LIKE CHAMELEONS:
CIVIL SERVANTS AND CORRUPTION IN MALAWI

Gerhard Anders

In the civil service you have to know how to manoeuvre.
Senior civil servant in Malawi

The making of rules and social and symbolic order is a human industry matched only by the manipulation, circumvention, remaking, replacing, and unmaking of rules in which people seem almost equally engaged.

Moore (2000: 1)

In many tales and myths of Malawi’s past the chameleon figures as a morally ambiguous and cunning character (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985:17–38). The acclaimed poet Jack Mapanje (1981), who was imprisoned without charge or trial between 1987 and 1991, used the image of the chameleon to describe survival strategies during the days of Kamuzu Banda’s authoritarian regime when persecution and detention of so-called “confusionists” and “separatists” was the order of the day. Like chameleons, adopting the colours of the background to outwit their predators, people had to veil their criticisms of the regime to avoid detention. Since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994 the chameleon is used as a metaphor to describe the opportunism of politicians who sell their vote to the highest bidder (Dzimbiri 1998, Englund 2002). Civil servants in Malawi resemble chameleons in many ways. In order to manoeuvre successfully in the civil service they have to negotiate the often-conflicting claims and expectations from colleagues, superiors and kin. During President for Life Kamuzu Banda’s authoritarian regime between the country’s independence from Britain in 1964 and the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994 civil servants behaved like chameleons in Jack Mapanje’s sense whilst

---

since 1994 many seem to take advantage of the new liberties to use the public office for personal gains.

Malawi, known until the 1990s for relatively high levels of integrity and diligence among the country’s civil servants, seems to have caught up with the rest of Africa although the situation is a far cry from countries such as Angola or Nigeria where corruption is rampant. Since the introduction of multi-party democracy corruption appears to be on the rise and is hotly debated in the media and the political arena. Generally my interlocutors stressed that corruption was virtually unknown in Malawi until 1994 and expressed sentimental feelings for the “good old time” under the rule of Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the only legal party till 1993. It was striking how popular discourse drew a clear line between the period between 1964 and 1994 with little corruption, on the one hand, and the time since 1994 with widespread corruption and nepotism, on the other.²

This perceived increase in corruption since the 1990s has several reasons.³ First of all it is now official policy to talk about it openly. Since 1994 media and people have enjoyed more leeway to talk about corruption than in the past. Newspapers, for example, mushroomed and although most of them were only short-lived a range of professional national newspapers survived. In 2002 three national newspapers were available in the urban areas and many trading centres: The Nation, the Daily Times and the Chronicle, an investigative weekly. These papers reported extensively on corruption scandals among politicians and public servants in spite of occasional harassment from the government. This is something unheard of under Banda’s rule when strict control and arbitrary arrests of alleged dissidents created a culture of paralysis and fear. In those days any critical remark could lead to one’s arrest or interrogation and the only newspaper, the Daily Times, primarily functioned as the mouthpiece of Kamuzu Banda and the MCP.

The changes in attitude and policy are to a large degree attributable to the keen interest the “donor community”, led by World Bank and IMF, has been taking in the improvement of governance since the

---

² Anthropological fieldwork was carried out between November 1999 and November 2000, and February 2002 and March 2002 in Lilongwe and Zomba.
³ This chapter only addresses the perceived increase in corruption since there is no reliable data on the phenomenon either before or after 1994. The only thing that can be safely said is that the talk about corruption has increased since 1994. The various corruption indices only present a very incomplete picture reflecting the current obsession with corruption rather than its actual extent.