torture, living in overcrowded cells, poor diet, lack of medical attention and overworking." (p. 204)

Such passages underscore the tragic local impact of Banda's regime. Chapter 10 examines the opposition this abuse of power generated, primarily from those in exile, and the advent of change in the early 1990s after local officials of the Catholic Church submitted an open Pastoral Letter to the government in March 1992 criticizing its policies. These final chapters are informative, though again, very little is offered in the way of analysis as promised by the title. It is unclear how Banda's system of rule may or may not fit into broader empirical patterns or theoretical concepts of postcolonial power.

This final point unfortunately might characterize the book as a whole for some readers. Sindima writes that this book stems from a chapter of his doctoral dissertation, and it possesses that kind of feel. It frequently reads like a fact book rather than a fully engaged analysis. The editorial quality from the University Press of America regrettably tends to further undermine Sindima's study with grammatical errors and particularly through the insertion of a "references" section at the end of each chapter instead of proper footnotes or endnotes. Despite the author's training in philosophy and religion, there is a lack of deep engagement with contemporary debates within the field of African history, political science, or postcolonial studies. To return to the initial question of this review, Sindima's study is decidedly confined by the nation-state paradigm. With this angle, the voices and experiences of common Malawians are lost in the text beneath economic numbers and, ironically, the power of Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

Having said this, Sindima's book does raise interesting issues that deserve further examination that no doubt will take many more studies to explore fully. Beyond the experiences of victims, the local fate of customary authorities, Malawi's role in the Cold War, Malawian perspectives on their socialist neighbors, and the transnational impact of the civil war in Mozambique are all important topics for future consideration.[3] The empirical gaps in the text also raise interesting questions about postcolonial archives and the practice of postcolonial history. Are there "postcolonial archives" as such? How should contemporary scholars address this issue, to ensure that there will be valuable resources for future scholars to utilize? How can oral sources amend this? What new methodologies might be developed?[4]

Finally, Sindima's curious ending, a quote of a public apology by Banda, also raises the intriguing question of nostalgia for Banda that has accompanied democratic change in Malawi. This is something I encountered in

some quarters while conducting fieldwork in 1999, and it provides an undertone to sections of the book. The title of the book itself conveys a bygone era with a touch of nobility. What does this say about memory and politics in the postcolony?

With these observations in mind, one hopes that this book will find its way into the hands of an undergraduate at Chancellor College, who will use it as a stepping stone to pursue deeper investigations into the postcolonial history of one of southern Africa's less-studied countries.

Notes

[1]. Other studies that have addressed the Banda period, though not up to 1994 and after, include: Philip Short, *Banda* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); T. David Williams, *Malawi: The Politics of Despair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Kanyama Chiume, *Banda's Malawi: Africa's Tragedy* (Lusaka: Multimedia Publications, 1992); and John Lloyd Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A Study in Promise, Power, and Paralysis* (Bothwell: Dudu Nsomba Publications, 1993).

[2]. This is not the author's fault alone and is more likely a reflection of the difficulties of obtaining complete information for the postcolonial period. This issue will be discussed later.

[3]. Some of these topics are already being addressed by scholars. See, for example, Joey Power, "Hastings Banda and Cold War Politics in Malawi," in *Agency and Action in Colonial Africa: Essays for John E. Flint*, eds. Chris Youe and Tim Stapleton, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 195-212; Harri Englund, ed., *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi* (Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute, 2002); and Harri Englund, *From War to Peace on the Mozambique-Malawi Borderland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002). See also Kings M. Phiri and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Democratization in Malawi: A Stocktaking* (Zomba: Kachere Press, 1998); and Matembo S. Nzunda and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Church, Law, and Political Transition in Malawi, 1992-1994* (Zomba: Kachere Press, 1995).

[4]. For a start on this issue, see Stephen Ellis, "Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa," *Journal of African History*, 43:1 (2002): pp. 1-26.

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