

MALAWIAN OPPOSITION LEADER WINS HISTORIC ELECTION RERUN

By Alex Pollock

Lazarus Chakwera was sworn in as Malawi's new president Sunday [28 June] after the announcement the previous night that he had won the southern African country's rerun elections. Mr Chakwera is Malawi's sixth president after winning the historic election held last week, the first time a court-overturned vote in Africa has resulted in the defeat of an incumbent leader. (*Associated Press*)

Who is Lazarus Chakwera?

Lazarus Chakwera, a former pastor, and head of the Malawi Congress Party was sworn in as Malawi's sixth president after defeating former president Peter Mutharika by claiming 58.57% of the nation's votes in the 23 June election. The victory marked the first time that a court-overturned election in Africa saw an opposition leader defeat an incumbent leader. Mr Chakwera will serve a five-year term as president.



Mr Chakwera was born in Lilongwe, the current capital of Malawi, to subsistence farmers living on the outskirts of the city. Two of his brothers, born before him, died in infancy and his father, believing that he would live, gave him the name Lazarus after the Biblical character raised from the dead. Mr Chakwera is a Pentecostal preacher and served as the leader of the Assemblies of God for 24 years before making the decision to first run for political office in 2014. He told *BBC* reporters that he “argued with God” about the decision to move into politics because it did not seem like a natural career move. Mr Chakwera's father was a pastor who planted several churches, and Mr Chakwera's path as a pastor was well laid out before he made the switch to politics. He first ran for president in 2014 but came in second place to Mr Mutharika. He mentioned in an interview in 2017 for *BBC* that Exodus chapter three, where God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, was an inspiration for transitioning from church ministry to politics.

In his victory speech, he vowed to tackle the issues of poverty and corruption, creating a government that will “inspire, serve, listen, and fight for all Malawians.” He called for nationwide unity and said he was committed to represent even those who voted against him. The former administration was openly tribalistic in its personnel appointments, creating divisions between the Northern regions of the country and the rest of the population. Mr Chakwera's platform included the promise to address both the spiritual and social needs of Malawians by creating greater unity. He currently faces immediate decisions regarding the handling of the current COVID-19 pandemic and worsening economic conditions.

The call for a new election

The call for a new election came after several protests broke out, claiming the initial election in May 2019 – in which Mr Mutharika was declared the victor – was plagued by fraudulent votes. The reversal of the election was only the second time an African country had overturned the results of a presidential election. Kenya's 2017 election was the first.

Mr Mutharika won the May election with 38.6% of the votes, with Mr Chakwera coming in second. Mr Chakwera and Saulos Chilima (who came in third place) filed complaints, stating the election results were tampered with. Evidence of the use of correction fluid, false results sheets, and a number of mathematical errors led to the annulment of the election results.

Many of the protests that occurred following the initial election called for the resignation of Jane Ansah, the head of the electoral agency. Ms Ansah was accused of helping to rig the election in Mr Mutharika's favour. The Malawi Electoral Commission initially claimed no wrongdoing in the handling of the ballots and cited favourable reports from international observers as evidence of a fair election. However, after three months of court proceedings, the Malawi Constitutional Court made the decision to annul the results and rerun the election.

Mr Mutharika claimed the rerun election was “the worst in Malawi’s history,” but the Malawi Human Rights Commission praised the election for being peaceful and transparent. Mr Mutharika initially called for the electoral commission to annul the results of the second election and schedule a third, but later urged his supporters to “move on peacefully and respect the government.”

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

According to an *INcontext* contact, Mr Chakwera’s time as president could have one of two impacts on the Church in Malawi. If his administration performs well in delivering on its promises to confront poverty and corruption, it could boost church growth as Mr Chakwera is seen as a prominent Christian figure in Malawi. However, his leadership also runs the risk of having the opposite effect if his administration does not provide the promised reforms. With several other African countries following the election closely, his leadership could have far-reaching effects, beyond Malawi’s borders.

Ever since the disputed 2019 election results, the Church in Malawi has been praying for a righteous outcome to the political turmoil the nation has experienced over the past year. During his victory speech, Mr Chakwera addressed the people, calling for nationwide unity. In a video published by St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in California, he said he felt God calling him to a position in which he could pastor an entire nation.

He also referenced his biblical namesake when talking to the press saying he “feels like Lazarus, like he was raised from the dead.” One of his advisors, Sean Kampondeni, told *BBC* that Mr Chakwera believed it was his job to address both the spiritual and social needs of Malawians.

Please pray with us:

- For Mr Chakwera to reflect Christ in his leadership, and that he will be above reproach
- For Mr Chakwera to be a unifying force for his nation, that they may enter a new season of growth and productivity after this season of division and uncertainty
- For the Malawian Church to continue bearing up their leadership in prayer

IMAGE:

REUTERS/Eldson Chagara