

Interview

Understanding Malawi

An Interview with His Excellency Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika,
President of the Republic of Malawi



H. E. Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika officially became the President of the Republic of Malawi on May 24, 2004. Prior to this, Dr. Mutharika worked from 1990 to 1997 as Secretary General of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) (formerly Preferential Trade Area – PTA). Dr. Mutharika spearheaded the establishment of several regional economic organizations such as the Association of African Central Banks (AACB), the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, African Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (AFCCI), and Eastern and Southern Africa Business Organization (ESABO). Before becoming Secretary General of COMESA, President Mutharika worked for the United Nations where he rose to the position of Director for Trade and Development Finance. He holds a Ph.D. in Development Economics from the Pacific Western University in Los Angeles, California. He also has a master's degree in Economics and a bachelor's degree in Commerce from the University of Delhi in India.

Do you feel there is a good understanding throughout the world of Malawi today and the opportunities for foreign investment and business in your country?

Yes, I do. I think that investors are appreciating what Malawi is doing now more than ever before because we have focused interventions and interest groups coming in. So Malawi

is definitely getting the attention it deserves in that regard.

What are the industries that offer the most opportunities and for which you're looking to attract foreign investment into the country?

There is a whole range of industries. In the mining sector, we recently discovered a number of uranium and gold mines. The investment in uranium has started for the first time and we will be marketing uranium in February. In areas like transport, there is a lot of investment in construction at the southern tip of Malawi. The plan is to give seagoing craft access to go straight up to the north shore by building a port. Companies in the private sector business have started constructing the port. There are also opportunities for investment in hotels, restaurants, and an airport surrounding the port.

When you look at the workforce in Malawi, you've placed a major focus on education in the country. Are you happy with the reforms that are taking place and the strength of what you've been able to do in this regard?

We have a satisfactory education rate. In fact, we have been getting more and more graduates because the level of education is getting higher and higher, and there are more people graduating at the high school level. Those who are now entering the market are more educated than before. So we're moving in the right direction.

Throughout Africa, there is much in the media surrounding the challenges with health issues like HIV and AIDS. How much progress have you made in that area, and is the media telling the full story?

I think that the media is doing as well as it can, but we've made a lot of progress in the health sector, in terms of our getting primary health care through clinics, especially in the fight against child mortality as well as infant mortality. We have also made a lot of progress with regard to Malaria.

In terms of HIV and AIDS, the incidence of new HIV infection has declined from what it was five years ago. Right now, because of a very extensive public awareness program in Malawi, I think we've achieved a lot in combating HIV and AIDS. The prevalence of HIV and AIDS has been reduced by more than 2 percent. We have over 250,000 people now receiving

Antiretrovirals (ARV). Three to five years ago, nobody was receiving ARVs and these people are going back to work and working fully, although they are living with HIV and AIDS. We have also improved the nutrition aspect of things because to deal with HIV, you have to go in with a holistic approach. The challenge is how to make up for the tragic loss of life and contributions. For instance, if a medical doctor dies; it requires a great deal of time to replace him. So it is a challenge, but we're meeting the challenge.

Major companies looking to invest in Malawi will now find political stability and security for their investments. How critical is that, and do you feel there should be a high comfort level in Malawi?

Yes, I think that security is very important for investment; no one is comfortable going into an area or a country that is not secure. In Malawi, we have a comprehensive security approach for investors, so nothing can be taken out by the government. Malawi is the second most secure country in sub-Saharan Africa after Botswana. So this helps in terms of attracting investors, because they can feel comfortable that their investments are safe.

There are many different areas you're focused on, and you've already made an incredible impact in your first term. But in government, progress can take time. Is it hard to be patient and to not let it get to you?

We definitely want to do things in a hurry, and get things done yesterday. But there is a framework, and we have to manage the time, because we know that processes take time, especially when we're dealing with government. When an investor finds out that an area is profitable, they'll move quickly, but government takes time. Nevertheless, we are moving fairly well.

You've had tremendous success in your time in office. Do you ever take a moment to enjoy it, or are you always looking ahead?

It's difficult to set aside time just for enjoyment, but I try. As a matter of fact, after the General Assembly here, I hope I'll be able to go on holiday for a few days and enjoy myself. But looking back and realizing that we had a problem that I think we dealt with well, is satisfying. And the final word for me is to see that I leave Malawi better than I found it. ●