

THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF MALAWI



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CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF MALAWI

PRESS STATEMENT “SOLIDARITY WITH THE CIVIL SERVANTS”:- (A CALL FOR JUSTICE AND RESPONSIBILITY).

Vision: Family of God filled with the Holy Spirit living in Harmony, Peace and Solidarity

All official correspondence to be addressed to the Secretary General

1.0. Preamble

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace is the social justice and advocacy arm of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi. Since its establishment in 1992, the Justice and Peace Commission commonly called (CCJP), has among other things, built capacity of Malawian citizens to claim and uphold their rights, to actively participate in political and economic governance processes and as an institution, has provided civic and voter education during elections.

CCJP has noted, through passage of time that the voices demanding salary adjustments including economic policy adjustments, due to emerging economic hardships in businesses, employing institutions and at household levels are increasing in Malawi. Yet the responses from government are in part, non-convincing, non-committal, confusing and in another, over-delayed. The seemingly resolved impasse between civil servants and government is our present glaring example.

Whilst CCJP is aware of the economic challenges Malawi government is going through, at the same time recognizing the economic hardships and loss of livelihoods that civil servants and Malawian citizens are facing; we are however convinced that an *amicable solution* could have been without delays found that would have allowed government to spend within its means at the same time allowing for *fair* and *just wages* for civil servants that will allow their decent and reasonable living possible.

CCJP recognizes the serious dangers that have been caused due to the continued standoff in this impasse between government and Civil Servants. CCJP believes the delays in

resolving this impasse was uncalled for, was unfortunate, smacked of irresponsibility, sheer lack of understanding and empathy; as a result has cost Malawians lives, businesses, education opportunities and retarded economic progress.

CCJP is issuing this statement of support and solidarity with all civil servants and Malawian citizens in general; who are currently facing hardships due to ever-increasing prices of basic needs and commodities, largely emanating from the devaluation of the Malawi Kwacha and the continued floatation of the same, among many other causes.

2.0. Key Issues

2.1. Contextual Issues

CCJP observes from the recent past:

- i. That Malawi government devalued and floated the Kwacha that has in turn brought high inflation and skyrocketing commodity prices. This has resulted into increased hardships for Malawians including the civil servants that are demanding salary structural changes as they are failing to cope with the high cost of living.
- ii. That the linkage of the fuel prices to the global market prices leading to automatic fuel price adjustments is worsening the economic challenges Malawians are facing. This is due to ever-increasing prices of goods in response to the frequently and ever-changing fuel prices.
- iii. That while Malawi government has proposed some belt-tightening measures to turn around the corner the

economic challenges, this belt-tightening is only applied to selected public institutions and in turn some government departments are still enjoying benefits as if all is ok. The pain arising from the financial constraints is not equally shared across the board.

- iv. That the financial hardships, notwithstanding, government continues to plan and spend as if all is well. In fact the current public expenditure is not sustainable in this economic climate. Many bad decisions are being made in government contractual obligations, in turn; more public money is being spent on compensations than is being used in basic service delivery.
- v. That whilst many calls from CSOs, Social Commentators and Trade Unions and the general citizenry are being made to adjust the economic policy framework (that is causing hardships to most Malawians), government seems to be convinced to the contrary that the suffering is temporary and in turn is doing little; yet this optimism from our government leaders is creating agony, anguish, anxiety and anger among Malawians facing the economic woes today.
- vi. That whilst the country is grueling with these economic challenges, there is emerging a quickly rich class of people that seems to thrive on nepotistic, corrupt and political- connected tendencies; looting heavily public funds with minimal checks and balances from

government. These are vices that Malawi has been grappling with from the past administrations. CCJP agrees that: “the more things change, the more they remain the same” and in our considered view, the more they get worse!

- vii. That Malawi is seriously entrenching a two-tier society with over 80% of the population struggling to survive and depending on poor, over-stretched and quality-compromised public service delivery; while the 20% are affording privatized education, health and security services. This 20% of the population that is able is creating a section of passive and irresponsible citizenry that has become silent to the plight and cries of the majority poor.
- viii. That there is an emerging sinful silence from Faith Based Organizations, NGOs and CSOs that once were vocal and were proactive in fighting what seemed to be social injustices and administrative arrogance. The silence, the failure to act in solidarity with the poor, the sudden change of attitude and approach to social-economic and political challenges Malawi is facing insinuate a civil society movement that is confused, detached, co-opted and to an extent, unaccountable.

2.2. The Human Face of the Stand Off

As the standoff continued without a tangible solution at hand:

- i. The poor Malawians especially widows and orphans that cannot access health services in the health facilities were dying of curable diseases. Their right to life was being taken away from them by a government that promised and sworn to provide for the nation.
- ii. Poor women and girls in rural and urban areas of Malawi that were being hit hard with inaccessible social services like water, electricity, education, agricultural extension services in so doing perpetrating their suffering.
- iii. Old men and women who depend on purely government service delivery were being left unattended whilst the rich were affording private services, in this case entrenching the two-tier society in Malawi with the majority poor left to fend for themselves hit-hard.
- iv. The very backbone of our economy under informal business sector has been destroyed as business capital has shrunk at a faster rate than normal. Imagine a poor widow who has been living by selling mandazi as she goes back to a shop to buy more baking flour, she finds that the money she has can only buy half of initial possible kgs. Her business has collapsed; she has no source of livelihood. This erosion of livelihoods is creating a vicious cycle that is going to haunt Malawi through acute hunger, malnutrition and growing poverty in the couple of years to come.

- v. Young boys and girls who have not been learning in schools as their teachers had silently and in other cases openly laid down their tools, seeking better living wages have had their future greatly and negatively impacted upon as a result of the delayed solution of the impasse.

3.0. A Call to Action

Having observed these worrisome trends and negative consequences of the just ended stand off; CCJP is, through this statement, thankful to government for finally agreeing with civil servants on the salary increments, in so doing bringing to a halt the impasse that was worsening Malawi's socio-economic challenges. Whilst CCJP realizes and appreciates the huge responsibility of government about the welfare of its employees but at the same on the welfare of the general citizenry; CCJP reiterates strongly that:

The government and civil servants standoff was irresponsibly prolonged. The cries and agonies of the poor people, the civil servants that do the donkey work in government could not go without support and without response. CCJP is convinced more than ever, that an amicable solution could have very much early been arrived at to accord fair and just wages to civil servants, in doing so avoiding the paralysis of the delivery of basic services that has impacted negatively on over 80% of the Malawi poor population with the negative consequences in deaths, looting and destruction of private property including intimidation of children attending private school education that brought the country to a standstill.

Therefore, we call:

- i. Government to show its serious responsibility in proactively dealing with these crises as they emerge from time to time. Government must not wait for ugly scenes and complete paralysis of its businesses for it to take essential and concrete steps towards effective solutions. Dialogue inspired by empathy with the civil servants must always be desired and must influence swift actions and responses.
- ii. Civil servants ought always to propose reasonable and fair salary structural changes that our government can afford to implement; this is taking into consideration the other over-burdening responsibilities that Malawi government has to fulfill towards the common good of all Malawians.
- iii. Parliamentarians to quickly respond to the salary structural disparities by proposing and legislating on measures that should take away the financial woes from citizens and civil servants. This midterm budget review is the opportune time not overlooking the next budget sitting. If it is the parliament of the people for the people and must benefit the people, then, action now for the better lives of the people is a must.
- iv. Faith Based Institutions, NGOs and CSOs should mobilize themselves in support of the civil servants and the general citizenry by way of pushing the agenda of government to review the current economic policy

framework that is causing misery and destitution. Action in solidarity with civil servants and the majority poor is needed now.

- v. Development partners especially IMF and others should come in to help government to resolve the economic challenges and pains by supporting Malawi government's responsive and effective economic policies.
- vi. Political parties both ruling and opposition, the suffering of people is self evident. Let us not politicize this to seek votes in 2014. Let us collaborate our efforts to push this government top leadership to proactively respond to these challenges. Let us work together as a country facing a huge problem causing death and destitution. The road to 2014 will be bumpy and impossible to consider if political players do not show their interest in the welfare of Malawian civil servants and the population at large.
- vii. Media houses to bring forward cases to amplify the cause for the friends demonstrating for better packages resulting from the hard-hitting economic policies. Government needs tangible evidence not only from civil servants but from many-stakeholders including media houses.
- viii. To all Malawians; service delivery by government is huge and if paralyzed due to any impasse between

government and civil servants, we all lose and this is a recipe for more problems for this country as the recent impasse testifies. We are direct and only in few occasions indirect beneficiaries of our civil service provisions. We must show compassion and we must in solidarity act together.

4.0. Conclusion

Prophet Isaiah says: “Let us reason together, says the Lord of hosts.” CCJP believes that we must always come together and love one another through honest, fair and just dialogue for the common good of all Malawians. Much as this cause is emotive, painful and frustrating, CCJP will always call all well meaning Malawians to desist from burning, looting and destroying public and private property as this only aggravates our problems.

God bless mother Malawi and keep it a land of peace where justice prevails and where just wages make life living a real possibility.

Chris Chisoni

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