



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Think tank argues protests in Malawi are not sudden eruption

As protests against the government of Malawi sweep the capital Lilongwe, the commercial capital Blantyre, and the northern city of Mzuzu, Africa Research Institute reveals how Malawians have long used public radio to voice social, political and economic grievances. [*Voices of disquiet on the Malawian airwaves*](#) highlights the importance of the country's most popular radio programme – *Nkhani Zam'Maboma* or “News from Districts”. Broadcast in Chichewa, a language spoken by few foreigners, the programme content is easily overlooked by donors and human rights activists.

The current unrest was triggered by sharp rises in the cost of living, fuel shortages and repressive new government legislation. Everyday hardship and injustice caused by developments like these are the focus of many of the stories sent in to *Nkhani Zam'Maboma*. The programme is broadcast twice nightly, seven days a week, to several million listeners.

The stories on *Nkhani Zam'Maboma* express discontent in a radically different way to human rights organisations – and protesters. Local idioms and proverbs that have a broad resonance with the listening public are widely used. Authorities – from religious leaders to employers – are taken to task in subtle rather than overt ways.

While human rights organisations focus their efforts on securing civil and political rights, *Nkhani Zam'Maboma* offers a platform for Malawians to pursue social and economic rights. In Malawi, activists have been slow to recognise that the provision of adequate economic resources and opportunity might be a human rights issue, despite the entrenched poverty and inequality that beset the country.

Public radio in Africa is seldom considered a forum for voicing protest, or disquiet. For the most part, public radio is regarded as a mouthpiece for the incumbent government. During the recent protests in Malawi, this has certainly been the case. But *Nkhani Zam' Maboma* is broadcast by the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), demonstrating that “there is always more than meets the eye (and the ear) even in official news stories broadcast on the MBC”.

Nkhani Zam'Maboma has become an institution in its own right. Its vast audience is one that Malawian human rights activists can only dream of. Never before has it been possible for Malawians – irrespective of wealth, age, gender or ethnic origin – to articulate experiences of abuse, injustice and violation so publically.

Notes to editors:

Africa Research Institute is a non-partisan think tank based in London. Our mission is to draw attention to ideas that have worked in Africa, and to identify new ideas where needed.

[Voices of disquiet on the Malawian airwaves](http://bit.ly/pMZ2f2) can be downloaded from the Africa Research Institute website: <http://bit.ly/pMZ2f2>

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