



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Malawi is a little smaller than North Korea or the U.S. state of Pennsylvania. In the north are the rolling grasslands of the Nyika Plateau, which rises to 8,000 feet (2,500 meters). Mountains dot the central and southern agricultural plains. The southern region boasts the Zomba Plateau and Mount Mulanje, the nation's highest point, at 9,850 feet (3,002 meters). Much of the east is dominated by Lake Malawi, which stretches 360 miles (570 kilometers) in length and varies in width from 10 to 45 miles (16–75 kilometers). Lake Malawi is the ninth largest lake in the world and the third largest in Africa, after Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika. The East African Rift Valley, which forms the lake's trench, extends into Malawi from the north. The Shire River drains Lake Malawi and connects to the Zambezi River.

Malawi's subtropical temperatures and rainfall vary with elevation. The lakeshore and southern Shire Valley are the hottest and most humid areas. The higher agricultural plateau is more comfortable. The hot, rainy season (November–April) brings 90 percent of Malawi's annual rainfall. Rains are often late or inadequate, causing hardship and drought. Temperatures during the cool, dry season (May–July) vary between 45 and 70°F (7–21°C). The hot, dry season (August–October) produces temperatures of 85 to 100°F (29–38°C). During July, the south may experience a damp fog or heavy cloud cover called *chiperoni* (a brand of blanket).

History

Tribal Migration

Early records identify the Kafula and Bantu speakers from Cameroon as the first ethnic groups to farm Malawi's fertile soil. Maravi people migrated from the Congo in the late 13th century, forcing the Kafula to flee to Zambia and Mozambique. The word *Maravi* (the origin of *Malawi*) means "the sun's rays." In the 15th century, the Maravi leader granted fertile land west of the lake to two groups who together became known as the Chewa. By the 18th century, more groups were migrating to Malawi, including the Tumbuka and Tonga in the northern and central areas, the Ngoni near Mzimba and Ntcheu, and the Yao in the south. The Yao cooperated with the Portuguese and Arabs in the slave trade, and they adopted aspects of the Arabs' language, appearance, and religion.

European Arrival

David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary and famous explorer, entered Malawi via the Shire River in 1859. The journey led him to Lake Malawi and brought him face-to-face with the slave trade. European missionaries continued his early attempts to curb slavery, promote commerce, and Christianize the people.

British settlers arrived just after Livingstone. In 1891, Britain's political, economic, and strategic interests in southeast Africa prompted authorities to negotiate boundaries for, and claim the area as, the British Protectorate of Nyasaland. The British took the most productive agricultural areas, subdued tribal authority, and made the native people tenants on their own land.

In 1915, Reverend John Chilembwe, an educated Yao, encouraged a violent uprising to protest poor working

conditions on farm estates. He was killed by police and today is regarded as the first martyr for Malawi's eventual freedom.

Path to Independence

The Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) was formed in 1944 and included native associations and independent churches. It worked to counter British interests in Africa. Malawi's British leaders responded in 1953 by joining with other white settlers to form a federation with Northern and Southern Rhodesia (today's Zambia and Zimbabwe). In 1958, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, a physician, returned to Malawi after 40 years abroad to denounce the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He became the NAC's new leader. In 1959, when Banda and other leaders of the NAC were jailed for their activities, he organized the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). An ensuing struggle with the MCP led the federation to dissolve. On 6 July 1964, Nyasaland became the Commonwealth of Malawi, with Banda as prime minister. Full independence was granted to the Republic of Malawi in 1966, and Banda became president.

Elections and Current Challenges

Banda's methods of promoting development were not always popular with other Malawians. By 1992, Banda's one-party rule faced strong opposition from local Catholic bishops, the international community, and others over alleged human-rights abuses. In a 1993 national referendum, voters overwhelmingly supported a multiparty state, and the aging Banda lost the 1994 presidential election to Bakili Muluzi, who was then reelected in 1999. Elections in 2004 brought Bingu wa Mutharika to the presidency, as Muluzi had reached his two-term limit. Mutharika was reelected in May 2009.

Mutharika died in April 2012, and Vice President Joyce Banda assumed office in his stead, as directed by the constitution. Banda was seen by many as a welcome change that would give the country a chance to make the changes necessary to overcome its struggling economy, for which many held Mutharika personally responsible. As the first female president in southern Africa, Banda also promised to improve women's rights. However, her term was marked by scandal. Following presidential elections in May 2014, Peter Mutharika, brother of former president Bingu wa Mutharika, became president. Peter Mutharika took office with the goals of strengthening the economy and providing jobs for the nation's youth.

Recent Events and Trends

- **Drought:** In April 2016, Malawi declared a state of disaster in the face of severe drought that caused widespread food shortages. Some 2.8 million Malawians faced food insecurity.
- **Soldiers protecting forests:** In March 2017, Malawi announced it was starting to use 24-hour military patrols to protect the country's forests from illegal logging. Malawi is facing rapid deforestation, largely due to the production of charcoal that is used for cooking by much of the population. Deforestation also hurts the country's water supply since forests give off water vapor that contribute to the rainfall that fills rivers.
- **Child marriage banned:** In April 2017, President Mutharika signed a constitutional amendment that raised the legal age of marriage to 18. The legislature had approved the constitutional change the February before. As of 2016, some

47 percent of female Malawians were married before age 18, making Malawi's rate of child marriage one of the highest in the world.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Malawi's annual population growth rate is among the highest in the world. Most Malawians live in rural areas, where people are generally subsistence farmers. The population is concentrated in the fertile southern region, which suffers from extensive deforestation and overcultivation. Blantyre (the largest industrial city), Lilongwe (the capital since 1975), Mzuzu, and Zomba (the former capital) are crowded cities with large squatter areas.

At least 97 percent of Malawians are African. The Chewa (35 percent), Lomwe (19 percent), Yao (13 percent), and Ngoni (12 percent) are the largest groups. Smaller groups include the Tumbuka (9 percent), Sena (4 percent), Tonga (2 percent), Nyanja (1 percent), and Ngonde (1 percent). A few thousand Asians (mostly merchants) and Europeans also live in Malawi.

Language

English, the official language, is used in government and business. Many Malawians are fluent in English; others speak or understand it to lesser degrees. Chichewa and Chitumbuka are the two most widely spoken languages. President Hastings Banda, who was a Chewa, selected Chichewa as the main national language, and it is taught in schools along with English. Chichewa dominates in central and southern regions, while Chitumbuka is spoken mostly in the north. Smaller ethnic groups speak their own Bantu-related languages but usually know some Chichewa. These Bantu languages are melodic and expressive; every syllable ends in a vowel, though some are not pronounced.

Religion

About 87 percent of Malawians are Christian. The largest denominations include Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Anglican, and Seventh-Day Adventist. Muslims (12 percent) are concentrated in central and southern lakeshore areas. Of the remaining Malawians, many practice traditional indigenous beliefs exclusively. These beliefs are manifested through rituals, festivals, and dances. For instance, the *gule wamkulu* (great dance), popular in the central and southern regions, uses various masks (representing ancestral spirits, people, and animals) to tell stories and teach traditions. Christians often mix their beliefs with traditional beliefs. The different belief systems are not considered contradictory because each plays a different role in people's daily lives.

General Attitudes

Malawians are proud of their nation's reputation as the "warm heart of Africa." They tend to be kind, courteous, and hospitable, as well as friendly and trusting. Many Malawians, especially young people, are optimistic about building a democratic and progressive nation. Many older people remain

unsure of democracy and would prefer a stronger leader. Some tension also exists between generations due to the influence of Western culture among the youth. Many people of the older generations feel that Western influence threatens traditional ways of life. For others, the debate is irrelevant; they focus their efforts on housing and feeding their families.

Material possessions are generally few but well cared for. Bicycles are prized, and it is quite an achievement to own a car. However, the family is considered a person's greatest asset. Parents fondly refer to children as "Firstborn," "Secondborn," and so on. Society is group oriented; individuals sacrifice their interests for the good of the family or community.

Personal Appearance

Malawians generally strive to be clean, neat, and modestly dressed in public. Western-style dress is common but may be combined with traditional clothing. Men wear pants, shirts, and often a suit jacket. Women wear blouses, skirts, and dresses. They might also wrap an African-print *chitenje* around their waist. This 7-foot (2-meter) cotton fabric protects dresses from dust and dirt. The *chitenje* can also serve as a shield from wind and rain, as a baby carrier, or as a coiled support for baskets carried on the head. Women in major cities wear pants, shorts, or short skirts. Children wear uniforms to school. After school they usually wear Western-style clothing. Boys often wear shorts, and girls, especially those in rural areas, usually wear dresses.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When meeting, Malawians shake right hands while placing the left hand under the right forearm. Showing both hands in this way demonstrates sincerity and trust. Women and men dip their knees slightly when exchanging greetings. If greeting elders or people of authority, some groups kneel down and clap their hands quietly two or three times. Women dip their knees even if the person has lower status.

People greet with an exchange of "Hello, sir" (*Moni bambo* in Chichewa; *Monire adada* in Chitumbuka) or "Hello, madam" (*Moni mayi* or *Monire amama*). This is followed by "How are you?" (*Muli bwanji?* in Chichewa; *Muli uli?* in Chitumbuka). The common response is "I am fine" (*Ndili bwino* or *Ndili makola*). It is also polite to ask about the other person's family as part of the greeting.

Malawians rarely use first names to address older people, whom they formally address as "Madam" or "Sir," followed by the surname. Informally, they use surnames alone. Persons in authority are addressed as *Bwana* (Boss). In most of Malawi's languages, placing the prefix *a-* before a name or title shows respect. For example, *bambo* is the word for "man," but usually one would address a man as *abambo*; likewise, the name Mayuni would become *Amayuni*. Young adults and teens use first names but may also address each other as *chimwali* (sister) or *chimwene* (brother). People use *iwe* (you) with people of their same age or younger. An older person is addressed as *inu* (you).

Gestures

Malawians generally give and receive items with both hands. A verbal "tss-tss" or "a-a-ah" expresses displeasure or disbelief. A loud and long hiss is used to get someone's attention from far off; when near, one says *Aisse* (Friend). Public displays of affection between men and women are not acceptable in most places. However, friends of the same gender may walk arm in arm or hold hands while laughing and exchanging stories.

Hand gestures are dramatic and conversation is lively. Eye contact is important but direct gazes are limited, especially toward elders or persons of authority. The youth use the "thumbs up" gesture and *Sure* (in English) in friendly exchanges. It is offensive to make the U.S. "okay" sign, with the thumb and index finger forming a circle. When describing a child's size to others, Malawians extend an upraised hand to the approximate height. Extending a level hand, palm down, is used only to show the height of animals.

Visiting

Strong family and community ties make visiting a common activity. Unannounced visits may occur anytime, but especially on Sunday. Rather than knock at a door, Malawians call out *Odi, odi!* (Knock, knock!) until someone welcomes them in with *Odini!* (Come in!). A house with frequent visitors is highly regarded. The Chichewa proverb *Alendo ndi mame* (Visitors are like dew) means that a visitor's presence is short-lived and hence precious. Hosts automatically serve tea or water and refreshments to their guests; asking if a guest wants something is considered rude. Visitors customarily bring a small gift of money, tea, or sugar—especially if invited, visiting a new baby, or coming after a funeral.

Eating

Malawians usually begin their day with corn porridge, cornbread, sweet potatoes, or a piece of bread and tea. In the past, to accommodate agricultural-based schedules, many Malawians ate a late breakfast, around 11 a.m., and skipped lunch. Today, breakfast around 9 a.m. or earlier is more common, and lunch is typically eaten. Malawians eat their main meal in the evening.

There is a greater abundance of food after the April harvest. Women often cook meals over a fire, either in small mud-brick kitchens or over an open fire with three stones supporting a pot. Food is kept covered until it is ready to eat. Among some traditional families, women and children eat apart from men, who are served first. All wash their hands in a basin of water before and after eating. Most food is eaten with the right hand. It is impolite to smell food or comment on the aroma of a meal. Leaving a small amount of food on the plate when finished assures the cook that a person has had enough to eat.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Most Malawians value large families. The average family has five or six children; rural families are somewhat larger than urban families. A typical household includes extended family members. Depending on the ethnic group, families may be either matrilineal (in which the wife's side of the family is dominant) or patrilineal (in which the husband's side is dominant). In matrilineal families, couples live with the wife's family after marriage. In patrilineal families, which are more common, couples live with the husband's family.

People with incomes expect to share with their extended family. For example, a well-off family member may pay the school fees for a less fortunate relative's children. Members of the extended family also help care for children. Aunts may babysit their nieces and nephews, and cousins are often as close as siblings.

Although Malawian law prohibits polygamy, about 14 percent of women are in polygamous relationships. Such marriages cannot be registered with the government, leaving women without the legal rights associated with marriage. In these families, the man builds a separate hut for each wife and her children.

Parents and Children

Children are taught socially acceptable behavior, responsibility, respect for elders, and work skills. Girls care for younger siblings, gather firewood, clean, and fetch water. Boys generally assist with farming, tending livestock, and other chores. Children often live with their parents into adulthood; they may move out to seek higher education or establish a home of their own, but there is no age at which they are expected to leave. Adult children help their aging parents with farming, household chores, and financial support. Most elderly people live in their own homes for as long as possible. They may move in with their grown children when necessary.

Gender Roles

Regardless of whether family structure is matrilineal or patrilineal, families are led by men, who support the family economically and make all final decisions related to their wives and children. Women are responsible for raising the children, caring for the home, and cooking. A growing number of women, particularly in urban areas, work outside the home or attend higher education. While in the past families generally valued educating their sons over their daughters, today boys and girls attend school in nearly equal numbers, with girls slightly outnumbering boys at the primary level. Women occupy important positions in business and government.

Despite these gains, women still face significant discrimination in society. While Malawian law grants women equal rights, traditional customs often favor men. Rates of domestic violence are high, and domestic violence is seen by some as an acceptable way for a man to exert control in the home. Female circumcision, also called female genital mutilation, still quietly happens among a few small ethnic groups despite local and international pressure to discontinue the practice.

Housing**Rural**

In rural areas, extended families live together in a compound of several huts, typically thatch-roofed, mud-brick dwellings with one or two rooms. Each nuclear family occupies a hut. If there are two rooms in the hut, the parents sleep in one room while the children share the other room; otherwise, all family members sleep in the same room. Doorways between rooms are usually covered with fabric rather than doors. A compound also includes a kitchen hut, a bathing hut, a *nkhokwe* (structure for storing grain), a latrine, and perhaps an enclosure for livestock. In preparation for manhood, young boys may live in a structure, called a *gowelo*, separate from the rest of the family. The space inside the compound is well kept and tidy. Children are often assigned the task of sweeping the area around the huts each morning. The family's fields are located near the compound.

Electricity is uncommon in rural homes. Villagers use lamps and candles to light their homes at night. Running water is rare throughout the country. Rural people often fetch water from boreholes or wells located within or near the compound; women congregate each day to collect water in large tins and plastic buckets. Most people bathe using a bucket of water. Bathtubs and showers are rare.

Urban

Urban neighborhoods are often crowded. Homes are built without regulation, and city planning is virtually nonexistent. Some homes are part of a compound, with different huts serving different purposes. Other homes are single, self-contained structures.

Styles of homes vary considerably. On one end of the spectrum are spacious cement-brick homes occupied by the wealthy and surrounded by brick walls topped with razor wire or electrified wire. At the other extreme are makeshift squatter areas where homes are built from salvaged materials and located very close to one another. Drainage in these settlements is often inadequate, resulting in unsafe and unsanitary conditions. An increasing number of homes are built in Western styles. An average urban home has one to two rooms and is constructed of red bricks or mud bricks. Roofs are usually metal sheeting. The bathroom (either a pit latrine or one with plumbing) is generally located in a separate structure a short distance from the house. Urban homes generally have access to electricity.

Interiors and Exteriors

Homes are furnished according to a family's income. Most homes contain a table, a set of chairs, and a cupboard for storage. Urban people usually have mattresses; rural families often sleep on *mphasa* (bamboo mats), *nkeka* (palm-leaf mats), or grass mats. Some urban homes have televisions, but many families cannot afford one or do not have access to electricity. Rural homes may be decorated with animal-skin rugs, *mphasa*, or *nkeka*. Urban homes generally include paintings, framed photos, and fresh or artificial flowers.

The exteriors of homes are usually whitewashed or left untreated. The wealthy may paint their homes in a variety of colors. Homes made of mud bricks are coated with mud to prevent deterioration and give the home a fresh appearance. Designs may be made with different colors of mud.

Ownership

Home ownership brings respect and prestige within the community. In urban areas, most people rent their homes, as land and building materials are expensive in relation to the average income. Mortgages are available to only the wealthiest Malawians. Rural families usually own their homes, as most have access to ancestral land and building materials are inexpensive and easily obtained.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Young couples often meet and socialize at school, church, or community activities. School dances are popular events in secondary school. Taking a walk together is a common date activity. The wealthy may go to restaurants or movies, but the average Malawian cannot afford these activities. Young men generally initiate courtship, usually through social media.

Once a couple has decided to marry, the young man customarily sends one of his uncles to speak with the woman's family to ask for her hand in marriage. If the family agrees, the young woman is called in and asked if she accepts the proposal.

While most young people choose their own spouses, arranged marriages are still common. Even in these cases, however, the young people usually have some input on the choice of spouse. In order to arrange a marriage, a young man's family may pay a visit to the family of a young woman in order to discuss a possible marriage. If the young woman's family accepts, wedding preparations begin.

Engagement

Before the wedding, a group of elders meets with the couple to discuss marital roles and responsibilities. In some cultures, particularly in the north and south, the groom's family must pay a *lobola* (bride-price) to the bride's family. The *lobola* usually consists of cattle or goats. The payment must be delivered before the wedding can take place. Brides-to-be are often thrown a bridal shower, a tradition adopted from Western cultures. Female friends and relatives gather to give the bride marriage advice and gifts for her home.

An engagement ceremony (*chinkhoswe*) takes place after at least half of the *lobola* has been paid. The night before the ceremony, both sides of the family celebrate with food and traditional beer. Family members take part in traditional dances throughout the night. In the morning, the ceremony is preceded by drumming, whistling, and shouting. The couple and their guests dress in traditional clothing. As part of the ceremony, the groom's family gives a rooster (representing the groom) to the bride's family, who in turn gives them a hen (representing the bride).

Marriage in Society

Women often marry young, and more than 26 percent of girls between age 15 and 19 are married, divorced, or widowed. In poor areas, a family may choose to marry their daughters off soon after puberty in order to obtain the *lobola*. Marriages in which one partner is under the age of 18 cannot be registered with the government, but such marriages still take place, particularly in rural areas. While in the past people generally did not marry outside of their ethnic groups, today marriages between people of different ethnicities are common and well accepted.

Married people are generally afforded more respect than unmarried people. However, a growing number of Malawians choose to live together and begin families without marrying. Same-sex marriage is illegal in Malawi. After facing international condemnation, Malawi suspended its laws banning homosexuality in 2012.

Weddings

Once they have saved enough money for a wedding, the couple may be married in a civil, traditional, or religious ceremony. In order for the marriage to be legal, it must include a civil ceremony, but few couples complete this step, in part due to costs, and instead move in together.

Christian and Muslim weddings are generally similar. The ceremonies are held in a church or mosque, respectively, and both are conducted by a religious leader. The couple exchanges rings and vows and is pronounced husband and wife. After the ceremony, the couple meets with older, married relatives, who give the couple marriage advice. A reception is held in the evening. A married couple is chosen by the newlyweds to escort them into the reception room. Food is served, and guests bring gifts and participate in traditional dances. Village weddings are usually less elaborate than urban celebrations.

Divorce

There is little stigma associated with divorce. While in the past it was difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce, today the process is much more accessible, and women can go to a domestic court or traditional leaders to do so. In the event of a divorce, women are usually awarded custody of the children and, for this reason, generally receive a greater share of the couple's resources.

Life Cycle

Birth

During pregnancy, women often go to live with their parents, particularly before the birth of their first child. Alternatively, a woman's mother or mother-in-law may come to stay with her to help before, during, and after the birth. When a baby is born, family and friends visit to welcome the newborn and bring gifts. Babies are often named for the parents' emotion following the birth, in either English or local languages. Names such as "Happy" and "Blessings" are common, though a difficult labor may yield a child with a name such as *Mavuto* (Trouble). Babies are not taken out in public until they reach two weeks old, in order to avoid sickness. After this period of time (called *chikuta*), friends and relatives gather to celebrate, bringing more gifts for the baby.

Milestones

During the early teen years, children in rural areas undergo rituals marking their transition into adulthood. Some urban parents have abandoned these rites of passage, while others return to their home villages so their children can participate in them. Initiation practices vary by region and ethnicity, but generally they are done once a year, with groups of similar age going through the rituals together.

Many rituals prepare young people for their future roles as mothers and fathers. Young women may take part in *chinamwari*, during which older women from the village teach them about their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

After the *chinamwari*, a celebration is held and attended only by women. Young men may be taken into the bush to be circumcised, though an increasing number of young men are circumcised in hospitals. In some parts of Malawi, the males who have gone through these rituals then leave the village as a group to fend for themselves for a certain length of time, up to several weeks. When they return, they will have completed the transition to adulthood, and the village celebrates with music, dancing, and feasting that may last for days.

Death

When a person dies in rural areas, the entire village takes part in preparations and ceremonies. In urban areas, involvement is usually limited to the friends and family of the deceased. For one or two days, the body lies covered inside the family home, where the women of the family gather to wail over it. The men of the family gather outside around a fire. Mourners come to pay their respects and offer condolences to the family. Attending funerals is extremely important, and people will travel great distances to attend funerals for even distant relatives.

In rural areas, before burial, family members of the same gender as the deceased prepare the body for burial. In urban areas, it is more common for the body to be prepared at a funeral parlor. Christian funerals are typical and are usually held in a church. Tribal elders and church clergy conduct the ceremony. Mourners accompany the coffin to the graveyard. After Muslim funerals, the men take the body to the graveyard, while women stay behind. It is customary for drivers to slow down and turn off their radios when they come upon a funeral procession.

Cemeteries are considered sacred places inhabited by the spirits of the dead. Malawians are careful not to disturb cemeteries, and in some areas plagued by deforestation and overpopulation, cemeteries are the only areas where trees still stand. Following the burial, the women prepare a large feast. Family members may commemorate a death with a memorial ceremony (*sadaka*) held months or years later, in which a large feast is prepared in honor of the dead.

Diet

Malawians typically do not feel they have eaten unless they have had *nsima* (starchy porridge made of corn flour and water). *Nsima* is balled in the right hand, dipped in *ndiwo* (a sauce or condiment), and eaten. *Ndiwo* may be made of fish, meat, beans, greens, or other ingredients, depending on what is available. Rice is a more expensive, less filling alternative to *nsima*. Malawians drink tea daily if they can afford it. Water is taken with meals.

Most Malawians do not consume enough calories to meet basic nutritional needs. Dried or fresh fish from Lake Malawi is the most abundant protein source. It is available in markets, along with beef, chicken, and goat, which are more expensive. Alternative protein foods such as red beans and peanut flour are plentiful; insects such as grasshoppers and termite larvae are another source of protein.

Locally grown fruits and vegetables include papaya, mangoes, bananas, tangerines, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and avocados. Vendors approach local buses to sell produce, dried fish (*nsomba*), and roasted mice on sticks (*mbewa*). People of

all ages like sugarcane for a snack.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer is the most popular sport. People often gather to watch televised games, and many villages have local soccer teams that play against one another in informal matches. Soccer fields and equipment are often makeshift. Young boys create soccer balls out of scraps of plastic bags. Any open space can serve as a field, and goals may be marked with rocks or scraps of wood. To differentiate between teams, members of one team may remove their shirts. Aside from soccer, few other sports are widely played in Malawi.

Leisure

For many Malawians, free time is scarce. Recreation is sometimes viewed as wasteful or frivolous. Many people spend their free time visiting and socializing with friends and relatives. They may visit in the home or go out to cafés or bars. Women enjoy attending family events, sewing clubs, and initiation ceremonies. They may also participate in traditional dances. Men often gather at local *bottle stores* to drink traditional beer or bottled soft drinks. Families enjoy church- and school-sponsored activities.

People who live near lakes and rivers enjoy swimming and diving. In urban areas, people may play checkers, cards, or other board games. People in villages, at the market, or at a bus stop gather around anyone playing *bao*, a strategy game played with pebbles or seeds on a carved-out board. *Draughts* (similar to checkers) is also popular. Although Malawi has multiple television stations, most people do not have access to a television set. In villages, someone who owns a television and VCR or DVD player may charge people admission to watch videos or DVDs; action movies are the most popular.

Children enjoy games like jump rope (*misimisi*) and hopscotch (*phada*). They also play house (*zawana*) and construct seesaws (*mzende*). Hide-and-seek (*chibisalilano*, or *kalondolondo*) is popular in the summer, when children gather at night to play by the light of the full moon. Girls also gather to dance under moonlight. Boys make highly prized *magalimoto* (toy cars) out of scrap metal and bits of trash. Girls play a game similar to basketball, called netball.

Vacation

Recreational travel is rare for all but the wealthy. Urban dwellers may travel to home villages on holidays, while rural people may visit urban areas during their time off. Families may also visit Malawi's wildlife parks.

The Arts

Song, dance, and drumming festivals are an integral part of social and religious life. For example, the Ngwetsa festival celebrates the harvest. The Chewa perform the *gule wamkulu* dance at celebrations, funerals, and initiation rites. Singing and drumming provide accompaniment. The *ingoma* is a dance that celebrates past victories of the Ngoni ethnic group; male dancers hold spears and shields and wear a traditional costume of animal skins.

Unique Malawian instruments include the *zeze*, a one-string violin, and the *maseche*, a rattle attached to the legs and arms of dancers. Reggae and Congolese *kwasa kwasa* (a

fast, rhythmic style of music) are popular in *bottle stores*, where men gather to drink traditional beer or bottled soft drinks.

Holidays

Malawi's official holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Chilembwe Day (15 January), Martyrs' Day (3 March), Easter (Friday–Monday), Labor Day (1 May), Independence Day (6 July), and Mother's Day (second Monday in October). Malawians greatly value their national holidays. In addition to specific traditions related to each holiday, most people also visit friends and relatives or take day trips to nearby lakes, waterfalls, or game reserves on these days.

Patriotic Holidays

Important patriotic holidays include Chilembwe Day, Martyrs' Day, and Independence Day. Chilembwe Day commemorates the death of John Chilembwe, who is considered the first martyr for Malawi's freedom. In the past, the mood on this day was one of sorrow and mourning. Businesses were closed, and people did not listen to music or participate in any social activities. Today the holiday is less solemn, and many in the older generation worry that young Malawians do not fully understand the importance of the day. Each year, radio stations broadcast plays about Chilembwe's life and death.

Martyrs' Day honors those who gave their lives in 1963 in the quest for independence from Britain. Similar to Chilembwe Day, Martyr's Day was once a solemn occasion, but today the mood is more relaxed. The government organizes a military parade, but the holiday is otherwise not widely celebrated.

On Independence Day, Malawians celebrate their independence from Britain, gained in 1964. People mark the day by watching military parades, traditional dances, and plays. The atmosphere on this day is festive and joyful.

Christmas and New Year's

Christmas (25 December) is celebrated only by Christians. Church services on this day include songs and plays depicting the events of Christ's birth. Families gather for special meals. Christians also buy new clothing at Christmastime, which may be the only time they buy clothes during the year. The New Year is celebrated with large parties, food, and drinking.

Muslim Holidays

During the holy month of *Ramadan*, Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to dusk. In the evenings, people visit friends and eat. *Eid al-Fitr*, a three-day feast, is the most important Muslim holiday in Malawi and commemorates the end of *Ramadan*. Non-Muslims often join in the celebrations on this day.

Other Holidays

On Mother's Day, people show their appreciation for their mothers with gifts and visits. The president also gives a speech praising the role of mothers.

Unofficial holidays include Valentine's Day (14 February) and Education Day (19 July). Valentine's Day is celebrated throughout the country with red decorations and gifts of chocolates and roses. On Education Day, students celebrate

the availability of education with events like school dances and organized games.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

The Republic of Malawi is a presidential republic and is governed by a president, who functions as head of government and head of state. The president and vice president are elected to a five-year term and the president appoints a cabinet. The 193 members of the National Assembly, the country's legislature, are elected through a majoritarian system to five-year terms by popular vote.

A traditional authority system vesting power in village headmen and chiefs functions at the local level. The official courts respect the authority and decisions of these traditional leaders.

Political Landscape

Many political parties are active in Malawi, though there are few major differences among most party platforms. As a result, many of these parties are relatively unstable because they tend to be centered around individuals who often switch parties or positions.

Malawi's biggest and most influential parties include the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP); the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), which was the only legal party from independence until 1993; the People's Party (PP), which is an offshoot of the DPP; and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

The government continues to face the challenges of rampant poverty and underdeveloped healthcare and educational systems.

Government and the People

The government's respect for free press, speech, and assembly are continually improving. Corruption is problematic, though the government is making efforts to fight it. The government is increasingly able to improve the quality of life for its citizens. Malawi's life expectancy and HIV prevalence rates especially are improving. All citizens may vote at age 18. Since the beginning of multiparty elections in 1994, voter turnout has been relatively high. Elections are increasingly transparent and fair.

Economy

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Many people rely on subsistence agriculture to survive. In all, 64 percent of the labor force is involved in agriculture of some form. Malawi is one of the largest tobacco exporters in the world; U.S. manufacturers purchase much of the annual crop. Other exports are tea, sugar, cotton, coffee, peanuts, wood products, and clothing. Malawi relies on international aid for agriculture, healthcare, education, and infrastructure, all of which remain underdeveloped. The country has few natural resources other than its soil, and most workers are unskilled. Industry is underdeveloped, as is tourism. Many men work in South African cities, sending earnings back to their families in Malawi. The country's currency is the *kwacha* (MWK).

Transportation and Communications

Malawians transport goods and passengers by road, air, water, rail, and even bicycle. A personal car is unaffordable for the average Malawian. Local buses are cheap but overcrowded, slow, and poorly maintained. Express buses are better but expensive. Small trucks and minivans reach rural and remote destinations; boats on Lake Malawi reach areas inaccessible by road. Slightly less than half of roads are paved. The Lakeshore Road traverses the country from north to south. A railway allows exports to reach the Indian Ocean through Mozambique. It provides no passenger transport.

Democracy has encouraged the growth of newspapers and allowed for a more reliable and private postal system. The landline phone system is in poor condition, and cellular phones far outnumber landlines. Coverage is best in major urban areas, but it is growing in rural areas. Still, just a small proportion of the population uses cellular phones. Even fewer use the internet. Radio is the main source for information. Malawi has government-owned radio stations and several private stations. Television was introduced in the country in 1999, and Malawi has one government-owned television station, as well as several privately owned networks that broadcast in urban areas.

Education

Structure and Access

The government provides free education in primary school, though students must provide their own uniforms, supplies, and textbooks. These expenses are relatively affordable for most families, though students may have to attend school without shoes or use a plastic bag in place of a backpack, for example. Still, nearly 80 percent of children complete primary school. In secondary school, students must pay tuition, making it difficult for most families to continue to support their children's education.

During primary school, grade levels are referred to as *standards*; in secondary school, they are called *forms*. Primary school lasts eight years (*standards* one through eight) and begins at age six. Secondary school includes *forms* one through four and lasts four years. It is divided into junior and senior levels.

In the past, families were generally more willing to pay secondary school tuition for their sons, who were seen as able to benefit the family more than daughters, who become part of their husband's family after marriage. However, this attitude is changing, and female education is now starting to be valued more highly. Many children drop out because their families cannot afford the fees, because they are needed to help on the family farm, or because they must begin working to earn money for their family.

School Life

Teachers and facilities are in short supply, particularly in rural areas, where students may have to walk long distances to school each day. Some classes are held outdoors under trees because of classroom shortages. The language of instruction is English, which few students speak when they enter school. Chichewa is taught as a subject. Teaching styles often incorporate class discussion and collaborative assignments. Teachers are treated with respect and rarely socialize with

students outside of the classroom. They are addressed as “Sir” or “Madam.” In primary school, students are not given much homework. In secondary school, the workload is increased, and many students spend around two hours on homework each night. Cheating in schools is strictly prohibited and severely punished.

Higher Education

National examinations are taken after primary school, junior secondary school, and senior secondary school. The results, combined with a student's grades, determine which universities a student may attend. Only the best students are able to continue their education after secondary school, and university graduates are highly respected in society. The University of Malawi has five campuses. Students may also choose from several other universities as well as teacher-training colleges and technical schools. Tuition is generally expensive, and government and foreign aid scholarships pay for many students' education.

Health

Serious health problems such as tuberculosis, malaria, bilharzia, diarrhea, cholera, malnutrition, and respiratory infections are widespread in Malawi. It also has one of the world's highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection: about 10 percent of adults aged 15 to 49. Many families have lost both parents to HIV/AIDS, in which case households are often headed by older children or the elderly. The National AIDS Control Program contributes to care for AIDS patients and orphans. Other urgent priorities include sanitation, immunizations, family planning, and maternal and child health care. The maternal death rate is high, though increased resources related to maternity care and childbirth are helping. Government efforts have increased access to free rural health centers or fee-based mission hospitals. Traditional healers (*Sing'anga*) are common and widely used. They prescribe roots, bark, and other plants for a variety of ailments. They also cast out demons and evil spells.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Malawi, 2408 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 721-0270; web site www.malawiembassy-dc.org.

Country and Development Data

Capital	Lilongwe
Population	19,196,246 (rank=60)
Area (sq. mi.)	45,747 (rank=98)
Area (sq. km.)	118,484
Human Development Index	170 of 188 countries
Gender Inequality Index	145 of 188 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$1,200
Adult Literacy	73% (male); 59% (female)
Infant Mortality	45 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	60 (male); 64 (female)
Currency	Malawi kwacha

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ProQuest
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
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Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
Fax: 1.800.864.0019
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