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The Observer Profile

Dr. Hastings Banda

Few recent events have been so clearly foreseen as the catastrophe that has now overtaken Nyasaland. From the time that this Protectorate of three million Africans and 8,000 Europeans was obliged to join the Central African Federation against the will of the Africans, instability was predicted.

When Dr. Hastings K. Banda, the national leader of the Nyasas long resident abroad, went back eight months ago, he returned to a country already in a state of political ferment. He called for a passive resistance movement, if the African demands were not heeded. These demands were for secession from the Federation, and internal self-government.

The colonial administrators of Nyasaland realised the seriousness of the challenge and understood that only major constitutional changes could avoid troubles. But they were helpless to do anything about it. The British Government was apparently committed to support Sir Roy Welensky's Federal Government in resisting any major change in Nyasaland.

Welensky's supporters indicated that they would welcome "a real showdown" with the African nationalists over Nyasaland. Not all agreed: various voices advised letting Nyasaland leave the Federation. But Sir Roy Welensky remained adamant: there were to be no concessions. The clash, therefore, became inevitable.

The arrest of Dr. Banda and of several hundred Congress leaders is now being justified on the allegation that they were planning a massacre of the Europeans. The Government, however, refuses to disclose the evidence in support of this sensational charge.

Is Dr. Banda the sort of man likely to be associated with a Mau Mau-type plot in Nyasaland?

Nothing in his record shows that he has ever favoured violence against Europeans. There is much to show precisely the opposite. In his first speech on his return home last July, he vigorously criticised the anti-European feelings expressed by some Congressmen.

"I am not anti-European," he told the reception committee at the airport. "Still less am I anti-British. I could not be so, having spent the greater part of my life among Europeans. Individually they treated me very, very nicely, and I have nothing against them." And he has continued to speak in this vein.

Equally persistently he has denounced violence as an instrument of policy. "We will conduct our struggle by means of passive resistance," he proclaimed. And at the famous conference in Accra last December he supported non-violent resistance. More recently, he has said that only if Africans are prevented from waging a political campaign by peaceful means would violence be justified.

But Dr. Banda is certainly no moderate. His speeches in recent months have been both militant and extremist. He has given his reason for this. "Moderates," he has explained, "cut no ice in African societies where settler politics operate. The settlers will listen only when they are compelled to do so."

He has justified this reasoning by referring to the experience of the moderate African leaders who campaigned constitutionally in Britain and Central Africa against the imposition of federation. "Where did that moderation get them?" But while publicly proclaiming himself to be an extremist, he wrote recently to a British friend: "If there is any prospect of a political settlement, they will find I can be mild as a lamb."

Hastings Kamuzu Banda was born in 1906, a child of two worlds. His pagan parents called him Kamuzu ("the little root") because his mother's barrenness was ended by the root herbs prescribed by a medicine-man. Later, he himself adopted the name of a missionary he admired, John Hastings. Like most other African nationalist leaders, his career began in a mission school. To this day, he remains a staunch and devout member of the Church of Scotland.

Because Nyasaland could not offer him further education, he took a fantastic decision at the age of twelve. Without spare clothes, money or any companion (and not telling his parents for fear they would stop him) he set off to walk nearly 1,000 miles through wild bush country to the cities of South Africa. His journey took almost a year.

It was during this first stage of wanderings that he decided to become a doctor. The ambition was born of watching over African patients in a hospital where he had found temporary work as a cleaner.

When he finally reached South Africa, he had no money for school. He worked for eight years as interpreter in a compound on the Rand goldfields, where Nyasa labour was employed, studying at night.

He decided to go to the United States after hearing a lecture by the famous American Negro educationalist, Dr. Aggrey. He had managed to save £50 and, with the aid of an American Methodist bishop, set sail hopefully in 1923; he arrived in New York with £2 in his pockets. His Methodist contacts raised a fund among friends "for a very clever African whom it would not be right to let go to waste."

There followed fifteen strenuous years of scraping and hard work to put himself through high school at the Wilberforce Institute, Ohio, and through a succession of universities. He earned fees as a Sunday-school teacher, and always found American friends willing to help him along: Banda has always remained grateful to those white Americans. He was the only non-white student at the University of Chicago, where he obtained his Bachelor of Philosophy degree. Later he qualified as a doctor at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee.

Although much preoccupied by studies, he discovered that he was "a natural political animal." He was strongly attracted by Franklin Roosevelt, and equally strongly repelled by the Communists. By 1938 he felt that America had nothing more to offer him; but he was not yet ready to go home. Instead, he came to Edinburgh, where in 1941 he took his L.R.C.P. He practised medicine during the war years in Liverpool and North Shields, and joined the National Health Service on its first day. Until 1955 he conducted a flourishing practice in the Kilburn area of London with more than 4,000 patients, all Europeans.

© current spelling is Mahany

His modest home in Kilburn soon became a rendezvous for intelligent African students. Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Nkumbula, Botsio and other Africans who later became well known frequently called on "the Doc." His own life was that of a successful and careful bourgeois who neither drank nor smoked.

The others went home and he stayed on: he had early on resolved that he would return only when he could be reasonably assured of his own economic and political independence.

Some doubted whether he would ever return to Africa. But throughout these happy, active years of voluntary exile, he maintained a prodigious correspondence with Nyasas. His letters inspired the creation of a Nyasaland African Congress, which he helped to guide and finance from London. When the polite struggle over the proposed Federation of Central Africa came in 1951, Banda for the first time met the perplexed chiefs and Congressmen who came in self-financed delegations to London to oppose it. His leadership was tacitly accepted.

For the first time, he appeared at public meetings -- a rather small, lean man with lively eyes and close-cropped hair beginning to turn grey. Always carefully dressed like any other doctor, he had a deceptively mild appearance. It hid militant Christian principles and an explosive temperament which expressed itself in table-thumping argument and fast-tumbling words.

Throughout the protracted debate between Westminster and Salisbury, with the Africans never formally consulted, Banda's opposition to federation was unyielding. He quarrelled bitterly with certain Labour Party leaders who wanted him to accept federation. He viewed it as an attempt by the Rhodesian white settlers to establish their control over Central Africa and demanded the continued protection of Britain for Nyasaland.

When federation was imposed in 1953 in spite of the unanimous, but only verbal, opposition of all Africans in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, he exclaimed with deep anger: "The Nyasas have been deceived by people whom they had grown to regard as Christian and honest, and betrayed by a Government which for sixty years they had relied upon as Trustee and Protector."

After a period of near-despair and bitterness, Dr. Banda decided to go to Ghana in 1955 and practise there as a doctor. Politically, this gave him the chance to study an African country grappling with independence. Economically he could add to his capital by practising among the prosperous Ashanti cocoa farmers.

Last year, Sir Roy Welensky announced his intention of demanding independence for the Federation in 1960. The Nyasaland African Congress was riven with rivalries and unable to offer effective resistance. Banda arrived in London from Ghana, having decided to accept the offer to take over the leadership of Congress. He gave Press conferences, called on M.P.s.

His militancy had lost nothing by years of waiting. He left nobody in doubt about his intentions when he embarked for Nyasaland. The whole world, he declared, had rightly condemned Russia for imposing on the Hungarian people a form of government not of their choosing. "That the European settlers want federation is no justification, any more than the fact that a section of the Hungarians wanted the Russian-imposed regime, for imposing an unwanted regime on the African people."

His homecoming was a dramatic occasion. "I am like a Moses come home to my people," he said somewhat melodramatically and deeply moved. Then, patting his