

Nyasaland ~ A Bit of Background History

(Part 10)

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The Federation Years

For the first three years of the Federation the NAC retreated and licked its wounds. That is not to say that it lay down and died, but several of its more influential and radical members left and without its confident, organised leadership the population settled into a period of



resigned discontent during which opposition to the usual suspects - thangata, malimidwe and resettlement - was expressed on a local level. There was a sort of passive resistance to the Federation's demands; the Chiefs would nominally support policy but in practical terms meted out punishments that were so negligible that they were no deterrent to the villagers who broke the rules and the officials who were supposed to be ensuring compliance found themselves almost powerless. In urban areas the Nyasalanders complained about passes and curfews that only pertained to them, repeatedly requesting that these restrictions either be lifted completely or applied

to all residents. The African businessmen formed their own Chamber of Commerce and unions became more active - often they were supported as much by the employers as the employees in their actions which included strikes.

By 1955 the NAC was showing signs of recovery. New lifeblood was infused into the party by a generation of young radicals, most of whom had gained experience outside their own country and were keen to bring their ideas home. Also, Governor Colby, no supporter of the politics of his neighbours, pressed to increase representation of Africans on the Legislative Council. (The early Legislative Councils had consisted of twelve members; six officials and six non-officials, one of whom was usually a missionary representing the interests of the Africans. The non-officials were appointed by the Governor until 1930 when they were subsequently chosen by settlers and businessmen. In 1949, under pressure from the NAC, the Governor had selected three Africans and an Asian to join - but the number of official members increased accordingly to ten.) Now Colby recommended that those selected should be chosen by the Chiefs and existing African members of the three Provincial Councils rather than by himself. This



Left: Henry Chipembere
Right: Kanyama Chiume

clearly allowed for the election of radicals rather than moderates, should that be the wish of the voters. The results said it all; out with the old and in with the new. Two victorious candidates were Kanyama Chiume who took the Northern Province and Henry Chipembere who took the Southern. These young men - both in their mid-twenties - grasped the opportunity that had been handed to them by the throat and shook it until its teeth rattled.

NAC membership, which had fallen to a miserable mere thousand, rose to thirteen times that in a year and a half. More influential young people joined the party - Dundudu Chisiza had been expelled from Southern Rhodesia for sedition while Flax Musopole had Marxist

tendencies and appealed to the workers with his talk of boycotts and strikes. As support for the NAC grew so did resistance to any regulations imposed by the Federation. In particular, the flouting of the hated agricultural rules was particularly encouraged.

The NAC was invigorated by its ambitious new intake, their determination and ideas, but it lacked the gravitas it needed to appeal to the old guard. Who better to guide them than their former advocate, Dr Banda, a man with the wisdom of years on his shoulders, a man of the world who had experienced life on three continents, a man whose loyalty to his country of birth was unquestionable? Still in the Gold Coast, Banda was primarily approached as more of a consultant than potential leader, but he soon made it very clear that unless he was being invited to preside over the NAC he would not be coming at all.

He landed at Chileka Airport on 6th July 1958 to the rapturous reception of three thousand potential voters. From the beginning Banda's speeches bore the hallmarks of the oratory style which he employed for the rest of his political life. He always spoke in English, which



may seem a strange choice for the leader of an African nation, but he had by now spent many more decades in English-speaking societies than among his own people. However, he had retained a working knowledge of his mother tongue and if he noticed that his interpreter was not translating his words exactly he would berate him and demand he say it again, properly. He also spoke to the people as if they were children and he was a teacher, often chastising them for various misdemeanours - usually inaction in their support for him and the NAC.

Visually, he cut a dash, never wearing anything other than a well-cut three-piece suit, usually black, and often sported a Homburg. This may have seemed as affected as his choice of language but to wear European style clothing was a mark of pride rather than that traditional garb represented any kind of inferiority. He did carry one local accessory with him though; he was never without his white fly whisk.

Hastings Kamuzu Banda may have had a very particular sense of sartorial style, but he was a man of many guises. To the radical intellectuals of Nyasaland, ripe for revolution, he was the elder statesman who could carry their ideas forward but to their more moderately thinking brothers he was a dangerous and uncompromising extremist who would never allow minorities a voice. He was a suppurating sore in the side of the British Colonials, something that needed to be treated carefully and not permitted to spread, but the Federation saw him as more of a malignant cancer that they wanted to excise. In London he was viewed by the Labour Party as progressive and pro-western, by the Conservatives as a troublesome agitator and by the BBC as a figure not to be taken seriously (although their 'That Was The Week That Was' show featuring an irreverent 'Little Black Banda' sketch was not dreamt up until the early sixties.) To his former patients in London he was a benevolent and beloved medical man with healing hands, and to the metaphorical descendants of Joseph Booth he was the promised Messiah, returned to save their souls.

Banda was made President General of the NAC at the next AGM and immediately insisted on being given control over all positions within the party. Chipemebere, Chiume and Chisuzu were given important positions, Rose Chibambo was asked to resurrect the Women's League and the Congress Youth League was founded. Banda also brought in leading local businessmen who might be regarded as useful sources of financial support. Political agitation was stepped up on a nationwide level, whipped up by Banda who could not resist publicly criticising or referring to the Federation in derisory terms and lobbied tirelessly for its dissolution. He was also ruthless when it came to any local political opposition; it would be remiss if I did not mention that there were other political parties in Nyasaland, but Banda found ways to discourage them and their supporters. He often enlisted the help of his Youth League in this.

Towards the end of 1958 there were many examples of the locals, acting in allegiance with the NAC, challenging the colonials in all arenas. There were incidents of rioting on the streets of larger towns. Women became as politically active as the men. Both students and teachers spoke out. From the tenant farmers in Cholo to the civil servants in Zomba, from the railway workers on the lines to the preachers in their pulpits; the Nyasalanders were united. Even the Girl Guides got in on the act and greeted the visiting Governor of the

Federation with protests rather than pleasantries. By the New Year the situation was dire and the Colonial Office recognised something would have to be done to calm things down. Governor Robert Armitage had replaced Colby in 1956 and was as resistant to the Federation as his predecessor had been. He was now faced with a choice; he could either recognise Banda and the NAC as the natural inheritors of the country and to co-operate with them while effecting the removal of Nyasaland from the Federation or he could see Banda and the NAC as seditionists who would have to be removed in order to maintain the status quo and keep Nyasaland in the Federation.



Meanwhile, Banda and the party announced their decision to mount a non-violent campaign of resistance - however, opposition to the Federation was so endemic that it was obvious that any such campaign would soon spill over into confrontation and that violence would almost certainly result from it.

Banda was conspicuous by his absence at the infamous 'Bush-meeting'* of January 1959 when it was decided that the NAC would do whatever it could to make life difficult for the authorities, from the cutting of telephone wires to holding meetings without permission. A list of nationals who were known not to support the NAC (referred to as 'stooges,' 'quislings' and 'capricorns') were to be identified as public enemies - in the weeks that followed, a number of these black-listed individuals were seriously intimidated. Finally, and most controversially, the NAC purportedly plotted to kill all of the Europeans, Asians and moderate Africans in the country in the event that Banda was arrested (or even murdered) as they were sure he would be.

While some Europeans who were privy to it - and there were not many - did not take the report of a murder plot entirely seriously, others did. Congress was clearly in no mood for conciliation and when trouble erupted in the Northern Province where Colonial and Federation authority was at its weakest it soon spread south. Armitage had to act quickly and again he was faced with a set of uninviting choices; he could declare the NAC unlawful and restrict Banda et al to a small inaccessible area of the country; he could have Banda arrested, charged and imprisoned within the country (but that would be difficult since Banda himself had not instructed the members of the NAC to act as they were) or he could bring about a State of Emergency and have Banda and his fellow NAC leaders deported to another country within the Federation where they could be legally detained. This latter was the option he plumped for.

Law and order was a territorial issue but defence was not; that was the responsibility of the Federation and as such its Prime Minister, Roy Welensky stepped up, no doubt with an eye to ultimately taking over the Nyasaland Police and Internal Security at a later date. Reinforcements from the military forces of the Rhodesias and Tanganyika arrived with expedience. A State of Emergency was announced late in the evening of 2nd March 1959 and after midnight it became illegal to be a member of the NAC or any of its associated organisations.