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The Role of the Malawi Media in the Malawi-Tanzania Border Dispute

Joe Mlenga*

Introduction

Around mid-2012 there was a flurry of media reports on the dispute in which Malawi and Tanzania were embroiled over the position of their border in the lake that acts as a frontier between the two neighbours. The tensions came to the fore following Malawi's commissioning of oil and gas exploration on what it knows as 'Lake Malawi' but which is 'Lake Nyasa' to Mozambique and Tanzania. Tanzania told Malawi to call off the search for oil and gas reserves, pending talks about where the borderline should be. While Malawi laid claim to the whole water body, Tanzania argued that the line should be in the middle of the northern part of the lake.

Tanzania backed its claim to half of the water mass by referring to international customary law, developed in the 1960s, on equitable sharing of water bodies, while Malawi cited the 1890 Heligoland Treaty which handed sole ownership of the lake to Malawi, as well as the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty which came into effect around the same time.

The media in Malawi reacted in a variety of ways to the standoff between the two countries. In this practitioner's note, I describe some of the reactions of daily newspapers, including online publications. First they brought to the attention of Malawians the simmering tensions over the lake. Then they began sounding the alarm, reporting that Tanzanian legislators were mentioning possible war over the border dispute. Finally, most of these newspapers appeared to be promoting mediation and dialogue.

The initial reports hinting at possible warfare jolted Malawian journalists into action, though that action did not always take the form of selecting appropriate sources. The subsequent reportage was generally based on quoting Tanzanian media houses and not diplomatic or other official sources. The effect of this failure to seek official sources was to aggravate Malawians' fears that war was imminent. It took the visit of a senior cabinet minister to quell the unease in the border district of Karonga.

The Malawi government made further efforts to tone down the inflammatory reporting by calling for responsibility and calm. This appeared to work as the daily newspapers and online publications stopped relying so heavily on Tanzanian media houses. Possibly

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they realized that relying on Tanzanian reporters would exacerbate the situation because these reporters were undeniably biased towards their national interests. Hence Malawian journalists began to use more diplomatic and government sources from Tanzania. Malawian history and law experts were also engaged to try to give a balanced opinion on the border dispute.

The spectre of war further diminished as both countries used the media to stress that dialogue would take precedence. But a faction of the Malawi media seemed to have abandoned journalistic ethics and continued to write in a manner likely to fuel tensions. A case in point is the *Malawi Voice*, which went so far as to publish false news that the Tanzanian High Commissioner to Malawi had been given 48 hours to leave the country (Nkhoma 2012). The fallout from the report included the arrest of the journalist who wrote the article.

In this note I argue that the Malawian press was at first somewhat naïve in its reportage but over time revised its approach and became more professional. I also argue that political interests made some publications attempt to worsen conflict between Malawi and Tanzania.

I suggest that the media in Malawi, Tanzania and indeed beyond should play a peacemaking role and practise peace journalism rather than fan the flames of conflict, as happened in the case of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

Background

Malawi, which until independence in 1964 was the British colony Nyasaland, is a small landlocked country bordered by Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia. Part of the frontier with Tanzania and Mozambique is demarcated by Lake Malawi, formerly Lake Nyasa, which is the third largest freshwater lake in Africa. Its abundance of fish provides a livelihood for many Malawians.

Malawi is a poor country with few natural resources. However, there is a large uranium mining establishment at Kayelekera in the northern district of Karonga, operated by an Australian firm. In recent years there has been speculation that Lake Malawi is rich in oil and gas deposits. In September 2011 the Malawi government gave Surestream Petroleum of Britain a licence to explore the lake for these resources. The prospecting seems to have been the spark that reignited the wrangling between Malawi and Tanzania.

The stand-off began in the 1960s. It involved the founding fathers Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kamuzu Banda of Malawi. In 1968 Nyerere wrote to the then British Prime Minister Harold Wilson saying Banda was implementing an 'expansionist' policy over the lake. Banda had announced that he would put patrol vessels on Lake Malawi, apparently to demonstrate that his country owned the whole water body (Mmana 2012). In response Britain supported Malawi's case, citing the Anglo-Germany (Heligoland) Treaty of 1890 that gave sole ownership of the lake to Malawi (Mmana 2012). The Anglo-Portuguese Treaty that came into effect around the same time also recognized Malawi as owning the whole lake. Tanzania bases its claim on international customary law of the 1960s that stipulates equal sharing of water bodies that form boundaries.

In 2005 former President of Malawi Bingu wa Mutharika reportedly wrote to his Tanzanian counterpart Jakaya Kikwete about the need to reaffirm borders between the two nations following what he termed 'small conflicts' on Lake Malawi (Munthali 2012a). Munthali gives no details on what transpired following the correspondence.

Initial reportage in the Malawian press

It seems that initially the border tensions between Malawi and Tanzania were beneath the radar of the Malawi daily newspapers, *Nation* and *Daily Times*, and online publications such as *Nyasa Times* and *Malawi Voice*. The matter was brought to the fore as Surestream Petroleum began searching for the oil and gas deposits in Lake Malawi. The Malawian press picked up reports in Tanzania's *Citizen* newspaper suggesting that some parliamentarians in that country were angered by Malawi's ongoing prospecting for oil. The deputies were quoted as saying Tanzania was ready to resort to military action to defend the half of the lake the nation believed was theirs. In an article published in the *Citizen* on 7 August, the chairman of Tanzania's parliamentary committee for defence, security and foreign affairs, Edward Lowassa, was quoted as saying:

We expect this conflict will be solved diplomatically using a committee of foreign affairs ministers from both countries and using the mediator whenever needed. Malawi is our neighbour and therefore we would not like to go into war with it. However, if it reaches the war stage then we are ready to sacrifice our people's blood and our military forces are committed in equipment and psychologically. Our army is among modern and stable defence forces in the world. (Masare 2012)

The news that was filtering in had an electrifying effect on Malawians. The talking point on the streets, in minibuses, in homes and on social media sites was Tanzania's perceived belligerence over the lake issue. Malawians more or less started to believe that armed conflict was imminent. Those living on the Malawi-Tanzania border seemed especially affected since they were close to the 'belligerent' Tanzanians. The Malawian media and populace focused on the 'war threat' and ignored the point that Lowassa also made about mediation taking precedence.

George Kasakula, editor of the *Weekend Nation* of Malawi, said he would not be 'sabre-rattling' over the issue. But his article had some tough language for the Tanzanians. On 10 August he wrote:

After catching a whiff of the tantalising aroma of oil that could be under Lake Malawi, the greedy and shameless Tanzanians have taken it upon themselves to use a muscular show of force to intimidate this country that they are prepared to go to war over the lake's ownership. Ranging from government officials to MPs, the Tanzanians are truly beating the drums of war and they have the audacity to demand half of our lake ... This naked aggression, showboating and flagrant display of power by Tanzanians must be met with outmost resolve that we will not give up what rightfully is ours. (Kasakula 2012)

The *Malawi Voice* of 23 September declared that Malawi had become a nation of wimps because it was smiling on people who wanted to 'kill' it (*Malawi Voice* 2012a). A week later the online publication wrote that when Tanzania issued a new map showing half of the northern part of Lake Malawi as belonging to it, President Joyce Banda's only response was to write a letter to her Tanzanian counterpart President Kikwete (*Malawi Voice* 2012b). It appeared the *Malawi Voice* wanted a tougher response from their country's president than merely writing a letter. It could be that this publication regarded mediation or diplomacy as a non-starter.

The media in Malawi may have believed they were being patriotic, but they only succeeded in alarming the citizenry. The press may have been attempting to help the Malawi government and trying to match the Tanzanian media pound for pound, but such reportage had the effect of heightening tensions and fear.

I attribute this alarmist and tough stance partly to the use of Tanzanian media reports as sources for stories. The Malawian press relied heavily on such sources, forgetting that their counterparts were likely to be partisan and overly patriotic in reporting the border issue. As a result, blunt and undiplomatic sentiments from across the border were highlighted while voices that called for mediation and diplomacy were ignored.

It was naïve of the Malawian media to ignore official sources and rely on Tanzanian newspapers. President Banda was quoted in the *Nation* of 20 August as saying the Malawian press had been 'patriotic' in their reportage (Munthali 2012a), but I would argue that President Kikwete had a better perspective on the issue, as he blamed the initial reports of seemingly imminent conflict on sensationalism in the Tanzanian media and on opposition politicians' rhetoric. I would argue further that the action by the Malawian media could be described as *inaction* because there was somehow passivity in gathering news of such importance. They neglected to cross-check with diplomatic sources in Malawi before publishing the reports suggestive of heightened tensions and possible war.

It was several weeks before the Malawi press reported the case accurately: that Tanzania wanted the northern tip of the lake to be shared equally. The first impression given by the media was that Tanzania wanted the whole lake to be split down the middle. This helped fuel Malawians' resentment of the neighbouring country because it was portrayed as greedy and grasping.

I also see hints of partisan politics at play in the initial reportage in Malawi. The *Malawi Voice* is sympathetic to the former ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and bitterly opposed to President Joyce Banda's People's Party (PP).² The publication may therefore have been trying to stoke the tensions and make Banda appear to be doing nothing over the frontier issue.

² Banda was ousted from the DPP after apparently refusing to endorse Peter Mutharika, brother to late President Bingu wa Mutharika, who wanted to stand as presidential candidate in the 2014 polls. After the fallout, Banda formed the PP. Banda was constitutionally successor to the presidency as she was Vice-President of Malawi when President Bingu wa Mutharika died. Peter Mutharika now leads the DPP.

In response to the effects of the first reports about the border dispute, the Malawi government took steps, including sending a senior cabinet minister to tour the district of Karonga, as mentioned above, to defuse citizens' worries about the border issue and fears that war was imminent.

The Tanzanian government also took action to dismiss the rumours of war. President Kikwete was widely reported in the Malawian media as having quashed the rumours of armed confrontation. The *Daily Times* declared in its 16 August lead story: 'Border dispute won't end in war – Kikwete' (Matonga 2012a). The *Sunday Times* of 19 August simply stated: 'No war, Tanzania says' (*Sunday Times* 2012). It quoted Kikwete as saying he had not given any order for military action as commander-in-chief of Tanzania's army, and therefore the talk of warfare was baseless. The *Nation* of 17 August also had a lead article headlined: 'Malawi, Tanzania will not go to war', giving details of a meeting between Malawi's Foreign Affairs Minister Ephraim Chiume and his Tanzanian counterpart Bernard Membe (Munthali 2012b). The story reaffirmed that the two neighbours believed mediation and dialogue would be given priority.

A shift in tone

A month after the news broke about the Malawi-Tanzania border dispute there was a general change in the language and tone of the reports. As stated above, the governments of the two countries took the initiative to cool tempers with statements that dismissed war as an option. One of the articles I saw as key in changing the course of the coverage contained a crucial sentence that said: 'Meanwhile Chiume has disclosed in an interview with Malawi News Agency (Mana) in Maputo on Thursday that the issue between Malawi and Tanzania is a bilateral one and that Malawi has refused to call it a conflict' (Munthali 2012b).

The rejection of the terminology of conflict suggested that dialogue, mediation and peacemaking was the preferred way out of the problem. It was also possibly a cue for media houses to change their reporting style.

A few days later President Banda thanked her country's media for 'patriotic' reporting, while President Kikwete blamed sensationalist reporting and opposition legislators for blowing the wrangle out of proportion (Munthali 2012a). The sentiments expressed by Kikwete add credence to my argument that the official and diplomatic line had been ignored, and unofficial sources had helped fuel tensions unnecessarily when the first reports of the dispute emerged.

These statements by the leadership of the two countries seemed indeed to make the Malawian press change their tune. Portrayals of the border dispute as potential warfare disappeared. As an example, *Nyasa Times*, an online publication, carried an item with the headline: 'Malawi, Tanzania open border talks, Chiume warns experts to avoid careless talk' (Mtika 2012). This article highlighted mediation and being diplomatic in talking about the border dispute. It quoted Chiume as saying:

It is very easy for the discussions to break down and result in a stalemate. Let's avoid making statements that can undermine the process. Let us remember

that we are here representing the multitude of Malawians and Tanzanians ... who want an urgent resolution. (Mtika 2012)

The historically close ties between the neighbouring countries were stressed in subsequent articles in various newspapers and other media outlets. A good illustration is an opinion piece in the *Nation* of 25 August. Negotiations between Malawi and Tanzania had just broken down, but the newspaper did not rant about anything. It chose to highlight the positives and stress that peace was paramount, asserting in its headline that there was 'no substitute for dialogue' in the Lake Malawi dispute. It advised that:

Earnest dialogue, which Malawi and Tanzania have begun, has no substitute if the objective is a peaceful settlement to a dispute. Viewed from this perspective the deadlock between the two countries ceases to be a dead end as some may have feared ... It will take patience and level headedness on the part of the negotiating teams to forge an outcome that ensures people of the two countries continue to enjoy the good neighbourliness that has characterised the relations between Malawi and Tanzania. (*The Nation* 2012)

Furthermore it seemed the Malawian media had learnt their lesson about using unofficial sources. Newspapers and online publications started quoting Tanzanian diplomatic or government sources more than before. The press also used experts in law and history to analyse the issue in order to give a balanced version of the dispute. One of these was Desmond Dudwa Phiri, a former diplomat and history expert, interviewed by the *Nation* of 21 August on the Heligoland Treaty (Kanjjo 2012). Although Phiri reaffirmed that the Treaty was still valid, the interview was conducted in a sober manner and was neither ingratiating nor inflammatory.

Two reports in September and October 2012 could have sparked tough anti-Tanzanian rhetoric from the Malawian media once again. One said that Tanzania had issued a new map showing the boundary as being in the middle of Lake Malawi and the other that Tanzania was deploying a naval vessel on the lake and harassing or arresting Malawian fishermen on the side claimed by Tanzania. But the Malawian media in my view handled the two events with maturity. In analysing the development, the *Daily Times* of 27 September said: 'The move should come as a surprise to Lilongwe at a time government officials of both countries have been making assurances to commitment to the talks' (Matonga 2012b). On the issue of patrols by the Tanzanian naval vessel, the Malawian media were quite detached and made sure both Tanzanian and Malawian officials were quoted. Malawian government sources said the incident could increase tensions, while their Tanzanian counterparts stated that the patrols were 'normal' exercises.

However, not all sections of the Malawian press toned down their reporting of the border dispute. The online publication *Malawi Voice* used provocative language and, in the example of bad journalism mentioned earlier, it even published false news (Nkhoma 2012). After the publication of the new map by Tanzania, the *Malawi Voice* published a disparaging article saying President Banda was 'kid-gloving' the Tanzanians and hinting that protesting via a letter was not enough (*Malawi Voice* 2012b). It is not clear what action *Malawi Voice* thought was a better alternative, but the overriding motive was probably to increase tensions between Malawi and Tanzania and, given this publication's political sympathies, to portray the Banda administration as incompetent.

The *Malawi Voice* went overboard in its reportage, as can be seen in the 12 October article which claimed that the Malawi government had given the Tanzanian envoy 48 hours to leave following an interview with a Malawian radio station in which he reportedly said the water body was Lake Nyasa and not Lake Malawi, and that it belonged to Tanzania (Nkhoma 2012). At first the police charged the journalist with three counts of insulting President Banda, criminal libel and publishing false information. These charges were later dropped and replaced with a single count of publishing false news likely to cause fear and alarm. In February 2013 the charges were dropped (*Nyasa Times* 2013). Media watchdogs condemned the police for the detention of the journalist, but I choose to differ. Firstly, to publish such a story without verification was careless and unethical considering the sensitivity of the topic and the likely repercussions. Secondly, it seems the journalist used a false name on the byline as his name differs from the one that appears on the article.³ If indeed the reporter used an alias or another journalist's name, this raises further questions of credibility and other journalistic ethics.

The way forward

At the time of writing (February 2013), dialogue between Malawi and Tanzania had not made much progress. The two countries decided to seek mediation by the Forum of Former African Heads of State and Government. The Forum, chaired by ex-President of Mozambique Joaquim Chissano, was given a mandate to find a solution to the dispute, supported by jurists who would give legal guidance. The period set for the mediation was between January and March 2013. If that process failed then the matter was to be referred to the International Court of Justice for a final decision.

As noted in this paper, the Malawian media apparently swallowed the bait dangled by Tanzania in the form of nationalistic rhetoric from what were described as opposition parliamentarians and media houses bent on sensationalism. The alarmist reaction of the Malawian press helped fan the flames of tensions. Later they seemed to tone down their reports. Such a scenario calls for the adoption of peace journalism by media practitioners in Malawi.

McGoldrick and Lynch (2000, 1), writing for Transcend, an organization promoting peace journalism, describe this type of journalism as a 'broader, fairer and more accurate way of framing stories, drawing on the insights of conflict analysis and transformation'.⁴ This entails deliberate efforts to publish news content that is balanced and treats parties in a conflict situation with fairness, as well as equipping journalists with knowledge and skills on how to analyse and resolve conflicts. One of the goals of peace journalism, according to McGoldrick and Lynch (2000), is to be creative in finding new solutions to existing conflicts. Such creativity leads to transformation, which the two scholars say is a situation in which the issues at stake are seen in a new light and therefore as possible to resolve.

³ The arrested journalist goes by the name of Justice Mponda, but the byline on the Malawi Voice website story gives the name of Pearson Nkhoma.

⁴ This is the authors' basic definition of 'peace journalism' on p. 1 of the print version of their manual.

Furthermore, peace journalism posits that decisions made by journalists in reporting conflict situations contribute to either enhancing peace or provoking war. In other words, if one side in a conflict scenario carries out a particular action and the media report the issue in favour of that side, then the deed will probably be repeated. For example, if a violent act is perpetrated and journalists seem to glorify it, then the culprit may well repeat the misdeed. But if the media choose to downplay or condemn the incident, then there will be no incentive for the perpetrator to do it again.

Peace journalism avoids demonizing labels, victimizing language or distinctions of 'us' and 'them'. Peace journalists avoid partisanship based on affiliation such as nationality, race or ethnicity. Journalistic bias dehumanizes one of the parties in a conflict situation, making it appear to be the sole cause of the problem, a threat to the survival of the rival group. If one side heaps all the blame on the other and paints it as inhuman and uncivilized, this may hinder peace or mediation efforts because the victimized party is likely to react negatively to such sentiments.

McGoldrick and Lynch (2000, 29) advise that there should be 'humanization of all sides' in a conflict, meaning that the conflict parties should be regarded as people with feelings and capable of making positive decisions. Every untruth pronounced by the parties should be exposed and everyone should be given a voice, not just one side.

My examination of the way the Malawian press conducted itself and the role it played in the border dispute indicates reportage contrary to such tenets. An example is the *Weekend Nation* opinion piece cited above in which Kasakula described the Tanzanians as 'greedy and shameless', used emotive phrases like 'naked aggression', 'showboating' and 'flagrant display of power' and made strong appeals to patriotic sentiments, such as 'we will not give up what rightfully is ours' (Kasakula 2012).

Peace journalism, by contrast, highlights peace and mediation overtures and downplays threats and violence.

I envisage that by adopting the principles of peace journalism the media in Malawi would not make the mistakes they made in the early stages of the border dispute. Exposure to this brand of journalism is therefore important. Training by able facilitators will need to be provided to build such capacity in the Malawian media personnel. The training would entail conflict analysis and resolution skills; drills in using appropriate terminology and avoiding provocative language; practical exercises on finding creative solutions to problems; learning how to report on violence and its associated effects such as trauma without appearing to condone the violence; highlighting peace and peacemakers rather than conflict and violence; and being proactive by writing to lessen tensions rather than encourage hatred or conflict.

Finally, the media in Malawi and indeed across the African continent have a role to play in promoting peace. Where there is conflict or potential for war, journalists should act as the voice of reason. The media should not repeat the mistakes made in Rwanda in 1994. Mediators in conflict-torn Africa need the assistance of journalists to advance their cause.

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