In those African countries where the past decade has registered superficial success in instituting liberal democracy, human rights discourses abound. ‘Rights talk’ is spoken by ruling politicians and their donors no less than by the opposition and non-governmental critics and watchdogs. Malawi is a country where the emphasis of rights talk has been on civil and political liberties rather than on socioeconomic rights. Drawing upon ethnographic and sociolinguistic fieldwork among human rights watchdogs and programmes, this paper investigates the effects of these discourses on empowerment in a context ravaged by historical inequalities and impoverishment. Particular attention is given to the fact that some of these non-governmental programmes operate with considerable funding from transnational donors. They represent a mode of governance where certain transnational programmes have resources that virtually exceed those of the State. The paper presents an analysis of the involvement of youths in a particular civic education programme on human rights in Malawi. Rather than being the volatile political force that they are in some countries, youths are pacified by their status as civic educators. The paper presents detailed data on how this pacification is achieved in their training, in their encounters with the so-called ‘grassroots’, and in their depoliticized messages on human rights. A narrow understanding of human rights that assumes hegemonic proportions, the paper concludes, contributes to the continuing disempowerment of the majority in Malawi. The role of donor agencies discloses this process as a mode of transnational governance of an African country.