

Exclusive Interview with Honorable Dr. Kondwani Nankhumwa, President of the People's Development Party (PDP)

Host: Burnett Munthali, Maravi Post

Tuesday 19 November 2024

Good day, and welcome to this exclusive interview with Honorable Dr. Kondwani Nankhumwa, the President of the People's Development Party (PDP). Thank you for joining us today. As the 2025 general elections approach, the PDP has raised serious concerns regarding the ongoing voter registration process in Malawi. In a recent press statement, you highlighted several critical issues that could undermine the electoral process and disenfranchise eligible voters. Today, we aim to delve deeper into these concerns and understand your perspective.

Questions:

- 1. Honorable Nankhumwa, in your recent press statement, you raised alarm over what you referred to as a “crisis” in the voter registration process. Can you elaborate on the key issues that the PDP has identified with the current voter registration exercise?**

As PDP, the absence of National Registration Bureau (NRB) personnel at voter registration centres has been our biggest concern. The electoral law requires that only those with National IDs, may be registered as voters by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC).

Unfortunately, not everyone has a National ID - some lost them; some have not been issued with cards despite being registered by NRB. So, in such cases, these people are denied the opportunity to register as voters.

However, recently, the High Court came to the rescue of those that do not have National IDs. Justice Mandala Mambulasa said every person who is eligible to register as a voter should not be barred from registering and voting in an election for failure to provide proof of eligibility when the proof could be easily provided to them near where they live or stay. The right to vote entrenched in section 40 (3) of the Constitution creates positive obligations on the part of the State to ensure that it is fulfilled, he said.

Justice Mambulasa therefore ordered that NRB personnel must be present at all registration centres to provide such an identification service. But we are concerned that despite the court order, NRB officials are unavailable at most voter registration centres and those without a National ID are being turned back by MEC officials. We feel this is contempt of court and NRB should face repercussions.

2. You specifically criticized the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) for its handling of the voter registration process. What exactly do you believe the MEC has failed to address, and how has this impacted the registration exercise?

I did not criticize MEC. However, what I said is that the electoral body must ensure it shows decisive leadership by addressing concerns transparently, engaging stakeholders constructively, and upholding its constitutional duty to deliver credible elections. The electoral process is not merely a political exercise; it is about protecting the sanctity of our democracy and ensuring that every Malawian can exercise their constitutional right to vote. MEC must not bury its head in the sand but demonstrate leadership by addressing all the challenges with transparency, efficiency, and fairness.

3. You highlighted the failure of the NRB to issue national IDs in a timely manner. How significant is this issue in preventing eligible voters from participating in the registration process, and what can be done to resolve it?

The Republican Constitution in Section 40 (3) says that every eligible citizen has the right to vote. However, Section 12 of the Parliamentary, Presidential and Local Government Elections Act, mandates MEC to accept a national ID as the sole identification for voter registration. The two laws are conflicting. But as I said earlier, the High Court resolved this matter by ordering NRB officials to be present at all voter registration centres to provide identification to those that may not have the National ID.

As PDP, we are concerned that there are no NRB officials at many registration centres and many people are being refused to register as voters. NRB is denying eligible Malawians an opportunity to exercise their constitutional right. Failure to address this matter will disenfranchise thousands, if not millions, of eligible voters—many of whom are already marginalized by systemic inefficiencies. This would damage the credibility of the 2025 elections.

4. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and resource shortages have been mentioned as key barriers to the registration process. Could you provide more specific examples of how these issues are affecting voters on the ground?

The 2025 tripartite elections are facing significant challenges primarily due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and resource shortages, which have a direct impact on the voter registration process. We have heard about defective machines at registration centres, which are adversely impacting the voter registration process. Such machines take time to be repaired or replaced. As a result, eligible voters find it difficult or impossible to register, undermining democratic participation.

There are specific instances where machine defects have created barriers. In Lilongwe and Blantyre, there have been reports of long lines at registration centers where only a few functioning machines are available. When these machines break down, many people leave without registering. In Machinga and Mulanje, MEC has failed to register new voters because their designated machines failed repeatedly over several days. There are also documented cases where individuals' biometric data could not be captured due to faulty

scanners; as a result, those individuals were denied their right to register despite being eligible.

As PDP, we have also noted that there is often a lack of effective communication between MEC and the public regarding registration processes and requirements. Some potential voters are unaware of when and where they can register due to insufficient outreach efforts by electoral authorities. This gap in communication exacerbates existing barriers thereby contributing to lower registration rates.

5. You warned that these challenges could jeopardize the legitimacy of the 2025 elections. Could you clarify how these technical and logistical issues might undermine public confidence in the election results?

The integrity of elections is paramount for a functioning democracy, and any technical or logistical issues can significantly undermine public confidence in the electoral process. Malawi deserves a voter registration process that is efficient, transparent, and inclusive. MEC and NRB must act swiftly to rectify these challenges and build public confidence in the electoral process.

Technical failures with voting systems, logistical challenges affecting accessibility and material distribution and institutional trust issues, among others, contribute significantly to potential undermining of public confidence in the 2025 elections. Addressing these challenges proactively is essential for ensuring a credible electoral process that reflects the will of Malawian citizens.

6. You proposed the establishment of an Electoral Integrity Platform (EIP) to address these challenges. Could you explain what the EIP would entail, and how it would work to ensure the transparency and effectiveness of the voter registration process?

I believe EIP could enhance oversight mechanisms to foster transparency and accountability at every stage of the electoral process. The EIP could be a strategic initiative aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with the electoral process, particularly concerning the voter registration system. This platform is essential for fostering dialogue, building trust, and implementing effective solutions to enhance electoral integrity. This platform should urgently focus on resolving the operational and systemic issues undermining the voter registration process.

7. Who would be the key stakeholders involved in this proposed platform, and how would their collaboration help resolve the issues you have highlighted?

My suggestion is that MEC, NRB, political parties, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders should be part of the EIP. This platform is essential for fostering dialogue, building trust, and implementing effective solutions to enhance electoral integrity. I believe that by working together, we can strengthen our democracy and guarantee that every voice is heard and respected. This is a critical moment for us to reaffirm our commitment to the principles of fairness, inclusivity, and accountability that underpin our nation's democratic foundation.

8. You have called for a transparent investigation into allegations of irregularities in the voter registration process. What specific irregularities have been reported, and what steps would you like to see the MEC take to address these concerns?

The issue of voter suppression is the most worrying challenge that we are currently facing. Others include the presence of duplicate registrations. This occurs when individuals are registered multiple times, which can skew election results and undermine public confidence in the electoral system. Another grave concern involves allegations that underage individuals are being registered to vote. The legal voting age is 18 years, yet there have been claims that some registrants are below this age limit.

This not only violates electoral laws but also poses ethical questions regarding the manipulation of young voters for political gain.

Finally, MEC has faced criticism for a perceived lack of transparency in its voter registration processes. PDP calls for clearer communication regarding how voter registration is being conducted and how data is managed. The absence of transparent procedures can foster distrust among the electorate.

PDP believes that MEC should initiate an independent audit of the voter registration process to identify and rectify any discrepancies such as duplicate registrations and underage voters. Establishing stronger verification processes during registration can help ensure that only eligible voters are registered. This could include cross-referencing with national identification databases. MEC should also launch campaigns aimed at educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities regarding voter registration, including how to check their own registration status.

9. Regarding the ongoing calls for the resignation of MEC Chairperson Justice Anabel Mtalimanja, you have suggested that she may need to step down due to public perceptions of bias. Can you elaborate on why you believe her resignation would be beneficial for the electoral process?

Some quarters have alleged that Justice Mtalimanja may not be a neutral referee because she is daughter to late John Tembo, who was once the President of Malawi Congress Party. While I do not personally take that viewpoint, I believe that one of the fundamental pillars of a fair electoral process is public trust in the institutions that oversee it.

Justice Mtalimanja, as the Chairperson of MEC, is expected to play a crucial role in ensuring that elections are conducted fairly and transparently. However, ongoing calls for her resignation stem from perceptions of bias, which can undermine this trust. If significant portions of the electorate believe that the MEC is not impartial, it can lead to widespread disillusionment with the electoral process itself. In that sense, I believe that

being a Judge of high moral values, the best thing that she could do is to resign to protect her integrity.

10. In your statement, you mentioned that Justice Mtalimanja has lost the trust of the people. How do you think this loss of trust in the MEC could affect the overall credibility of the 2025 elections?

If Justice Mtalimanja is perceived by some quarters as favoring one political party, it could create an environment where some voters feel their voices are not being adequately represented. Such perceptions could lead to voter apathy and increased tensions among political parties. The integrity of the MEC is paramount; if its leadership is questioned, it risks delegitimizing its authority. Considering these concerns, a resignation could serve as a powerful statement about accountability and responsiveness to public sentiment.

Justice Mtalimanja could pave the way for new leadership that might restore confidence in the MEC's ability to conduct free and fair elections. This transition could also allow for a thorough review of practices within the commission to ensure they align with best practices for electoral management.

11. Given the current challenges, what immediate steps would you recommend to both the MEC and the NRB to address the issues raised and ensure that all eligible voters are able to participate in the upcoming elections?

As I said, I ask MEC to demonstrate leadership by addressing these challenges with transparency, efficiency, and fairness. On the hand, NRB, must ensure that they fulfill its mandate diligently, ensuring no eligible citizen is disenfranchised.

12. How do you see the current state of voter registration affecting the political landscape leading up to the 2025 elections, especially for the PDP?

The political landscape in Malawi is significantly influenced by voter registration processes, which serve as a foundation for democratic participation. As the country approaches the 2025 elections, the current state of voter registration could have profound implications for various political parties, including the PDP. It is a fact that political parties have strongholds; regions where they have a huge following. If such places face serious voter registration challenges, dominant parties there would suffer losses because were denied the right to vote.

13. Concluding thoughts: To close, what message would you like to send to the voters, political parties, and government institutions as we approach the 2025 elections?

Given the complexities surrounding voter registration and its implications for party dynamics and electoral outcomes in Malawi's upcoming elections, it is imperative for all stakeholders involved—political parties, civil society organizations, and government bodies—to work collaboratively towards ensuring a fair and transparent electoral process.

As we move forward towards the elections, let us work together—government officials, civil society organizations, political parties—to ensure that every eligible voter has a fair chance to register and participate in this vital democratic exercise. We owe it to ourselves as a nation to uphold the values of democracy by fostering an environment where transparency reigns supreme.

I urge all stakeholders involved in this electoral process to prioritize transparency and inclusivity at every level. Let us commit ourselves today to safeguarding our democracy by ensuring that no eligible voter is left behind.

Closing Remarks:

Thank you, Honorable Nankhumwa, for sharing your insights and thoughts on these critical issues. Your concerns about the voter registration process are certainly thought-provoking, and urgent attention is needed to ensure that the 2025 elections are free, fair, and inclusive. We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today, and we look forward to hearing how these matters are addressed in the coming months.