

Travel Tales

Explosions in the Warm Heart of Africa

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Malawi is known as the “warm heart of Africa,” and I counted myself lucky to get a two week consulting assignment there. My job was to analyze the situation in the Malawi civil service in terms of information and communications technology, and to help plan an “e-government” strategy.

E-government is the streamlining and computerization of government processes and the use of websites to increase government to citizen (“G2C”) and government to business (“G2B”) interaction. Montgomery County launched its e-gov program twelve years ago. As one of the 30 poorest countries on earth, Malawi is just getting started.



Malawi is landlocked in SE Africa

It took twenty hours on a very hard coach seat on Ethiopian Airlines to get to Malawi via Ethiopia. Malawi, which many Americans have never heard of, and most of the rest confuse with Mali, is located south of Tanzania and north of Mozambique. It is a long narrow country, bounded on the east by Lake Malawi, 360 miles long and filled with over 1000 species of exotic fish, more than any other lake in world. If you’ve ever had some exotic fish in your tank, the chances are they came from Lake Malawi.

The country was dusty but pleasantly cool in the evening, and my hotel was a little dingy but not too bad, about like an old Best Western in the US. The next morning I got in a solid day of work, interviewing some ministerial staff, all of whom were warm and friendly.

Then the country exploded.

It seems that President Bingu wa Mutharika had not been reading my recommendations on openness and transparency in government. He had been overspending, appointing cronies to numerous ministerial slots, shutting down

opposition radio stations, mismanaging the economy and causing a severe gasoline and foreign exchange shortage.

When protestors marched, the police and army moved in. In the ensuing riots, 18 people were killed across the country, shops were looted, and the protest leaders threatened with prosecution.

I hid in the hotel, which luckily was on the outskirts of the capital, away from the violence downtown. I met an American attorney whose car had been stoned. Surprisingly, he was convinced that the rioters didn't really want to hurt him and his driver, since they carefully aimed their rocks at the car's fenders. The attorney threw six US dollars out the window and they escaped.

On the third day an eerie silence hung over the capital. My local agent and I drove into town looking for a pizza, but every shop was shuttered. Over the weekend, business started up again, and by Monday everything was back to normal. The streets were filled with traffic while hundreds of cars waited in long queues for gas. Ladies walked in the dust beside the road with bundles on their heads, wearing colorful dresses covered with pictures of President Bingu.



President Bingu wa Mutharika's policies led to riots



Malawi's riots shook the country

I got in a solid day of work, interviewing ministry and IT staff, who said in one breath that, “we haven’t had any riots since 1989,” and in the next that, “the riots always stop after one or two days.” Hmmmmm. My work was going well, and my big presentation was coming together.

Then my computer exploded.

It seems that the hotel power system fried it with a jolt of electricity, during one of the seven power outages we had each day. My local agent put me in touch with one of his local IT buddies, who diagnosed my problem and re-installed Windows on my machine, thus wiping out all my files. Luckily my report and presentation were backed up on a thumb drive. I tipped my new IT friend 30 dollars, for a job that would have cost \$250 back home. I got in another good day’s work, and finalized my presentation. I was ready.

Then my e-gov policy world exploded.

It seems that the People’s Republic of China had just quietly signed a \$100 million commercial loan deal with President Bingu to install e-government in every ministry and agency in the country, including the defense forces, intelligence agency, border patrol, police service and national registration system. Every government process would be computerized by an army of Chinese technicians. This was all part of a major push to wean Malawi away from its former alliance with Taiwan, and increase China’s presence in Africa.



A large gate at the entrance to the Chinese workers compound just outside the Malawi Parliament

I altered my presentation to make recommendations on how to best manage the massive project while not giving away all of the country’s national sovereignty – no easy task. I gave my presentation before an audience of 50 staff from 20 ministries, and fielded questions and comments for six hours.

Now I'm lying in bed in my dingy hotel room, watching Malawi TV and very much looking forward to flying home tomorrow for twenty hours on Ethiopian Airlines. My only worry is that I had a good day at work today, wrapping up the project. So, what's going to explode next?

Lew Toulmin has worked in 30 developing countries, including 15 in Africa, and lives in Silver Spring. He has an MPA from the Maxwell School of Syracuse University and a Ph.D. in public administration and economics from American University.

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