



# Malawi

## Introduction

Official Name: Republic of Malawi  
Nationality: Malawian  
Area: 118,480 square kilometers (45,745 square miles)  
Languages: Chichewa (official), English (official), Chinyanja, Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chisena, Chilomwe, Chitonga, other indigenous languages  
Currency: kwacha (MWK)  
Location: Southern Africa, bordered by Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia

## Statistical Information

Population	13.0 million
0-14 years	45.1 percent
15-64 years	51.2 percent
65+ years	2.7 percent
Birth rate	43 births/1,000
Death rate	21 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	6.3 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	2.383 percent
Life expectancy	41.7 years
Literacy	62.7 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	14.2 percent
Below poverty line	55 percent
Ethnic groups	Chewa Nyanja Tumbuka Yao Tonga Ngoni Ngonde Sena Lomwe Asian European
Religion	79.9 percent Christian 12.8 percent Muslim 3 percent other 4.3 percent none

## Economy

Malawi ranks among the world's most densely populated and least developed countries. The economy is dependent upon agriculture, and 85 percent of the population lives in rural areas. The tobacco crop is the key to economic growth, as tobacco accounts for more than half of Malawi's yearly exports. The economy depends upon substantial amounts of assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and bilateral aid agreements. In 2006, Malawi was approved to receive aid under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative. The government's challenges include developing a market economy, the rapidly growing problem of HIV/AIDS, and tightening fiscal discipline to the satisfaction of foreign donors. In 2005, President Mutharika supported an anticorruption campaign which helped restore the faith of international donors.

## Government

Capital: Lilongwe

Malawi is a democratic republic. The president is both chief of state and head of government, and is elected by popular vote to serve a five-year term. The legislature consists of the unicameral National Assembly, whose 193 members are elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms.

## Climate

Malawi has four seasons: the cool season lasts from May to mid-August, the hot season lasts from mid-August until November, the rainy season occurs from November to April, and the post-rainy season is April to May, with temperatures beginning to drop in late May. The rainy season may last longer in the northern and eastern mountains. Variations in altitude around the country lead to differences in climate.

## Environmental Concerns

Deforestation and land degradation are environmental problems in Malawi. The country also experiences

water pollution due to agricultural runoff, sewage, and industrial wastes. Pollution and debris which collect in spawning grounds endanger fish populations.

### **History**

The earliest inhabitants of Malawi were probably tribes related to the San tribes of South Africa. Between the first and fourth centuries A.D., Bantu-speakers migrated to the region that is now Malawi and settled there.

A new wave of Bantu-speakers arrived in the 14th century and, in the late 15th century, established the Maravi kingdom, which was centered in the Shire River valley. In the 18th century, Maravi rulers conquered portions of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. By the late 18th century, the Maravi kingdom began to decline due to internal rivalries and invasions by the Yao, who took captives and sold them as slaves to Arab and Swahili merchants living along the Indian Ocean coast. In the 1840s Malawi was cast into further turmoil with the arrival of the warlike Ngoni tribes.

In 1859, Scottish explorer David Livingstone visited Lake Nyasa. He brought the effects of the slave trade to the attention of the European community; in 1873 two Presbyterian missionary societies established mission bases in the country.

Britain sent a consul to the region in 1883 and created the Shire Highlands Protectorate in 1889 to counter the threat of Portuguese annexation. In 1891 the British Central African Protectorate, which included most of modern Malawi, was established. In the 1890s the British abolished the slave trade in the protectorate and established coffee-growing estates in the Shire River valley, which were worked by Africans.

In 1907, the British Central African Protectorate was renamed Nyasaland. In 1915, a small-scale African revolt in Nyasaland was easily put down by British troops, but the revolt served as an inspiration to other Africans intent upon ending foreign domination.

In 1944, the protectorate's first political movement was founded, known as the Nyasaland African Congress. The government admitted the first African members to the legislative council in 1949. In 1953, Nyasaland was federated with Northern and Southern Rhodesia to form the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Nyasaland's African population strongly protested the ties to Southern Rhodesia, since Southern Rhodesia's policies were strongly white-

oriented; the Africans of Nyasaland feared that Southern Rhodesia's pro-white policies would be applied to them.

In the mid-1950s, the Nyasaland African Congress became more radical under the leadership of H. B. M. Chipembere and Kanyama Chiume. In 1958, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda became the leader of the Congress, which was renamed the Malawi Congress Party in 1959. Protests against British rule organized by Banda led to the declaration of a state of emergency from 1959 to 1960.

The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was dissolved in 1963, and on July 6, 1964, Nyasaland became an independent nation under the name of Malawi.

Banda became the fledgling country's leader, first as prime minister and then, after Malawi became a republic in 1966, as president. In 1971, Banda was proclaimed president for life. His autocratic policies soon alienated other leaders; he allowed Europeans to retain considerable influence in Malawian affairs, and he refused to oppose white-minority rule in South Africa. Banda suppressed a 1965 revolt led by Chipembere and another in 1967 led by Yatuta Chisiza.

In 1967, Banda established diplomatic ties with white-minority-ruled South Africa. He argued that Malawi's economic well-being depended upon friendly relations with the South African government. In 1970, Prime Minister B. J. Vorster of South Africa visited Malawi, and in 1971 Banda returned the visit, becoming the first ruler of an independent black African nation to visit South Africa. Banda received heavy criticism from the public for this move. Throughout the 1970s, Malawi enjoyed economic prosperity, much of which was due to foreign investment.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, antigovernment rebels from Mozambique took refuge in Malawi, causing tensions to grow between the two countries. In the late 1980s, the flow of more than 600,000 civil war refugees prompted Mozambique to close its border with Malawi. This forced Malawi to rely on South African ports, which cost the country a great deal more. As Banda aged, the public began to speculate about his successor. In the midst of public speculation, Banda began eliminating powerful leaders by expelling them from the country and possibly authorizing assassinations.

In 1992, the worst drought of the 20th century devastated Malawi. Violent protests against Banda's rule erupted, and international aid to Malawi was suspended. In 1993, Malawians voted to end single-party rule, providing for a multiparty democracy and ending the lifetime presidency. In an election held in 1994, Banda was defeated by Bakili Muluzi, a former protégé. Muluzi ran on a platform of national reconciliation.

In 2002, Muluzi began to push for a change in the constitution which would allow him to run for a third term in office. He abandoned the idea in the face of political and popular opposition. In 2004, Bingu wa Mutharika won the presidential election.

Mutharika launched an anticorruption campaign which alienated many high-ranking officials, including former president Muluzi. Mutharika's party tried several times to impeach him, but failed. A crop failure in 2005 resulted in massive food shortages and high food prices throughout the country.

### **Ethnic Groups**

Although there are clear cultural differences between tribal groups in Malawi, there is currently no significant friction between tribes.

The Chewa live in the central region of Malawi. Their language is Chichewa, an official language of Malawi. There are two large Chewa clans, the Phiri and Banda. The Phiri are associated with aristocracy, and the Banda with mystics and healers. Traditional Chewa society is matrilineal. Chewa society is internationally known for its traditional secret societies, masks, and ritual tattoos. Chewa traditional religion is based on their secret societies, known as *nyau*. Many Chewa are agriculturalists.

The Nyanja are closely related to the Chewa. They inhabit the southern region of Malawi. Their language is known as Chinyanja. The prefix "chi" means "language of," so "Chinyanja" means "language of the Nyanja."

The Tumbuku are a Bantu ethnic group. They live in northern Malawi. Their language is Chitumbuku, a Bantu language similar in structure to Swahili. The chief god of Tumbuku traditional religion is Chiuta, an all-powerful, omniscient, self-created being.

The Yao ethnic group lives around the southern end of Lake Malawi. They speak a Bantu language known as Chiyao. Many Malawian Yao also speak Chichewa and English. The Yao are primarily Muslim, and have a rich cultural and musical

heritage. Historically, they had close ties with Arab traders on the coast of Mozambique, and adopted the architecture and religion of the Arabs.

The Tonga live in northern Malawi. Their language is known as Chitonga. Traditionally, Tonga society was based on fishing, with cassava as their staple food. During colonial times, mission education enabled them to earn higher wages; they worked primarily as porters and skilled or semi-skilled workers. Their traditional religion was primarily a religion of the dead, as were many Bantu religions. It centered on the worship of ancestral spirits. The Tonga traditionally believed in diviners and spirit-possession, and they sought out those who communicated with the dead.

The Ngoni people trace their origins to the Zulu of kwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. They were traditionally raiders and cattle-herders who developed effective military tactics and organization. Today, many are Christian, although some still follow their traditional religion.

Other ethnic groups in Malawi include the Ngonde, Sena, and Lomwe tribes. There are also populations of Europeans, mostly of British and Portuguese heritage, and Asians, most of whom are Indian.

### **Religion**

Most Christians in Malawi are either Protestants or Roman Catholics. Christians comprise nearly eighty percent of Malawi's population. Christianity was introduced to Malawi in the 1800s, when Presbyterian missionaries established missions in the country. The African Baptist Assembly of Malawi was formed in 1945. Today, there are over 25,000 Christian congregations in Malawi.

Around 13 percent of Malawians are Muslims. Nearly all Malawian Muslims adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam. There are mosques in every major city in Malawi.

Some Malawians still adhere to traditional African religions. Their beliefs vary depending upon the religious traditions of their tribe.

### **Culture**

Food—A dish of boiled cornmeal known as *nsima* is the staple of Malawian meals, eaten twice a day. Many Malawians prefer *nsima* to rice or potatoes. Malawians eat chicken, goat, and occasionally pork, except Muslims, who will not eat pork. Fruit is very popular, including mangoes, melons, oranges, bananas, and

pineapples. Vegetables are grown, but are not as popular as fruit. Soft drinks, especially Coca-Cola, are very popular. Common alcoholic beverages include beer and *chibuku*, a homemade brew often served in cut-off milk cartons.

**Social status**—Malawians from the northern third of the country have the reputation of being better-educated and more skilled at business. They tend to be distrusted by the population of the southern two-thirds of the country.

**Marriage**—Marriages are often arranged, especially in rural areas. Dowries are traditional; they usually consist of livestock, such as cattle, goats, or chickens, but may also consist of grain or land. They are presented by the bride's parents to the husband-to-be, and play a large role in the selection of a marriage partner—a girl from a well-to-do family is considered a more desirable marriage partner due to the larger dowry her family will be able to provide.

**Education**—Education is generally reserved for those who can afford school fees and uniforms. Most children end their education before high school to help at home or tend younger siblings. College or vocational training is rare, although Chancellor College is a good school and Queen Victoria Hospital has a nursing program. Most families who can afford it will send their children abroad for higher education, usually to the United Kingdom, Germany, or the United States.

**Etiquette**—Residents of Malawi are very friendly, but they are also very respectful of personal privacy. When visiting, they will announce their presence before entering the house. Visitors are nearly always offered a drink and sometimes food. Verbal greetings are accompanied by a handshake.

### **Dress**

Most Malawian men dress in Western styles of clothing, wearing a shirt and trousers. Women often wear traditional styles of dress, which consist of two or three *chitenjes*, large pieces of colored fabric worn as skirts, headdresses, and saronglike wraps used to hold small infants on a woman's back. Shoes are expensive, so many Malawians go barefoot. Color is often representative of geographic region: red is identified with the northern region, blue with central Malawi, and green with the south.

### **Travel/Transportation**

Malawi's main highways are in good condition, although lack of shoulders, potholes, and frequent

bicycle traffic may create obstacles. Secondary roads are often unpaved and in poor condition. During the rainy season, secondary roads are usually impassable except to vehicles with four-wheel drive.

Public transportation consists primarily of minibuses, which can be unreliable. There is a high rate of accidents involving minibuses.

Police roadblocks are common, but properly documented drivers are able to get through them quickly.

Foreigners who intend to remain in Malawi for a length of time are expected to obtain a Malawian driver's license. Malawi will accept an international driving permit (IDP) for shorter-term visitors who wish to drive in Malawi. An IDP is a document which allows a driver to operate a vehicle in another country when accompanied by a valid driver's license from his or her own country.

You can apply for an IDP in the United States or Canada before traveling. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue IDPs. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue IDPs to Canadian citizens. The cost of an IDP is under \$20; the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

### **Illness/Injury**

Medical facilities in Malawi are rudimentary. Many local providers do not speak English. There is a limited availability of medication, and some American medications may not be available at all.

For major medical problems, many travelers choose to seek treatment in South Africa, where advanced medical care is available.

Most health care institutions and clinics will require payment in cash at the time of service. Some may even require payment before treatment is rendered.

### **Crime**

Most crimes against foreigners involve property theft, such as pickpocketing or residential break-ins. Visitors should keep valuables secured and avoid wearing flashy jewelry or overly expensive clothing.

### **Safety and Security**

Malawi has not experienced terrorist attacks or threats. Spontaneous demonstrations related to

student or labor strikes may occur, but are not common.

### **Entry/Exit Requirements**

A passport is required to enter Malawi. U.S. and Canadian citizens traveling to Malawi for tourism or business for 30 days or less may obtain a visa at airports or at land borders. The 30-day visa may be extended an additional 60 days by the Malawi Department of Immigration.

Those planning to volunteer or study should obtain the correct type of visa before traveling. Visitors who plan to be involved with religious activities (such as a mission trip) should obtain a temporary employment visa rather than a tourist visa.

There is an airport departure tax payable in U.S. dollars for all non-Malawians upon departure from the country.

For more information on visas, contact the Embassy of Malawi at 1029 Vermont Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20005.

### **Immunizations**

There are no required immunizations for travelers entering Malawi from the United States or Canada. Travelers entering Malawi from a country where yellow fever is endemic are required to present proof of yellow fever inoculation.

Malaria is a risk in all parts of Malawi. Before entering the country, travelers should complete a course of antimalarial drugs such as atovaquone, doxycycline, or mefloquine. Chloroquine is not an effective antimalarial drug for Malawi.

Other CDC-recommended vaccines include hepatitis A, hepatitis B, typhoid, and polio. Travelers should consult a travel health specialist to determine which vaccines to obtain.

Malawi has a high degree of risk for insect-borne illnesses. Travelers should protect themselves from bites with insect repellent and mosquito netting around beds.

### **Special Circumstances**

Travelers in Malawi are encouraged not to drink tap water, as illnesses such as giardia and hepatitis A are prevalent in Malawi. Bottled water or other bottled drinks are safer alternatives.

Wild animals may pose a danger to safety, especially in game parks. Visitors to game parks should remain in a vehicle and should not traverse the park on foot.

Travelers should take care to follow instructions given by guides.

Credit cards are not usually accepted outside major cities. There are a limited number of ATMs in Malawi; these accept Visa, Mastercard, and international ATM cards.

Although there are no longer dress codes in Malawi, visitors should dress modestly, especially when in rural areas. Women should avoid wearing short skirts and should buy and wear the traditional chitenje (see "Dress" above) when in rural areas. A chitenje can be purchased for around \$5 US and makes a nice wall hanging or table cloth back in North America.

### **Electricity**

Malawi uses 230V/50Hz power, so a power converter will be required to use most American appliances in Malawi. Recently-made cell phone chargers and laptop computers are manufactured to work with different power sources and may not require a converter. Malawi uses type G (rectangular-blade) plugs, so a set of adapter plugs will be necessary to convert American types A and B (flat-blade) plugs to Malawian outlets.