Nurtured from the pulpit:  
The emergence and growth of Malawi’s democracy movement

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*Most accounts of the wave of democratization that swept across the African continent in the early to mid-1990s point to the pivotal role played by movements that successfully forced authoritarian regimes to embrace democracy. But how did these movements emerge in an environment where the political space was closed or severely limited? Drawing on Malawi’s transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in the early 1990s, this chapter discusses how democracy movements in Africa came about through a process of regime rupturing after the intervention of exogenous actors in the political arena. In the case of Malawi, the Catholic Church was such an actor when, in 1992, it intervened in the political arena by issuing a highly critical pastoral letter that challenged the legitimacy of the thirty-year dictatorship of the then president-for-life, Hastings Kamuzu Banda.*

Social movements and the democratization process in Africa

The history of post-independence African politics can be divided into two periods. The first, coming immediately after independence, was dominated by authoritarian forms of government that ranged from military to civilian dictatorships while the second is the era of democratization that started in the last decade of the twentieth century.

During the authoritarian era, African leaders devoted a great deal of energy to suppressing political dissent at both group and individual levels. Political parties were often completely outlawed, which was common practice in military
dictatorships, and opposition parties were banned in one-party states. Individuals who expressed even the mildest forms of dissent were imprisoned, frequently without trial. Some were assassinated or murdered by state security agents while the (few) lucky ones managed to escape and live in exile. In other instances, the business interests of individuals who were perceived to hold critical views were frustrated, in some cases, being expropriated by the state.

The disbursement of patronage to supporters and opponents of the regime served as another instrument for the ruling elites to entrench power. As Medard notes, ‘through patronage, the leaders [were able to] co-opt potential opponents and regulate the recruitment of the ruling class’. Patronage networks thus served to undercut civil society by blocking opportunities for the emergence of strong and well-organized pro-democracy groups. Popular associations and organized groups, such as trade unions, that were considered to be hotbeds of dissent and to pose a potential challenge to the ruling elites were subsequently eradicated or emasculated. The only civic structures that were spared during the authoritarian era were those headed by hand-picked loyalists and that therefore posed no significant threat to the ruling elite. As a result, political opposition was either wholly undermined and/or so weakened that the continent’s authoritarian rulers were able to enjoy long years of unchallenged authority. Notable African leaders in this category include Malawi’s Hastings Banda, Ivory Coast’s Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Omar Bongo of Gabon, Paul Biya of Cameroon, Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia, Daniel arap Moi in Kenya and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, to name but a few.

By its very nature, authoritarian rule created a lot of losers. Individuals who fell foul of the regime were either sent to prison, went into exile or were allowed to operate but in a severely restricted environment. These groups, together with other sympathizers, served as a latent opposition even if they faced significant obstacles to organizing and operating publicly.

The 1990s marked a new era in African politics that was characterized by the introduction of democratic politics. Between 1990 and 1993 for example, 27 of the continent’s 53 countries made the transition from a one-party system or a military dictatorship to a multi-party democratic system. By 1994, single-party