

# Bad media law turns into diplomatic row

 By [Gregory Gondwe](#)

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The clinging of Malawi to poor governance practices that include the enactment of Section 46 of the Penal Code that empowers the information minister to ban any publication, has turned into a diplomatic row between Malawi and the UK.



A leaked cable from the British high commissioner to Malawi Fergus Cochrane-Dyett, published in the *Weekend Nation* of 16 April 2011, faulted President Bingu wa Mutharika for his reluctance to rethink the government's position on the repressive media law and other governance matters.

In reaction, government has declared Cochrane-Dyett 'persona non grata' and ordered him to leave the country. This comes after a week-long tension where the British government was demanding for an official written communication after he was verbally told to leave Malawi by foreign affairs minister Prof. Etta Banda on Monday, 18 April.

## Britain sends Malawi high commissioner packing

In retaliation, the British government has sent packing the acting Malawi high commissioner to the UK Emmie Gomire-Chidyawonga.

British foreign secretary William Hague said the acting high commissioner of Malawi and her dependants must leave the UK at the earliest opportunity.

"It is a worrying sign that the Malawian government is expending its energies in this way, rather than focusing on the real and substantial challenges facing it, including the need for improved governance," said Hague.

An invitation to the Malawian government to a party to celebrate the royal wedding was withdrawn.

## Mutharika, autocratic and intolerant - cable

Cochrane-Dyett is said to have described in the diplomatic cable Malawi's President Bingu wa Mutharika as a combative leader who becoming ever more autocratic and intolerant of criticism: "Government has been besieged for months over allegations of growth authoritarian rule, a bad human rights record and gagging the press," reads the diplomatic telegraph.

Following Cochrane-Dyett's expulsion, Hague said: "I have also asked my officials, working closely with their colleagues elsewhere in government, to review rapidly the full range of our wider relationship with Malawi."

In another development the European Union delegation has issued a statement in agreement with the EU Heads of Mission in Malawi. The statement says the European Union delegation is deeply concerned and surprised about the expulsion of the British high commissioner to Malawi.

The European Union believes that the decision of the Government of Malawi, which is apparently based on unconfirmed media reports and perceived criticisms of the government, is unjustified and inappropriate.

## ABOUT GREGORY GONDWE

Gregory Gondwe is a Malawian journalist who started writing in 1993. He is also a media consultant assisting several international journalists pursuing assignments in Malawi. He holds a Diploma and an Intermediate Certificate in Journalism among other media-related certificates. He can be contacted on [gregorygondwe@gmail.com](mailto:gregorygondwe@gmail.com). Follow him on Twitter at @Kalipochi.

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