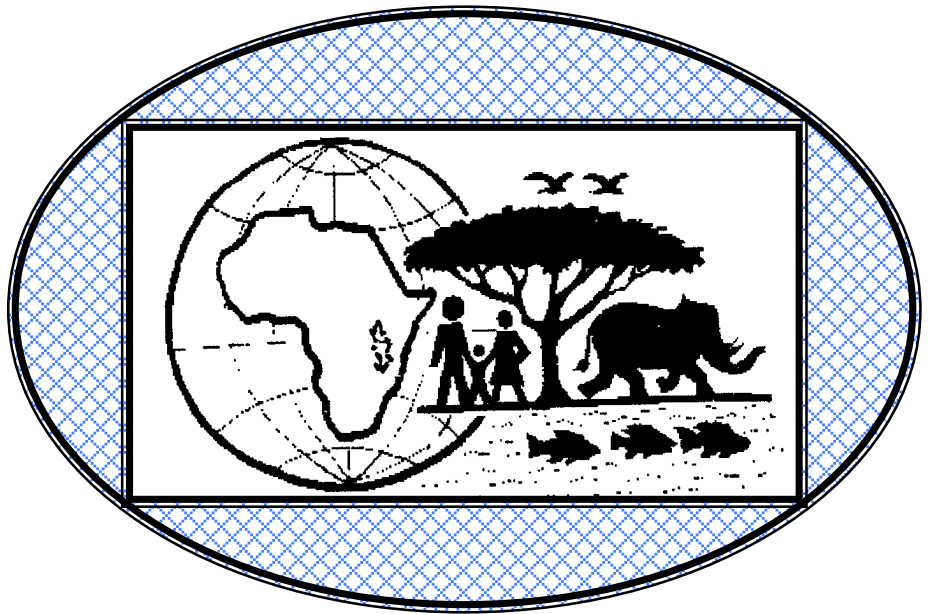


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**JANUARY
2011**

**News clippings
with analysis
From the
Major newspapers
in Malawi**

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LIST OF NEWSPAPERS REVIEWED

Daily Times

The Guardian

Malawi News

The Nation

The Sunday Times

The Weekend Nation

Nation on Sunday

PREVIEW

President Bingu wa Mutharika's recent pronouncements have left people wondering what exactly has become of the economic engineer that we elected in 2004. Memories are still fresh of how the then president Dr Bakili Muluzi marketed the little known Bingu in the 2004 General Elections. Muluzi's words become a reality as Mutharika tried to be the economic engineer people had prayed for.

Dr Muluzi made Malawians believe that Mutharika was the right person to lead them and true to the former president's words Mutharika tried his best to do just that. In his first term of office Mutharika was at the mercy of the Opposition who made sure they gave him hell for dumping the party but gave him the presidency on a silver platter.

It took civil society and faith groups several campaigns to have the budget passed in the National Assembly. At times Mutharika addressed a half full parliament after the Opposition had boycotted the debates. Indeed, Mutharika was at the mercy of the NGOs who made sure that they fought for him during the entire five years.

Five years down the line the song is different now that Mutharika has the majority in Parliament. The same civil society and faith groups that were there for Mutharika in his moments of trial are now seen as his enemies. Almost at every public rally Mutharika makes sure that he threatens them in order to silence them.

Of late Mutharika has accused the faith groups of being hypocrites simply because they criticized his government on a few shortfalls. The President has actually turned from being the same accommodating person we used to know in his first term of office to someone who is always on the defensive when criticized. Those that are surrounding him are doing him no good service with their advice.

The media has not been spared because they have also been attacked for reporting what is deemed to be bad for those in authority. Whatever happened to freedom of the press? Are we slowly going to the one party rule where anyone who opposes government's views is an enemy?

The moment someone criticizes the Mutharika's administration they are seen to be enemies. As we start the New Year one can only pray for sanity in Malawi.

POLITICS

The future of the long awaited Local Government elections seems to be cloudy following the closure of the electoral body *Electoral Commission EC*. This development has raised a lot of suspicions among the opposition political parties. The *Malawi Congress Party MCP* and the *United Democratic Front UDF* both who have carried out some activities in readiness for the April 2011, have either slowed down or stopped. According to the *MCP* the party has slowed down activities to do with the coming elections, while the *UDF* has completely stopped. A number of organisations and individuals have also raised doubts on the possibility of having the elections when *EC* is not in operation.

One can always ask if what the papers said about *MCP* president John Tembo is a true reflection of what will happen in 2014. The *MCP* announced that its president, Honourable Tembo, is not going to stand as a presidential candidate for the party. This is actually not news because the same Tembo was once again quoted in the press making the same announcement. John Tembo has lately come under heavy attack by some members of the party who formed a group called *Taskforce for Change*. This group is advocating for new blood in the party. If reports of Tembo's decision of not standing in 2014 elections are anything to go by then the group has all the reasons to smile.

True to the fears of many people the press wrote another story that Tembo never said in any way that he would not stand. Tembo attacked the party's spokesperson, Nancy Tembo, for telling the press that the constitution of the party would not allow him to stand again. This scenario only confirms people's doubts over the *MCP* leader's plans for 2014. It seems John Tembo is not in any way letting the presidency of the party go easily. But what does this say about Malawi's politicians when it comes to leaving the 'hot seat'? It only shows that there is a lot that needs to be done to convince party leaders so that they should know when to leave office.

The political future of the fired Vice President of the ruling *Democratic Progressive Party DPP* is still an undisclosed issue. The executive of the *DPP* fired Joyce Banda from the party but she still remains Vice President of Malawi. So far Joyce Banda has not announced what her next political move will be. Meanwhile the *UDF* is divided on some suggestions to welcome Mai Joyce Banda into the party. While some members of the former ruling party are in favour of her return to the party others have opposing views. On her part Banda has not made any public statement concerning her future in politics.

The ruling *Democratic Progressive Party DPP* is in a way courting disaster by putting pressure on MPs who have openly shown their allegiance to Joyce Banda. Freedom of association seems to be a crime the moment one speaks or sympathises with Mrs Banda. It seems all the party is interested in is marketing the president's brother Peter Mutharika and that everybody should support him. Those who do not support Professor Peter Mutharika are seen to be outcasts such as the likes of Thyolo MP Anita Kalinde. Some months ago this female legislator was manhandled by overzealous *DPP* Youths at Chileka Airport when she had gone to welcome President Bingu wa Mutharika. Some observers have noted that by forcing people to support

Peter Mutharika, the party is in a way shutting out those that had similar ambitions. One might question if those who are currently supporting Peter are being true to themselves.

While Malawi might have performed well in other sectors, such as the economy, the fact is that as a nation there is still a lot that needs to be done democratically. The just ended year on the political scene we witnessed a lot of undemocratic decisions from the Executive and Legislature. For the first time in the history of Malawi the government abused its numbers in the National Assembly to come up with some questionable decisions. Some commentators even complained of the way the 2010/2011 national Budget was rushed through without proper scrutiny.

Presently Bingu wa Mutharika is becoming more and more unsettled since the publication of the Roman Catholic Bishop's pastoral letter. Apparently he is out of tune with the democratic system of government which he swore to protect. Every time he addresses a public rally these days Malawian are used to hear him threaten his critics and political opponents.

While there have been some positive developments in Malawi over the past year other commentators strongly feel the succession plans in the ruling *DPP* have reduced points for Malawi on democracy. At present the *DPP* is busy selling Peter Mutharika as the next candidate for the party. Meanwhile Peter himself has not commented on the issue, though some people have said that his silence means he is consenting to all the plans.

As President Bingu wa Mutharika was handing over the *AU* Chairmanship in January, civil society asked government to account for the money that had been allocated for activities during his tenure. *Human Rights Consultative Committee HRCC* has since asked government to do this. Early in 2010 Parliament passed a K950 million budget for activities that Mutharika would be involved in during his tenure of office as the *African Union* Chairman. Now that his term is over civil society would like a report on how the money was used.

ECONOMY

Government came under heavy attack from motorists as the fuel shortage continued in the late part of last year and early January and yet the prices were increased at the pumps. It seems the problem has no solution in sight as evidenced by the persistent shortages that have now become the order of the day. Different ministers have come up with various reasons that were meant to convince people about the shortage. Just recently the Information Minister told the nation that the shortage was because there was congestion at the Tete Bridge in Mozambique. This excuse annoyed some Mozambican officials who made it clear to consumers that this was just a lame excuse. There has been congestion at the bridge for a long time. Just recently the Minister of Mining and Energy, Grain Malunga, pushed the fuel shortage blame on to banks. According to Malunga the banks did not put aside enough Forex for fuel purchases. Whatever the case is Malawians want this problem to come to an end. Authorities in government should come up with a lasting solution for this problem as it is slowing down production thereby affecting the whole economy.

On the same note the press reported that there are some quarters that want Malawi to adjust the price of fuel upwards. This plea comes against reports of losses that fuel importers have made. The *Petroleum Importers Limited PIL* said with great concern that at present they are importing fuel at a loss and this has crippled their business. Government has responded to their pleas by raising the prices of fuel. Petrol is now up by 13.9% selling at K290 per litre. The new price of diesel is K260 a litre. Malawians should brace themselves for tough times. This is because fuel increases always have the knock on effect of raising the prices of goods and services, making it difficult for consumers to cope.

Consumers welcomed the New Year with some tariff adjustments in electricity, water and road traffic fees. People are now digging deeper into their pockets to pay for water and electricity thereby depleting the same small amounts of income they have. As some observers said the rise in these tariffs means the increase in the cost of living. It should be noted that in 2010 the *Centre For Social Concern CFSC* in its findings on the monthly cost of living found that costs were increasing in all the four major cities. Now, as observers have noted, the price rise in electricity will surely affect people's incomes, as they will now be paying more.

Some economic analysts have noted that it is high time Malawi started doing business for 24 hours. The analysts have a feeling that a lot of time we spend at night could better be used for business. Experience has shown that countries where they trade even at night their economies improve. With the right infrastructure some countries are able to maximise their potential in business by trading for 24 hours. The same could happen to Malawi if the structures are enabled for business at night. Normally businesses close at 5 p.m. in Malawi.

FOOD SECURITY

The *National Food Reserve Agency NFRA* announced it would do away with the maize that has been stored for sometime at the reserves. The organization is still has maize that has been in the silos for over five years. A recent press statement stated that the organisation wants to replace the old grain with the new one. There are plans to sell the old maize at a low price. As some observers have noted selling maize at a lower price means a loss for the *NFRA* but as the organisation has announced the sale will go ahead. In recent years Malawi has experienced bumper yields resulting in a maize surpluses. To date Malawi is taken as a shining example to Africa because of the present food situation. One can only hope that this will not come to an abrupt end in the near future.

In January President Bingu wa Mutharika officially opened maize silos at Katoto in Mzuzu. For the first time ever Mzuzu has grain reserves that are supposed to carter for the Northern Region. The Mutharika administration had promised to construct maize silos in both the Southern and northern Regions. Some years ago President Mutharika enaugurated the Mangochi silos. So far Mutharika's promises on silos have been fulfilled. The newly opened Mzuzu Silos' capacity is 20,000 metric tones.

The fertilizer subsidy programme will never be short of controversies as evidenced by the many negative reports this initiative receives. If only the issue of fertilizer subsidy were not politicized perhaps the problems that the distribution exercise faces would come to an end. Year in year out the same problems happen such as the shortage of fertilizers for people who already have coupons, late delivery of the farm inputs, and theft. There have been reports of the shortage of fertilizer at the time farmers need it badly. Could this mean that those in authority fail to bring the farm inputs in time for the farmers or someone somewhere is deliberately sabotaging the exercise? Surely there is something that can be done to improve this distribution exercise.

As Parliament rose last December there were concerns that the picture of how much fertilizer has been delivered is not a true representation of what is happening on the ground. A report presented in the National Assembly indicated that 95% of the intended farm input had been delivered. But Members of Parliament reported that there was no fertilizer in *ADMARC* depots and other selling points. This is contrary to the report by Ministry of Agriculture in the House that almost all the fertilizer earmarked for subsidy programme this season has been delivered.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Malawi Human Rights Commission MHRC did not hide its disappointment over the remarks that President Bingu wa Mutharika made on the current spate of robberies in the country. President Bingu wa Mutharika publicly gave the police an order to shoot to kill anyone who might terrorize business premises and residents. To add salt to the injury Mutharika further threatened to deny bail to any of the robbers once they are caught. In this regard *MHRC* has noted that while it is true that as a nation we need to fight crime but allowing the police to kill would also give room for abuse. Already the police are well known for being trigger happy following a series of reports on victims shot by the same law enforcers. Some observers have also warned that this directive would also dent Malawi's human rights record.

The same Mutharika was at it again when he accused the media, faith groups and civil society organizations of insulting him. Mutharika, who spoke at a national memorial service of late Dr John Chilembwe, said that he is the most insulted president compared to his predecessors. One wonders why Mutharika does not want any criticism when he is holding a public office and is expected to be accountable to every Malawian. Of late Mutharika has labeled both the clergy and civil society groups as hypocrites because, as he said, they are quick to judge and condemn others especially his government. Political analysts reported that the government should not be defensive about any advice coming from any sectors of the society instead it should work on such shortfalls.

As the Malawi Growth Development Strategy MDGS II is coming the NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is leaving no stone unturned in making sure that children's issues are incorporated in MGDS II. The group feels MGDS II should include children's talk as one cannot discuss development while sidelining children. The coalition wants the next MGDS to incorporate strategies that would directly address children's issues like child trafficking, the removal of children from the streets, and many more current issues.

With just a few months to the Local Government Elections, some local NGOs have raised doubts whether the country will go to the polls on 20 April 2011. The doubts are coming after President Bingu wa Mutharika dissolved the Electoral Commission EC. Mutharika closed down their offices after auditors exposed alleged gross financial mismanagement. The fact that the organization is currently not in operation has left NGOs with little hope on the coming 2011 Local Government Elections. The Malawi Electoral Support Network MESN fears some of the activities on the calendar might not be carried out because the EC is incapacitated. Meanwhile the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace CCJP has asked for the postponement of the elections.

Some local NGOs have vowed to fundraise money for former president Dr Bakili Muluzi's medical trip to South Africa. At present the government is denying Muluzi funding for his trip arguing that he needs independent doctors to examine him. Dr Muluzi who is answering graft charges is suffering from slipped disc following his heavy campaigns for Bingu wa Mutharika in 2004. While welcoming the good gesture by the groups the family will not get any financial assistance from the concerned NGOs. The family has said Malawian people already pay taxes that are supposed to cater for the former president's medical care.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

The issue of the number of children a couple should have reappeared in the press. As some NGOs are proposing for two children per couple some sectors still have a contrary view. According to the press, the government still is of the view that imposing the number of children on Malawians is infringing on people's constitutional rights. An earlier survey showed that Malawi's fast growing population rate can easily be avoided if couples have two children.

The month of January also saw a number of articles on *Association of Secular Humanism*. This is a new organization to many Malawians. It seems to be a bit controversial because a number of its issues are contrary to the majority of people's beliefs, such as that God does not exist. The organization believes that witchcraft does not exist and has managed to gain freedom for some suspected witches who were in jail.

Controversy still surrounds the marriage age. To date president Bingu wa Mutharika has not yet given his assent to the marriage bill following a hot debate that arose the moment Parliament unanimously passed the bill. The bill allows people to marry at the age of sixteen without their parents' consent. Civil society and human rights organizations, health organizations, faith groups, and many more spoke out against the passing of the bill. They hold that at sixteen a person is still a child and should not marry. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children*, describes a child as anyone below the age of eighteen. Against this background the *United Nations Population Fund UNFPA* has advised that youths should be given a chance to decide on the right age for marriage since the issue concerns them.

Of late a number of surveys and studies have shown that poverty levels are decreasing. One can only hope that these studies and surveys are not only there to paint a rosy picture of the reigning government. Some ask are these a true reflection of the situation on the ground? Although a recent survey has indicated that the poverty levels have reduced, the real situation of people does not reflect well with the studies results. Reports have shown that poverty levels have fallen from 40% to 39%. Some economic experts have noted the best representation on the poverty levels in Malawi would be through conducting an *Integrated Household Survey*. It is only through this procedure that a clear picture of the situation of poverty in Malawi can be seen, because it will not only focus on availability of food but also employment creation.

Traditional leaders have discouraged people from singing weddings songs that incite violence. Traditional Authority Chauma noted with great concern some songs that literally paint marriage as a source of misery. Such songs have always been used during wedding ceremonies and nobody has ever questioned the idea behind such lyrical content. Against this background some organizations want counselors and all stakeholders to avoid use of such language.

EDUCATION

True to what observers said about space at the University of Malawi, students at Chancellor College are reported to be have accommodation problems. The recent intake for the University of Malawi first years saw a big increase of the number of students admitted against the number of rooms. These include first years who reside outside the campus. Media reports recently disclosed that there was a fracas at Chanco over hostels as boys and girls wanted the same rooms because of the shortage. Though the college downplayed reports of the fracas, the truth is there is a shortage of hostels at the college. As some observers have noted the current problems in the institutions of higher learning need urgent solutions.

Recently government made it clear that compulsory education is not an option for Malawi at present. Education Minister Peter Mutharika did not beat about the bush when he was asked about the issue. Mutharika said at present what the ministry wanted to do is to improve the quality of education more than to enforce compulsory education. According to Mutharika compulsory education is not the best option. At present the Ministry wants to emphasize access to quality and relevance.

As a way of making sure that a number of girls stay in school after falling pregnant, the Ministry of Education came up with a re-admission plan. At present a number of girls who fell pregnant whilst in school have been readmitted. According to reports over five thousand school dropouts have been readmitted. Reports indicate that some of the pupils readmitted are also boys who dropped out of school because of other reasons. Evidence has shown that not all the girls who left school were pregnant. The good thing is they are back in class.

Parents and guardians of pupils at Blantyre Girls Primary School, in Ndirande, were at pains to understand what exactly happened at the school recently. For no apparent reason a number of students fainted after one student suffered an elliptic seizure in class. This caused a great panic as parents, guardians and other onlookers went to the school to demand an explanation. In panic people accused teachers at the school of practicing witchcraft without any evidence. Such an occurrence is rare but there are recorded cases from all over the world of classmates fainting when a fellow pupil suffered seizures. After research none of these incidents have been connected with witchcraft but rather with the shock that students feel when their friends have such a seizure.

The Ministry of Education warned private schools to follow the authorised calendar. This warning comes after reports showed that some private schools are still following their previous school calendar against government's newly harmonised calendar. The ministry has since issued another warning that it would close such private schools. Authorities want all schools to open and close at the same time and have the same holidays.

HEALTH

The issue of nurses' attitude towards patients came up again in the press in January. Newly consecrated Bishop of Karonga Diocese, Martin Mtumbuka, gave the advice to all nurses in Christian hospitals in the country. Bishop Mtumbuka is of the view that nurses at Christian hospitals should be polite and exemplary to all medical personnel hospitals. Of late nurses have been in the press for the wrong reasons as reports disclosed cases of rudeness to patients. Expectant women in labour have also had a fair share of nurses' rudeness. These are some of the reason the Bishop wants nurses in Christian hospitals to refrain from such rudeness.

Still on the same issue of nurses, reports indicate that there has been a drop out in the number of nurses who die of HIV related complications. This believed to be because of the project that the *Organisation of Nurses and Midwives NONM* embarked on called *Care for Care Givers*. Nurses are also human and as some were affected or infected by HIV/AIDS. Now the news of the reduced number of cases of nurses HIV related deaths is good news because Malawi still needs these health personnel.

News that Malawi has missed the *Global Fund* has been received with mixed reactions. Some say the country did not fulfill the criteria because it did not spell out how it would deal with issues of homosexuality. If only Malawi legalized gay relationships then it would have an easy ride on global funds. Other authorities said this is not the reason the country failed to clinch the global fund. The outcome is that the nation has lost K84 billion which could have been used for the fight against TB, HIV and Malaria. The reaction of the *Global Fund* leaves some of the work in the fight against these diseases in jeopardy because without funds nothing can be done.

The health ministry has all the reasons to smile as the number of doctors is reported to be increasing. In recent times press reports have shown shortages of doctors as many Malawian trained doctors have left the country in search of greener pastures in the West. In most health centres have no qualified doctors. This shows how heavy the workload is on all the medical personnel in hospitals. Latest reports have revealed that there are now 265 doctors. According to the Minister of Health this is great improvement compared to what was happening in the previous years.

Although Cancer is rarely spoken about in the press, evidence has shown that this disease is one of the major killers globally. Dr Leo Masamba a Cancer specialist has noted that despite being one of the major killers cancer receives less attention and a few resources. Dr Masamba notes that many medical personnel do not have the right equipment to detect the disease at an early stage. Experts have disclosed that many types of Cancer can be cured if detected at an early stage. A major problem is that the necessary treatment for Cancer patients is not available in Malawi and what is available is within the private health sector!

ENVIRONMENT

Analysts have questioned the announcement by the Minister of Natural Resources, Energy and Environment, Grain Malunga, about restrictions on charcoal traders. Malunga announced that he would make sure that charcoal sellers are arrested because they are depleting Malawi's forests. It is true that charcoal selling continually contributes to the depletion of indigenous trees but it seems arresting the traders will not solve the problem. Many people are involved in the trade because they know their products have a ready market. Malawi is losing its forests day by day but charcoal sellers continue selling because there is a ready market. On the other hand many consumers use charcoal because it is cheap and they have no other alternatives. With the increases of electricity prices, consumers have no option but to use charcoal. Environmental experts feel arresting the charcoal sellers is not solving the problem but rather finding an alternative source of power would be a lasting solution.

Press reports disclosed that although climate change affects many countries, including Malawi, Malawi is least prepared to address the problem. Environmentalists say that Malawi is one of the countries that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change but has not done much to address its consequences. According to experts fisheries, agriculture, water, and other sectors will be affected by climate change and as such need to be taken care of.

After the world meeting on climate in Cancun in Mexico some analysts said that issues of water were not discussed. High on the agenda were issues to do with climate change but issues on water were not discussed leaving observers wondering why such an important part of the environment was left out. For sure the effects of climate change will also be felt in the water sector.

Finally peoples' fears have been put to rest over the activities of exploring coal in Lengwe National Park and irrigation project at Majete Game Reserve in Chikwawa district. Some residents and other environmentalists expressed worries over the activities as they feared they would affect the wildlife in the two habitats. Government Minister Grain Malunga has since assured the people that there is nothing to worry about because the coal business and the irrigation canal will not affect wildlife in Majete and Lengwe.

The launched of *National Tree Planting Year* has seen a number of organisations and communities planting trees in their surroundings. This initiative will ensure that the problem of depleted forests is taken care of. Some months ago it was reported in the press that for many Malawians there is no problem in planting, but in taking care of them. The trees should be looked after so that Malawi's efforts to cover up bare hills and mountains materialize.

GENDER

The press in January carried a series of a story of a young girl who ran away from a forced marriage in Karonga. In this time one would have expected parents and guardians to encourage their children to attain education first, but it seems some people in Karonga have contrary views. The girl is reported to have met a number of misfortunes as she ran away from marriage to an old man who was already married. In Karonga the culture of arranged marriages between young girls and rich old men still goes on. A number of poor families get credit from rich men and they pay back the loans by giving the creditors their young daughters to marry, locally called *kupimbira*. The story in the press reminded people that there are still some practices among Malawians that put young girls at risk and should be dealt with at once.

In January President Bingu wa Mutharika appointed Rosemary Kanyuka as the *Director of Public Prosecution DPP*. Kanyuka is the first woman in Malawi to hold such a position. Previously Mutharika appointed Ishmael Wadi who was later fired. Some gender activists have welcomed Kanyuka's appointment, which they say is the right step towards the empowerment of women. It should be noted that the attorney general is also a woman.

Gender organizations are keeping figures in connection with the wills and inheritance bill. The bill was brought to the National Assembly, but was referred back to committees.

With Parliament meeting at present women activists hope that this time around the bill will be passed into law. A number of male MPs spoke against the proposed bill saying passing it would mean giving women all the powers to either abuse and kill their spouses.

In their deliberation the male MPs claimed there is already a spate of deaths of men who were alleged to have been killed by their wives because of the women's greed. As the bill goes back to parliament one can only speculate that such concerns have been taken care of.

On the same issue property concerns come from women's organizations who are proposing a change in the Marital Property Law. According to *Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust WILSA* Malawi has expressed concerns over the Married Women Act which they claim discriminates against women. A representative of the Attorney General quashed the proposals saying there is not enough evidence to show that women are affected by the Act. *WILSA Malawi* wants women to have half of the property owned. Press reports have revealed that a number of women go empty handed when their marriages come to an end or when their husband dies. It is in answer to this scenario that *WILSA* is fighting for women to have an equal share of property earned household.