



## **The Big-Man Syndrome as a Security Threat in Malawi: A Critical Theory Perspective.**

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### **Abstract**

Socio-political life in Malawi reveals immense security threats stemming from neopatrimonial aspects such as the big-man syndrome. This paper takes a critical theory approach in exploring this phenomenon in Malawi with examples from the university sector and the July 2011 country-wide demonstrations. A critical theory perspective aims at revealing distortions in society in order to effect positive or emancipatory social change. Similarly, in this paper, a critical theory stance is employed to show how the big-man syndrome has in recent years posed as a security threat in Malawi so as to suggest social change. The paper starts by conceptualising the notion of the big-man syndrome and providing recent examples of security threats posed by the syndrome with examples from the university sector and the recent country-wide demonstrations. Finally, the paper proposes a model of social change based on philosophical notions of dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality.

### **Introduction**

The big-man syndrome is a notion associated with the concept of neopatrimonialism, which has permeated social-political life in Malawi rendering it anti-democratic in many ways (Booth et al. 2006; 8-13; Shawa 2011: 24). This paper takes a critical theory approach to show how the big-man syndrome poses as a security threat in Malawi and to suggest ways of containing it. The paper uses examples from the university sector and the July 2011 country-wide demonstrations. Neopatrimonialism is also associated with the notions of clientelism, patronage and misuse of resources for political legitimacy. The big-man syndrome and the related notions are briefly explained below.

The big-man syndrome or presidentialism refers to the dominance of one individual or group of individuals who strive to exert or achieve absolute rule or control over others deemed as 'subjects' (Bratton and van de Walle 2002: 63). Engel and Erdmann contend that "clientelism means the exchange or brokerage of specific services and resources for political support, often in the form of votes. It involves the relationship between unequals, in which the major benefits accrue to the patron" (Engel and Erdmann 2007: 106-7). Thus, clientelism facilitates personal favours such as job offers or appointments by the big man to individuals in order for the big man

to sustain rule or power (Booth et al. 2006: 8-13). Patronage is a form of clientelism applied to groups of people such as providing development finance within the logic of patrimony (Engel and Erdmann 2007: 107).

Without strong reference to notions of clientelism, patronage and misuse of resources for political legitimacy imbued within the notion of neopatrimonialism, this paper concentrates on showing how the big-man syndrome poses as a security threat in Malawi. The understanding of a security threat is a broad one, encompassing policy or decision-making processes including policy-steering mechanisms that limit citizens' rights of expression that have the potential to incite tension and violence within a country.

It is pertinent to note that events in this paper are discussed within the context of a political situation in which former President Bingu wa Mutharika, had passed away before finishing his term of office (scheduled to end by 2014) and during which the then Vice President, Joyce Banda, assumed office amidst political uncertainty. This situation provides some lenses assisting our understanding on what was happening at this time in terms of policy changes.

The paper has four sections: The first section conceptualises the notion of the big-man syndrome. The second locates the syndrome as a normative aspect within the socio-political life of Malawi. The third uses recent socio-political examples to show how the syndrome has in recent years been a source of security threats in Malawi. Finally, drawing on a critical theory perspective, the last section proposes a model of social change that advances aspects of self-reflexivity and argumentation based on philosophical concepts of dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality respectively.

### **Conceptualising the Notion of the Big-Man Syndrome**

As noted, the big-man syndrome is a concept associated with the term neopatrimonialism (Engel and Erdmann 2007: 97). Political scientists have used Max Weber's notion of the patrimonial state, which describes pre-industrial states in which the ruler owns all the wealth such that power operates on a private basis, to explain the notion of neopatrimonialism (97). While under patrimonialism, power depends on personal relations determined by the ruler and there is no difference between the private and the public, under neopatrimonialism, power operates in both private and public domains. Neopatrimonial rule thus combines aspects of patrimonialism and the modern demands of democratic rule (105). The challenge, however, is that the private and public domains under neopatrimonialism permeate each other in ways that are mostly anti-democratic as has been the case in many modern African countries (von Soest 2007: 621-5).

A society that exhibits the big-man syndrome suffers from the dominance of its leaders who strive for absolute power. In such societies there is usually a lack of democratic decision-making mechanisms characterised by a lack of transparency, misuse of funds and a concentrated power structure that depends on the big man (Cammack 2007: 600-1). In this way, the big-man syndrome facilitates a powerless-powerful relationship in society (Shawa 2011: 27).

From a critical theory perspective, the big-man syndrome can be explained using Habermas' notion of lifeworld (Habermas 1987: 130). Habermas describes the lifeworld as a background to

behaviour or a cultural and social context in which a shared societal meaning is derived. He posits that the nature of behaviour and decision-making mechanisms in society are influenced by the lifeworld. However, the danger is that this shared context in which the nature of behaviour and decision-making mechanisms are derived could be informed by distortions, such as the big-man syndrome (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 130). Habermas thus argues for a need to expose the lifeworld to criticism and deliberation or argumentation to expose distortions in order to effect social change (Habermas 1984: 70). In this paper, these insights are pertinent in that to contain the big-man syndrome there is a need to expose it to criticism and argumentation.

### **The Big-Man Syndrome in the Socio-Political Life of Malawi**

Neopatrimonialism in the socio-political life of Malawi has deep roots. In general, the aspect of the big-man syndrome seems to be posited normatively due to differences in power relations such as those between the rich and the poor (Booth et al. 2006: 8-13). Gilman posits that since the social situation in Malawi is highly stratified the poor population is less powerful and is prone to be susceptible to blind loyalty to the rich and powerful. This results in a reality “in which the ruling elite controls and owns most of the country’s economic and political resources, while the majority of the population is hoping to attain any little bit through the goodwill and generosity of these same people” (Gilman 2001: 46). This powerful/less-powerful behaviour thus translates deeply at every level of the socio-political life in Malawi in which, for example, the big men who have power want to exert absolute control over the led or the less powerful (Booth et al. 2006: 8-13).

The powerful/less-powerful behaviour is exacerbated by the traditional governance system or rule by chiefs who traditionally exert great authority over their subjects in most of Africa (Hendricks and Ntsebeza 1999: 99-126). Moreover, in Malawi, the chiefs tend to be susceptible to the ruling party as such they also get authority over their subjects through the political space. It follows therefore that the chieftainship can be used as an arena for social control by the government. As a normative aspect in the Malawian society, this big-man syndrome can be regarded as part of a lifeworld that determines ways of acting or behaviour in the socio-political life. It is this normative stance, the taken-for-granted, that requires change in order to avoid security threats that result from the big-man syndrome.

To give an example from the Malawi Congress Party and the Kamuzu Banda regime (1964-1994), it is clear that President Banda used ideological leadership to sustain his big-man syndrome (Chirambo 2004: 148). This was manifested in the way he created a special idolised image of himself: He was the Father and founder of the Malawi nation; he was the only person that Malawians wanted to rule the country, and, like Jesus Christ, he was chosen by God before he was born to save Malawi (148-9). He was thus called, His Excellency, Ngwazi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, the Life President of the Republic of Malawi.

The special image that Banda created about and for himself was reified through folk music and dance that people performed for their saviour (Chirambo 2001: 206). For example, this big man

and saviour was the “biggest” in the whole of Africa as the members of the Women’s League from Ntcheu district of Malawi portrayed in one of their songs:

*Kunoku Malawi kuno*  
*Ngakhale mu Africa*  
*Kulibewinapuresidenti woposa Kamuzu*  
*Mbumbazikunyadira*  
*Ife tikunyadira, kulibewinapuresidenti woposa Kamuzu*  
Here in Malawi  
Even in the whole of Africa  
There is no president as powerful as Kamuzu  
Women are happy  
We are happy  
There is no president as powerful as Kamuzu

President Kamuzu Banda’s behaviour reflected a one-man show in which everything belonged to him, the most powerful being. All national policy-steerage in the country depended on the big man Banda. Thus, normatively, Malawians believed or were meant to believe that Banda was really chosen by God hence no one would equate to him. It follows that anyone who differed with Banda was imprisoned or exiled creating fear and tension in the country (Kerr and Mapanje 2002: 79). The following section shows how the big-man syndrome poses as a security threat in the democratic era in Malawi.

### **The Big-Man Syndrome as a Security Threat in the Democratic Era in Malawi**

As noted, this paper posits a broad understanding of a security threat, encompassing policy or decision-making processes including policy-steerage mechanisms that limit citizens’ rights of expression and have the potential to incite tension and violence within a country.

With the dawn of multiparty democracy in 1994, it was expected that most issues surrounding governance would change for the better. However, the big-man syndrome has been carried over to the democratic rule revealing how ingrained it is within the socio-political life of Malawi. For example, both multi-party presidents: Bakili Muluzi (1994-2004) and Bingu wa Mutharika (2004-2012 [2014])<sup>1</sup> have in their own ways sustained the big-man syndrome in their rule. Cammack quotes an informant’s account of when Bingu wa Mutharika was addressing his ministers:

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<sup>1</sup> President Binguwa Mutharika passed away before finishing his second term of office which was supposed to end by 2014

No one should question. He has reached the point that the cabinet has to clap hands and sing. The same songs we sang for Kamuzu, we sing for him. This is a human being living in different era and this era is not good for him because it requires that you have to listen and compromise...when he makes a statement in cabinet, everyone has to agree. When you do not, you are seen as a barrier (Cammack 2007: 6).

As per the above sentiments, the big-man syndrome facilitates misuse of power at the expense of democratic tenets within a society or a nation. In the recent past, some of the activities of the Malawi Government and the Democratic People's Party (DPP) under president Binguwa Mutharika have constituted security threats as they limited [some] citizens' democratic rights. Following are examples of how the big-man syndrome has been a source of security threats in Malawi in the recent past.

### **The Academic Freedom Saga in Malawian Universities**

The example here shows how the big-man syndrome facilitated the stifling of academic freedom in Malawian universities. Academic freedom can be defined as the ability of academic staff to teach, conduct research and publish without outside interference (Anderson and Johnson 1998: 8). Contrary to this understanding, on 12 February 2011, an associate professor in the Department of Political and Administrative Studies of Chancellor College, a constituent college of the University of Malawi, was summoned by the Inspector General of police for questioning over what he presented in the classroom during a political science lecture. This used to be the case during the dictatorial time of Kamuzu Banda (1964-1994) (Kerr and Mapanje 2002: 79), where the Malawi Government had spies in university classrooms to report issues that were perceived to be against the government.

The summoning of the lecturer sparked intense controversy and a demand for academic freedom, with lecturers at the University of Malawi demanding an apology from the Inspector General of police and an assurance of safety in university classrooms. However, supported by the Malawi president and in a big-man fashion, the Inspector General of police refused to apologise. The lecturers then boycotted classes in demand for academic freedom to which the Malawi Government responded with threats to fire lecturers, freeze salaries and eventually closed the campuses of the University of Malawi. In big-man fashion, President Bingu wa Mutharika who was also chancellor of the university, publicly denounced lecturers' actions and threatened to fire and replace them within a short period of time. Thus, while academics stood their ground in demanding for academic freedom, the big-man wa Mutharika was not ready for any constructive talks and instead he went on blaming academics during some of his party rallies.

Given that academic freedom provides freedom to research and teach without outside interference (Anderson and Johnson 1998: 8), the Malawi Government can be said to have stifled academic freedom by interfering with what was presented in class. President Bingu wa Mutharika and his DPP Government showed a lack of communicative rationality to solve issues using reasoned arguments. The adamant position taken by the DPP Government in tackling the

academic freedom issue attracted demonstrations by concerned citizens, who were largely not listened to within the big-man environment. Stifling of academic freedom is a good example of how the big-man syndrome facilitates security threats in a country. The second example regards the university selection by quota system that was also conceived and implemented within the big-man environment.

### **The University Selection by Quota System**

This example shows how the quota policy conceived within the big-man environment lacked deliberative mechanisms and caused security threats in the country. In its way of solving university access to university education, the DPP Government established a quota based on district of origin in its selection of university students. Although this policy is contested as it talks to people's identities and was controversially challenged in court when the former dictatorial regime pursued it (1989-1993), the DPP Government in 2009 advanced the policy without any proper deliberative mechanisms. In big-man style, President Bingu wa Mutharika dismissed any person who talked against it [the big-man had decided and no one was to challenge the decision].

The former Malawi Congress Party Government of Kamuzu Banda first introduced the policy in 1989. Against this policy then, four students: Charles Mhango, Ambokire Salimu, William Kaunda and Christopher Chilenga who were admitted to the university on a non-residential basis challenged the University of Malawi Council's decision to admit them on that basis and on the basis of district of origin other than on merit (Malawi Law Reports 2003). Following their application to the court, the High Court of Malawi on 16 July 1993 rescinded the quota policy of selection based on the following arguments:

- That the university council adopted a government directive without making its own decision on the issue in accordance with the University of Malawi Act and thereby fettered its powers under the said act.
- That the university council had implemented an academic policy without consulting the senate as it was required under the act.
- That the decision to base university selection on district quota other than on merit was discriminatory and of no solid foundation (Malawi Law Reports 2003).

However, despite this High Court rule of 1993, in 2009 President Binguwa Mutharika and his DPP Government decided to reintroduce the policy. The policy attracted demonstrations by concerned citizens who generally saw the policy as discriminatory especially as it based its quota on district of origin. While interested citizens sought judicial reviews more than once, the recent quota policy has been maintained by the courts because unlike in 1993 those challenging it were not directly affected by the policy.

In big-man fashion, the DPP Government's university policy-steerage machinery did not give room to dissenting views. The quota policy of university selection attracted multiple voices from

religious leaders, university students, university lecturers, the civil society and many others from which the government could have benefited in terms of debate. Notable among groups or organisations that commented on the policy are the Public Affairs Committee (PAC): a grouping of all faith groups in Malawi and the Livingstonia Synod: a Presbyterian Church operating in the northern region of the country. Against the quota policy generally and the policy-making process, in its press statement, the Public Affairs Committee argued as follows:

- That the quota system as a policy issue could have benefitted from a proper consultative process required in a democracy.
- That the discussion culminated into political discourse and unleashed tribal, regionalist and divisive sentiments in the country.
- That the president's declaration amounted to top down policy approach.
- That the president should avoid publicly making comments likely to divide Malawians

As the press statement rightly captures, the stand of the president culminated into a political discourse that unleashed tribal, regionalist and divisive sentiments in the country. These divisive aspects are intrinsically embedded within the patron-client thinking alluded to earlier, which can be argued to have been a way envisaged [probably wrongly] by the big-man Bingu wa Mutharika to garner political support. This is so given the fact that the policy was largely seen as negatively affecting the minority northern region, but not than the larger south and central regions from which Bingu had comparatively more political support (Shawa 2011: 23).

On its part, the Livingstonia Synod in its press release generally argued that the quota policy is anti-democratic and that it should not be used as an excuse for not expanding the higher education sector in Malawi.

The policy attracted demonstrations by frustrated Malawians who were interested in social justice. It can be argued that the big-manism in Bingu wa Mutharika and his DPP Government yet again facilitated a source of security threat in the country due to a lack of listening or communicative rationality (Habermas 1984: 86). The other examples hinge on the 20 July 2011 mass demonstrations in the country that were dealt with in a big-man fashion by the DPP Government.

### **The 20 July 2011 Mass Demonstrations and Killings of Some Demonstrators in Malawi**

The mass demonstrations of 20 July 2011 provide excellent examples of security threats that followed the big-man syndrome behaviour of the DPP Government generally. The mass demonstrations were organised by the civil society due to concerns over governance, human rights and economic problems in the country. Problems included fuel shortages, rising cost of living and the general stifling of democratic values in the country. The civil society had tried its best to engage with the government on how to solve the problems but did not manage to get a "reasoning together" from the government.

Some of the issues that exacerbated the demonstrations are the two policies advanced by the DPP Government: the injunctions bill and section 46 of the penal code. The injunctions bill was passed by parliament on 16 June and came into law on 8 July 2011 when President Bingu wa Mutharika accented to it. The bill barred ex parte granting of injunctions against the government or public officers. The law caused public outcry as it limited citizens' rights to challenge the government and its machinery. The bill would have allowed the government to manipulate citizens' rights and continue to enjoy total control over Malawians. Despite reactions from the civil society against the bill, in big-man fashion the government did not heed to the people's wishes.

In big-man fashion, the DPP-led government amended the constitution with a section 46 that empowered the Minister of Information to reject information that was deemed dangerous to society. In this vein, if the Minister of [information] had reasonable grounds to believe that the publication or importation of any of publication would be contrary to the public interest, he would, by order published in a gazette, prohibit the publication or importation of such publication. This bill infringed citizens' rights to information.

It can be argued generally that the 20 July mass demonstrations were a kind of a last resort to beg the government to address the many issues that hinged on poor governance, human rights and economic woes. However, during the demonstrations and in big-man fashion, the demonstrators were shot at by the Malawi police leaving about 20 people dead across the country. Thus, instead of facilitating a "reasoning together", in big-man fashion the DPP Government responded with violence to impede people's democratic rights of expression, hence facilitating security threats in the country.

While dismantling the cult of the big-man syndrome shall take time, some of the actions by President Banda need notice. With the death of Bingu wa Mutharika, Banda facilitated the repealing of both the injunctions bill and the amendment of section 46 of the penal code during the June 2012 parliamentary sitting. This is important in containing the big-man syndrome. However, changing the syndrome requires a change of attitudes and developing a culture that can allow for democratic rule. It thus requires President Banda, in collaboration with other actors, to bring about a sustained way of containing the syndrome. The next section suggests a philosophical grounding to contain the big-man syndrome.

### **A Philosophical Grounding to Contain the Big-Man Syndrome**

As argued earlier, a critical theory perspective proposes a need for humans to realise that they can engage and change distortions that happen within their societies (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 130). This requires identifying agents of change and suggesting ways to effect change. This paper advances a need for self-reflexivity and argumentation based on philosophical notions of dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality as ways in which to conceive containment of the big-man syndrome.

## **Agents of Change**

This paper identifies the following agents of change: the civil society, the Malawi Government and the international community. These actors are identified because of their potential role both directly and indirectly in democratising the Malawi nation. The understanding of civil society is a broad one and it encompasses the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the church, university institutions and the general public sphere. The civil society in the country has shown great interest in fighting the big-man syndrome. This is very important in order to advance the democratic rights of the people. The new government led by President Banda seems to be interested in listening to its citizens as exemplified by the recent repealing of some of the anti-democratic laws. The international community is important in making sure that Malawi follows its protocols that hinge on human rights that the country has signed thereby promising to uphold.

## **Dialectical Reasoning and Communicative Rationality**

From notions of dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality, this paper advances ideas of self-reflexivity and argumentation respectively as ways of containing the big-man syndrome. The idea of dialectical reasoning entails understanding things as they are now and what they might be in the future (Adorno 1982: 38-9; How 2003: 3-4). For example, for Hegel, dialectics meant that the particular and the universal were interdependent (How 2003: 3-4), revealing the idea that reality is a becoming. Thus, dialectical reasoning demands constant questioning or reflexivity conceived as involving three moments: thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Carr 2000: 212). In this questioning, reality embodies the reflexive mind that negates the self-evident nature of reality (Horkheimer 1978: 26-48). For Adorno (1982: 38-9) dialectical reasoning also entails seeing the new in the old other than just the old in the new. Like Hegel, Adorno holds that the dialectic always involves asking questions about, what a future might be, from what is now. As such, other than viewing matters in nomothetic terms, dialectical reasoning demands continuous questioning of reality (Carr 2000: 217). For example, “for human justice to exist, to be justice at all, it must suggest the potentiality of fairness, rightness, equity and so forth” (How 2003: 3-4). To contain the big-man syndrome in Malawi, state presidents, politicians, government officials, the civil society and the general public sphere ought to start looking at reality within the realms of dialectical reasoning.

To contain the big-man syndrome, however, dialectical reasoning ought to be complemented by the Habermasian theory of communicative action or rationality that allows for argumentation. The theory of communicative rationality is against instrumental reasoning. The phrase instrumental reasoning was coined by Horkheimer following on Weber’s argument that in western society, reason was being used for social control by some people (Rasmussen 2004: 14). This meant for Weber, that reason became devoid of its emancipatory role as it was being used for manipulative purposes (14). It is this manipulative nature employed through reason that Horkheimer termed instrumental reason or force of reason for social control (Grubbs 2000: 222-223). It is against the domination and colonising effects of the powerful through instrumental

reasoning, that this paper suggests that communicative rationality as argued by Habermas would be helpful to contain the big-man syndrome.

Habermas posits critique within communicative action in which actors seek to reach common understanding and coordinate actions by reasoned arguments, consensus and cooperation, rather than instrumental reasoning or strategic action aimed at manipulation (Habermas 1984: 86). He advances the idea that communicative action is complemented by a theory of the lifeworld (70) in which he contends that subjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld or a cultural, social and shared meaning context (1987:130). As such, the “lifeworld provides context in which actors come to know themselves, where they ask questions of each other raising validity claims about what is true or false, right or wrong, about what should or should not happen” (How 2003: 128). As noted, the lifeworld is also posited as the taken-for-granted. The danger is that this shared context in which meaning is derived could be informed by distortions and anti-democratic practices, and thus, the need to rationalise or contain the lifeworld through argumentation (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 130). In other words, there is a need to question the taken-for-granted. Habermas posits as follows:

The more cultural traditions predecide which validity claims, when, where, for what, from whom, and to whom must be accepted, the less the participants themselves have the possibility of making explicit and examining the potential grounds on which their yes/no positions are based (Habermas 1984:70).

Rationalisation (containing) demands that validity claims that may be influenced by the lifeworld need to be exposed to criticism and deliberation based on reason (Habermas 1984: 337). This means that argumentation facilitated through communicative rationality is, as such, key in rationalising or containing the lifeworld. In this paper thus, argumentation is important in containing the big-man syndrome.

### **The Role of Dialectical Reasoning and Communicative Rationality**

Dialectical reasoning is pertinent to containing the big-man syndrome in that it presents social reality as in a constant transformation through human on-going reflexivity. Communicative rationality is significant in its use of reason, inclusivity, freedom from domination, equality and consensus in policy-making. Communicative rationality entails that government policy-steering ought to be a democratic affair in which domination is avoided in favour of rationality.

Embracing dialectic reasoning at a political level shall be helpful in producing politicians that take their actions as a constant reflection to improve the sector rather than to control and manipulate fellow citizens. State presidents, politicians and government officials who embrace dialectical reasoning are bound to begin by questioning themselves as requiring change before seeing what changes ought to be in others. Such thinking is important for them to guard against the big-man syndrome.

Embracing communicative rationality would allow all concerned stakeholders to engage in a deliberative way in policy formulation and create an enabling democratic environment in Malawi.

For example, the quota selection policy would have benefited from such engagement if those steering it did not harbour instrumental use of reason. Both dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality would help politicians, as well as government officials, to rethink their uncritical stances, that foster anti-democratic practices.

In trying to curb instrumental reasoning, there is a need to strengthen democratic institutions in the country. A serious starting point is a need to uphold the rule of law as stipulated in the constitution, such as in following the principle of separation of powers. For example, following the principle of separation of powers would allow for an independent police service that would not be manipulated by the government as was the case in some examples of the big-man syndrome cited. In this way, rule shall be premised on the rule of law and not on the big man.

With strengthened democratic institutions, there is a need for establishing a strong national communicative community or public sphere in which the identified agents could employ the force of reason to deliberate on security threats such as those stemming from the big-man syndrome. There is a need for a strong civil society to initiate deliberation on major issues that affect the country.

There is a need to revisit the whole education sector from kindergarten to institutions of higher learning so as to instill moral tenets within the curriculum that hinge on dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality. For example, there is a dire need for universities to start genuine training for citizenship education in which learners learn to formulate arguments, listen to other people's arguments, appreciate diversity and be able to develop their critical minds within the realms of a deliberative community. In this way, as a nation, citizens will be better equipped to criticise and rationalise distortions such as the big-man syndrome.

Drawing on a critical theory perspective, the model of social change presented in this paper is based on establishing a conducive environment for democratic rule in which the big-man syndrome can be contained. The concepts of self-reflexivity and argumentation based on philosophical notions of dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality are pertinent in fostering such an environment. The model advances practical ways of achieving such an environment: personal growth in terms of self-reflexivity which needs to extend to the whole community and nation, forming a deliberative public sphere that provides checks and balances within policy-steerage, systemic changes such as in strengthening democratic institutions and adhering to the principle of separation of powers, and attitude changes. In these areas, the educational system has a role to play.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has drawn on insights of critical theory to engage with the big-man syndrome as a security threat in Malawi. The paper has shown that societies that exhibit the big-man syndrome like in Malawi suffer from the dominance of its leaders who strive for absolute power. In such societies there is usually a lack of democratic decision-making mechanisms. It is argued that the big-man syndrome has posed as a security threat in that it has facilitated poor policy-making that has limited citizens' democratic rights. The paper gives three examples, which show how the

syndrome has posed as a security threat: the stifling of the academic freedom in Malawian universities, the policy-making process of the quota system of university selection, and the mass demonstrations of 20 July 2011 that reacted to the general demise of democratic values in Malawi. In a critical theory fashion, the paper identifies agents of change and proposes a philosophical grounding of change within dialectical reasoning and communicative rationality.

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### **Biographical Note**

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