



Civil Society Opposes Government's Plan for Security Mechanisms for Local Officials

Issued this 12th day of September 2023 at Lilongwe

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, voice our deep concern and opposition to the government's proposal to introduce security mechanisms for District Commissioners, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), and Mayors. This move is not only insensitive to the suffering of millions of Malawians but also a threat to democracy, a potential infringement on fundamental rights and freedoms, and a cause for alarm regarding the nation's future. It exerts an economic strain into an already fragile economy in the face of the recent unprecedented disasters, high costs of living, voluminous debt and broadened electoral constituencies.

1. The Essence of Democracy

Democracy is grounded in a delicate balance of power, transparency, and accountability. Public executive and elected officials, including Mayors, CEOs, and District Commissioners, are entrusted with the responsibility of representing the will of the people and ensuring that government actions align with the interests of their constituents. The government's intention to introduce security mechanisms for these officials will result in the failure of these officials to be accountable to their constituents as they will not be easily accessible thereby diminishing the political will that goes with their availability at all levels of society when required to do so.

2. Misallocation of Resources and Economic Consequences

The proposed introduction of security mechanisms for local officials carries significant economic implications. Allocating resources away from vital public services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure development exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities and hampers economic growth. A well-functioning democracy is crucial for attracting foreign investment and fostering a thriving business environment, but the presence of security mechanisms may signal political instability, deterring investors. Furthermore, the costs of establishing and maintaining these mechanisms, including salaries and infrastructure, strain the national budget, diverting funds that could promote economic prosperity, job creation, and poverty reduction. These economic concerns compound the democratic and social issues surrounding this proposal.

3. Undermining Democracy and Suppressing Dissent

One of the most significant apprehensions surrounding the introduction of security mechanisms for local government officials is its potential to undermine democracy. In democratic systems, public servants are held accountable to the people they serve. However, the mere presence of security forces can have a chilling effect on free speech, suppress dissent, and deter civic engagement. This erosion of trust, in turn, poses a direct threat to the vitality of democracy.

Historical precedent has shown that deploying security forces within civilian governance often results in the suppression of dissent and opposition. The very presence of such forces can intimidate citizens, dissuading them from participating in peaceful protests, expressing their opinions, or holding their leaders accountable. This stifling atmosphere is fundamentally detrimental to the democratic process and infringes upon the fundamental right to free expression.

4. Abuse of Power

A prevailing concern tied to the government's plan is the potential for the abuse of power. Providing local government officials with access to security apparatuses opens the door for potential misuse. Such misuse could lead to the suppression of political opposition or activities that do not align with the public interest. These possibilities carry serious consequences for the rule of law and the overall quality of governance.

5. Erosion of Trust

Trust is the cornerstone of any robust democracy. The introduction of security mechanisms sends a signal that the government perceives its citizens as potential threats rather than as partners in nation building. The erosion of this trust can initiate a vicious cycle of suspicion and hostility, dividing communities and impeding societal progress.

6. Legal and Ethical Concerns

The introduction of security mechanisms for local government officials raises substantial legal and ethical questions. Ensuring that any such measures are in compliance with international human rights standards, the constitution, and the rule of law is imperative. A lack of transparency and accountability in this regard can have far-reaching repercussions for the country's international reputation and overall governance.

A Call for Reconsideration

In light of these pressing concerns, civil society organizations are united in their call for the government to reconsider its plan to introduce security mechanisms for District Commissioners, Chief Executive Officers, and Mayors. We firmly believe that the preservation of democracy, respect for principles of constitutionalism on governance of state and trust from the governed safeguarding fundamental rights, and promoting transparent and accountable governance should serve as the guiding principles for any government's actions.

Civil society remains steadfast in its commitment to advocating for a just and democratic society where the voices of the people are not just heard but also respected. The concerns raised by civil society represent not merely a critique but also an opportunity for the government to demonstrate its unwavering commitment to democracy, accountability, adherence to austerity measures and the rule of law. The ultimate goal is to work together to create a brighter and more equitable future for the nation, founded on principles of justice, transparency, and respect for all.

Signed on 12th September 2023 by:

1. National Advocacy Platform
2. Human Rights Defenders Coalition
3. Centre for Civil Society Strengthening
4. Civil Society Coalition on Accountability and Transparency
5. Malawi Human Rights Resource Centre
6. NGO Gender Coordination Network
7. Centre for Social Accountability and Transparency
8. Human Rights Consultative Committee
9. Youth and Society
9. Malawi Economic Justice Network
10. NGO Coalition on Child Rights