The paradox of party institutionalization in a liberal era. The cases of Zambia and Malawi

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Abstract
Addressing the question of why it has proven so difficult to institutionalize multiparty democracy in Africa, the paper discusses how political parties in power relate to a political opposition, civil society and its own organization. The paper focuses on one particular kind of governing parties, the pro-democracy movements that in the early 1990s succeeded in ousting former one-party regimes from power. Due to their expressed democratic aims and close links to civil society, the pro-democracy movements were expected to represent a particular democratic trajectory. But, focussing on the cases of Zambia and Malawi, the paper shows that despite four consecutive elections, democracy has not institutionalized to the extent that stable opposition parties have been able to win elections and influence government policies. Parties are characterized by low level of internal democracy and weak links to civil society. The paper argues that the combined effects of political and economic liberalization and the new aid modalities that have given external financial actors a more political role in part explain the limited institutionalization witnessed.
Introduction

A striking characteristic of the multi-party systems across sub-Saharan Africa is the weakness of an institutionalized opposition that actually stands a chance of winning elections. Despite regularized competitive elections, multiparty democracy has failed to institutionalize to the extent that there is certainty about the process and procedures of elections and democracy and uncertainty about outcome (Przeworski 1991, p. 10). Analyses of 120 legislative elections in sub-Saharan Africa between 1989 and 2007 conclude that weakness of opposition parties is a striking characteristic of the multi-party systems in the region: Across Africa’s multiparty systems, competitive political contestation has failed to take root, and even in the countries with the most institutionalized democratic elections, the opposition rarely gains more than 20 per cent of the seats in the legislature (Rakner and van de Walle 2009). Underscoring the democratic challenge, the most institutionalized electoral processes are found in the dominant party regimes (Lindberg, 2008, p. 124). Thus, if democracy is understood as a political system where the opposition wins elections, Africa’s third wave of democracy display some distinct weaknesses. For one thing, the liberal democratic agenda that was advanced in the late 1980s, characterised by pro-democracy movements with strong linkages to civil society, has not developed into institutionalized party systems characterised by routinized party organisations with stable links to civil society. Instead, the countries that democratized in the early 1990s appear ‘stuck in transition’ as hybrid regimes with poorly institutionalized party systems.

Why is it so difficult to establish multiparty democratic process in Africa where a stable opposition exists and stands a real chance of winning an election, and in the event that this would happen, the incumbent would step down? Studies have pointed to three main factors when explaining opposition weakness in sub-Saharan Africa: the incumbency advantage stemming from presidentialist systems and executive dominance; the opposition’s limited access to resources; and the low legitimacy of opposition politics in the region (Rakner and van de Walle, 2009, p. 112).

Incumbent party dominance across Sub Sahara Africa is often associated with misuse of state resources and authoritarian tendencies. The cases of Zambia and Malawi illustrate this general trend of Africa’s ‘third wave democracies’. Both countries experienced change of leadership in the transition elections in 1991 (Zambia) and 1994 (Malawi). Since then, then the two countries have held four multi-party contests and seem ‘on track’ for the democratic consolidation. But, after the transition elections in the 1990s, the incumbent governments in
Zambia and Malawi have ensured that rules and regulations of the electoral process remain uncertain. Institutional reforms have failed to produce influential ‘watchdogs’ and counter-forces against state malpractice and corruption – contrary to what was assumed in democratic theory. As a result, a growing concentration of power in the executive office in has been witnessed. Underscoring the lack of democratic institutionalization, opposition parties have struggled to create lasting viable coalitions. Political parties function as lose organisational set ups characterised by fluid membership and lack of public and transparent sources of funding with the party leader as the main fundraiser. Succession politics appear deeply damaging and significant splits have occurred since the transition elections. Indicating a precarious lack of party system institutionalisation, in the case of Malawi after the May 2009 elections independent candidates is the second largest group in parliament.

The failure of the pro democracy movements to institutionalize
Going back to the democratic transition period in the late 1980s, arguably, there were several reasons to expect that the new governments formed on the basis of pro-democracy movement would develop multiparty competitive electoral systems. First, contrary to the nationalist parties of the 1960 and the liberation movements that formed governments a decade later that had a distinct nation-building agenda, the pro-democracy movements explicitly campaigned to reform the previous one party/military regimes into pluralist multiparty democracies. Contrary to transitions of the independence movements, the pro-democracy movements emerged in a particular international time-period that reflected a global liberal democracy agenda. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the liberal democratic agenda was the dominant ideology. The liberal democratic ideals were also reflected in the institutional make-up of the pro-democracy movements: The pro-democracy movements that succeeded in gaining power in the 1990s were broad coalitions of representative forces from civil society such as churches, trade unions, academia, law associations and business associations.

Nevertheless, the paper argues that the pro-democracy movements that became governing parties as part of the third wave of democracy faced exceptionally strong challenges of institutionalizing. Unlike other ‘transition movements’, the pro-democracy movements that gained power in the early 1990s faced the challenge of institutionalizing as political parties in a competitive ‘market place’, they could not build party institutions in a monopoly situation. The combined processes of political and economic liberalization that characterized the third wave transitions dismantled former structures that had forged regularized interactions
between business, labour and the party (one party government). Privatization processes (as part of the economic reform agenda) meant that the incumbent party could no longer rely on funding from state-owned companies to finance its operations. Political liberalisation also meant that member-based organisational structures that had provided the organisational base of the pro-democracy movement (business that was regularized in state-owned industries and trade unions with monopoly powers) was replaced by a new form of civil society, the non governmental organisations. The new NGOs that emerged had limited ties to a membership and political parties.

Much of the literature on transitions to democracy during the “third wave” has tended to focus on the internal dynamics of change and paid limited attention to the role played by outside forces in shaping the processes of transition. This is surprising as since the early 1900s democracy related aid has become one of the largest sectors of international development assistance. The role of external factors was especially strong with regard to the transitions to democracy in Africa. These transitions were the result not only of the determination of national political actors but also of pressures and incentives coming from the outside (for example, withholding aid from repressive regimes). But, illustrated by the cases of Zambia and Malawi, the paper will show that donor assistance has not reduced executive dominance over political processes in sub-Saharan Africa’s new democracies. Rather, the new aid modalities introduced since the early 1990s have enhanced the power of the executive and enabled incumbent governments to maintain a strong degree of top-down control based on patronage politics.

The paper is organised as follows: Following this introduction, section two reviews the main literature on party institutionalization linked to sub-Sahara Africa. Section three analyses the development of the party system and level of party institutionalization in Zambia and Malawi since the democratic transition in 1991 and 1993/94. Section four discusses the effects of political and economic liberalisation and international aid on party and party system institutionalization. A concluding section summarises the main arguments.

**Institutionalizing democracy: The role of political parties**

According to democratic theory, the presence of a stable and numerically viable opposition in the legislature is a key requisite for horizontal accountability, through legislative checks on executive power. The ability of the opposition to win elections is therefore largely a function
of the degree of democracy existing in the political system (Przeworski 1991). The ability of opposition parties to compete politically is a significant indicator of the level of democracy that is present in the political system (Carey and Reynolds 2007; Rakner and van de Walle 2009). From here it follows that political parties are necessary institutions due to their functions, such as candidate nomination, electoral mobilisation, issue structuring, social representation, interest aggregation, forming and sustaining governments and social integration.

Party and party system institutionalization

The party literature distinguishes between party institutionalization and party system institutionalization (Randall and Svåsand 2002). Party institutionalization refers to the endurance and routinization of organizations and a party is considered institutionalized if it is able to survive across time. The political parties should be durable institutions in order to perform some of the critical functions attributed to them, primarily candidate nomination, interest aggregation, policy orientation, and forming the government/opposition. Institutional endurance is also linked to routinized organisation, in other words an institutionalised party is defined by a formal party structure that operate according to the party’s statutes with regularized procedures for the election of office holders and nomination of candidates.

Party system institutionalization refers the continuity among party alternatives competing for votes and the ability of parties to dominate the recruitment process to political offices. First, parties should be able to aggregate different policy preferences into a cohesive programme with variations in policy orientation between the parties. As parties develop cohesive and separate policy orientations, the party system institutionalises and a pattern of competition and cooperation is expected to emerge that defines the roles of governmental and opposition parties. For parties to present aggregate and coherent policy alternatives, the party system must display stability across time in order for voters to hold parties to account from one election to the next. Thus, in an institutionalized party system, the parties become the main channel for political recruitment and as a party system institutionalizes, the number of independents running for office should decline.

The party literature on emerging democracies has only to a limited extent problematized the fact that the foundation for parties in many new democracies is radically different from the old democracies. In established democracies the development of the party system took place
over a long period of time, generated and supported by a mixture of politicization of social, cultural, territorial and economic cleavages and the gradual development of democratic institutions, suffrage, the introduction of parliamentary government, and electoral systems arrangements; all primarily driven by domestic actors and processes. The result of this gradual process was a structured party system with predominantly hierarchically organised party organisations based on mass membership and relatively systematic links between political parties and interest groups. These linkages provided parties with resources needed to sustain them, such as manpower, finance, and ideological commitment.

Africa’s pro-democracy movements: Democratization backwards

In newer democracies, in contrast, the development of parties takes place in completely different contexts. Rose and Shin refer to this phenomenon as ‘democratization backwards’: competitive elections based on general suffrage and the availability of mass media are introduced without the presence of basic institutions in a democracy, including well organised political parties (2001). The challenges of democratizing backwards appear particularly acute for Africa’s ‘third wave democracies’. As argued above, functioning democracies require an institutionalized party system to the extent that voters are able to choose between alternative parties and that they should be able to pass a vote on the basis of the parties’ performance in previous elections. Underlining the weakness of African opposition parties, it is striking how many parties that changes from one election to the next. Lindberg has compiled the number of parties registered in legislative elections in 44 sub-Saharan Africa countries (2008). While the number ranges from a low of seven (Botswana) to the 100 registered parties in Congo (DRC), more than half of the multiparty democracies in the region are reported to have more than 15 registered parties in legislative elections. In only a handful African countries have the same parties – apart from the incumbent- contested all three (or four) elections since multiparty elections where reinstituted. In Zambia only the party that won the first multi-party elections in 1991, MMD has contested all four legislative elections since 1991. Further underscoring the limited the institutionalization of the party system, in a number of countries in the region independent candidates have constituted more than 10 per cent of Members of Parliament (Rakner and van de Walle 2009).

The role of international aid

In contrast to the development in the established Western democracies where domestic variables for the most part determined the paths of democratic development as well as
national economic developments, in new democracies international actors are important for national economic as well as political developments. Over time international actors have become increasingly involved in promoting initiatives that are supposed to spur a development of democratic institutions and processes that one assumes would not happen, or at least would not happen as quickly, unless aided or supported from abroad.

More than any other region of the world, Africa’s political transitions have been influenced by pressure for change formulated by the international donor community. Aided by a democratic demonstration effect and increased legitimacy of liberal democracy associated with the end of the cold war, in the 1990s Official Development Assistance (ODA) became linked to processes of political liberalization (Harbeson 2000; Levitsky and Way 2006). This increased support for democracy and human rights promotion by the donor community marked a shift in donor behavior – from previously having assumed non-interference in other countries’ political affairs (Lancaster 2007). While aggregate figures on the amount of democracy related aid are lacking, it is estimated that democracy promotion financed by donor agencies now accounts for between 5 and 10 per cent of total official development assistance (Burnell 2005). The democratic aims of the international actors in the early 1990 were based in a model of pluralism. By reintroducing democratic constitutions and multiparty systems of rule, interest groups were expected to be autonomous and able to freely channel their concerns to government. Initially, development assistance to civil society was given priority because non governmental organizations performed many of the same roles as political parties (such as representing interests, building participation, and checking the power of the state) but ostensibly in a non-partisan way. As a result, donors often focused on particular types of social organisation (urban-based and poorly rooted in society, top-down rather than grassroots, trustee rather than representative organisations and heavily reliant on external funding for their continued existence) and, as a result, bypassed other significant agents of social and political change. According to Carothers, the form of civil society favored by democracy assistance programs had a small membership without a mandate from a wider constituency (2006).

The form of ODA provided to aid democratization processes in sub-Sahara Africa since the 1990s has affected party institutionalization significantly. First, democracy assistance has only very recently been provided to political parties, and party assistance remains a marginal part of the overall democracy assistance (Carothers, 2006). Second, the new aid modalities
introduced first as conditionality based lending and later as various forms of budget support mechanism have meant that the main part of aid allocations have been channeled through the executive branch of government. In many aid-dependent African countries aid funds contribute close to 40 per cent of the government budget and almost the entire development budget. The implications of the growing part of international assistance channeled through and controlled by the executive office for the development of opposition parties and credibly alternative political platforms have received surprisingly little attention in the scholarship on Africa’s democratic development.

In the following, the discussion will focus on the interrelated effects of internal and external actors that have shaped the political developments in Zambia and Malawi since the early 1990s. Let us first consider the extent of party and party system institutionalization since the transition elections in the early 1990s.

**Institutionalization of democracy in Zambia and Malawi: The role of political parties**

According to Carey and Reynolds, the origins of a governing party and the form of movement or organization they developed from, explain the viability of the new party in delivering accountable government and relating to the opposition (Carey and Reynolds 2007, 256). Specifically, party origins are considered to impact on the ability of parties to institutionalize to the extent that they develop programmatic platforms and party discipline. Distinguishing seven forms of transition movements in Africa’s new democracies\(^1\), they argue that governing parties that begin as labor movements due to their membership driven organization and grass root organization, provide a potential foundation for an institutionalized party and party system. Parties riding to power on an explicit pro-democracy wave in replacing a previous one party regime, however, are considered to have lower prospects for developing programmatic policies due to their fragmented membership-base.

**Party institutionalization in Zambia**

Interestingly, Zambia’s 1991 transition may be placed in both categories. In 1991 Zambia experienced a peaceful transfer of power from the one-party government of United National Independence party (UNIP) in a multiparty election and served as a model of African democratization: An electoral turnover without violence, in which the incumbent party was replaced by a cross-ethnic pro-democracy movement, Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) (Ihonvebere 1995; Gould 2002). The opposition’s surprising success in the first
multiparty elections has been attributed to the organizational reach and mobilizing success of trade union structures, Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) (Rakner 2003; Lebas 2005). But while the trade union movement provided the organization base for the MMD, the democratic transition in Zambia was characterized as a broad pro-democracy structure united on the desire to oust the one party government from office. The success of MMD in the 1991 transition elections also hinged on its ability to incorporate a wide range of societal actors, such as students, churches and business interests. In part, the multifaceted societal base of MMD also contributed to its fragmentation. Over time, rather than institutionalising, the Zambian party system fragmented with the number of registered parties and independent candidates increasing. Problems of succession and executive dominance appear to drive political party formation because the strong emphasis on party leadership has challenged multiparty dialogue.

Describing the limited institutionalization of the MMD, LeBas argues that the top-down character of party policy formulation witnessed in MMD is a reflection of the way the party was organised from the beginning: The lines between local branches and national leadership were ad-hoc, the local MMD activists were not involved or consulted on national policies (LeBas 2005, p. 136). Increasingly showing more the tendencies of the pro-democracy movement than a labour based organisation, MMD was neither a participatory party nor an elite controlled top-down party. The party leaders never emphasized intra-party discipline. As a result, and as argued above, succession politics appear deeply damaging and have caused significant splits.

Party institutionalization in Malawi
Malawi’s pro-democracy movement United Democratic Front (UDF) fits Carey and Reynolds category of parties riding to power on an explicit pro-democracy wave in replacing a previous one party regime. Four multi party elections have been organised and a democratic constitution with a strong presidency has been in place since 1994. Until the run-up to the 2004 elections, a regional based three party system dominated. Following the 2004 elections, the three party system fragmented and several new parties appeared as aspiring presidential candidates defected from their ‘original’ parties after having lost the bid to be nominated while others were formed as a result of frustration with the way the UDF controlled government developed. By the time of the 2004 elections, a succession crisis mounted as the incumbent president, President Muluzi, was barred from running again, after an unsuccessful
attempt to lift the term limitations. Failing to amend the constitution, Bingu wa Mutharika, an outsider to the UDF was hand-picked by Muluzi to be the UDF presidential candidate. Shortly after the election relations between the new president and the president of UDP, Muluzi, deteriorated. In order to pre-empt a decision by UDF to expel him from the party, Mutharika resigned and formed a new party, the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party). Without a single elected official at the local level and no national convention, the DPP party and Mutharika won the 2009 elections with a significant majority. Underlining the low level of institutionalization of party system, in the 2004 and 2009 elections a record number of independent candidates have contested the parliamentary elections.

The President’s new party, DPP does not have a distinct party identification it is simply a loose coalition of people interested in the spoils of the state. It has never had a convention, not even a founding one. All DPP officials are appointed by the President and none have been elected to their offices. The party leadership in the two main ‘opposition parties’, UDF and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) have also tried to avoid challengers by claiming that no convention is necessary because there is a ‘natural’ incumbent leadership. Thus, although the parties exist as formal institutions, all political parties in Malawi are characterized by a total breakdown of internal party procedures.

‘De-institutionalization’ of the pro-democracy movements
The distinction between the origin of the pro-democracy movements raised by Carey and Reynolds (2007) is confirmed in the cases of Zambia and Malawi. There are more regular party conventions in Zambian than in Malawi and although there are also a number of independent candidates in Zambia, it is on a smaller scale than in Malawi. While succession has lead to several splits of MMD, MMD is not tied to ‘an owner’ the way UDF appears linked to Baliki Muluzi. Above all, MMD has survived as an incumbent party, whereas UDF became an opposition party when President Mutharika left the party in 2005 and formed his own party (DPP). However, both pro democracy movements are weakly institutionalized political systems. In both countries problems of succession and executive dominance appear to drive political party formation due to the emphasis on party leadership and challenges of multiparty dialogue. The party programs show that the party systems cannot be characterized as polarized along a left-right dimension. On economic issues all the main parties tend to favor market-oriented policies. The party manifestos suggest that the parties in both Malawi and Zambia fail to offer the electorate distinctive choices along the dimensions of economic
policy and democratic reforms. Lack of clearly identified issue ownership inhibits the parties’ ability to attract a stable electorate and may also make it easier for politicians to switch between parties.

In both cases, the president’s prerogatives in terms of allocating government resources seem important for individual MP’s tendency to support the president in exchange for increased resources for their constituencies. The incumbents in Malawi and Zambia have since the transition elections preferred to build coalitions with individual opposition MP’s rather than the parties to secure support. As a result, the party systems of Zambia and Malawi display unsettled forms of party competition characterized by turnover from one election to another in terms of party alternatives and the lack of a clear constellation of governmental alternatives to that of the incumbent.

In sum, the political parties, which in democratic theory provide the glue linking the formal political institutions together, do not function in this way in Malawi and Zambia. In Malawi, parties are registered and de-registered at the whims of their leaders (Rakner et. Al 2007). Party candidates and MPs shift party allegiance when new opportunities arise. Formal party statutes are regularly ignored. In its place political leaders dominate. Due in large parts to the fluidity of parties and party alliances, the parliament is restrained from executing its constitutional role. The parties in Malawi and Zambia portray the range of political outcomes in African democracies, starting with electoral turnover with a cohesive movement-party and ending with a fragmented and ineffectual party dominance ten years later.

Turning now to address the puzzle of party decline in Zambia and Malawi in the 1990s, the discussion returns to the pluralist reform agenda at the time of transition. As the discussion will show, the dual processes of economic and political reforms, and the role of the international donors in the processes of reforms largely contradicted the aims of party institutionalization.

The paradox of institutionalizing in a liberal environment
After the 1991 and 1994 Zambia and Malawi were considered to hold great prospects for a democratic renewal: Electoral turnovers without violence, in which the incumbent party was replaced by a cross-ethnic pro-democracy movement that in its election campaign promised to
reform a stagnant economy that for a decade had an ‘off on’ relationship with its main international donors.

The effects of economic and political liberalization on party institutionalization

Addressing the weakness of opposition parties in Africa, Olukoshi argues that opposition parties’ misfortunes in part are related to the lack of policy alternatives caused by the imposition of structural adjustment policies that characterised the relationship between African indebted governments and the international donor community since the 1980s (Olokushi 1998). Manning also relates the lack of programmatic policy formation by African political parties to the structural adjustment agenda and argues that high aid dependency has resulted in all political contenders being constrained by the same economic model and political parameters (Manning 2005, p. 716).

Zambian and Malawian political developments in the 1990s largely support these claims. The MMD and UDF were formed quickly, without a prolonged discussion of policy platforms and positions and there was no agreement on the movements’ aims or its internal governance. For Zambia, Bratton notes that the MMD “often pushed local preferences aside, creating an unfortunate precedent of arbitrary, patrimonial decision-making” (Bratton 1994, p. 118). Local MMD activists, including the trade unionists that had played such an integral role in the organization of the movement, were replaced by individuals with connections to the MMD’s National Executive Committee or with money to fund their own election campaigns (Larmer 2005). In office, MMD ministers and MPs participated in the same practices as their UNIP predecessors: Szeftel suggests that corruption may even have been exacerbated during the first MMD administration by the party’s narrow definition of corruption, by Chiluba’s “laissez faire attitude to punishing corruption,” and by the opportunities provided by privatization and economic reform for those connected to government (Szeftel 2000).

The case of Malawi portrays even more leadership oriented politics after the 1994 transition. In the case of Malawi, the informality linked to patronage politics is compounded by a weak and declining economy and limited private sector. The private sector is weak and characterised as a loose coalition of individual politicians cum businessmen (Rakner et al., 2004). Political position is primary the route to business opportunities (licences, contracts with the state and donors) and this has been the driving force in the fragmentation of the
party system as well as in the commercialisation of Malawian politics. The Malawian parties have increasingly become mere vehicles for individual candidates to get into potentially lucrative positions. When political office becomes central to business opportunities, it hampers the development of a private sector based middle class that can serve as a countervailing force to self-seeking political behaviour. The case of Malawi illustrates that as chief executive of the state holds the key to the economy, and he then decides who will get what contracts.

Common for both Malawi and Zambia, contrary to the expectations of pluralist theory, the combined processes of political and economic liberalization did not induce the pro-democracy governments to form ties to domestic interest groups in the period after the transition elections. On the contrary, in the period after 1991 the institutionalized relationship between government and interest groups established in the one-party era was discontinued. Despite a disastrous economic situation for most of the post-transition period, the MMD government has not faced an opposition that seriously has challenged its economic policies in the period after the 1991 elections (Rakner 2003). Similarly, in Malawi, four legislative and presidential elections have suggested that the presence of close to forty parties and well over three hundred non-governmental associations to date has not been able to challenge the power of the incumbent government. Paradoxically, political and economic liberalization appears to have increased the autonomy of the incumbent. Stressing continuity over change, the trajectories of the pro-democracy movements turning government in Zambia and Malawi suggest that practices associated with the one-party rule of power centralisation in the executive office and use of patronage for political gain may prevail within the formal structures of a multiparty democracy and a market economy.

The effects of international actors and aid modalities
Financial aid to Zambia and Malawi has since the 1980s been tied to the implementation of economic reforms. By the early 1990s the international donor community had become an important advocate for pluralism in Africa. Linked to the new emphasis on political reform processes donor assistance to this area expanded rapidly during the 1990s, and the international pressure to reform the one-party states clearly influenced aid to Malawi and Zambia as nearly all bilateral donors insisted on the introduction of multi-party systems as a condition for aid.
In terms of economic reform, Zambia and Malawi post 1990 is characterized by a ‘partial reform syndrome’ suggesting that political leaders only carry out reforms that do not hurt their own vested interests. Moreover, the reform implementation has suggested that if a recipient government at least in part follows the economic policy prescriptions, lack of adherence to principles of democracy and good governance will not be challenged by the donors. Donor support to political parties and parliament has been limited compared to the amount of support going to the government in budget support. Largely bypassing formal political processes and institutions, donors have entered into binding poverty reduction strategy processes and aid alignments of the government’s development plans that have not been discussed by political parties – or passed by parliament. These examples illustrate how governance support risks undermining central democratic processes, and enhancing the position of the incumbent. Support to civil society is often considered ‘risk free’ and large sums of donor money can be allocated governance without risking entering into ‘the minefield’ of politics. As a result, international financial assistance has played a major role in replacing a formerly interest group based civil society centered around the trade unions, churches and business associations with a civil society of professional and issue based NGOs financed by grants from international donors.

The lack of attention to party institutionalization by the international donor community is illustrated by the fact that during the initial phases of political party support, organisations worked to support Zambian political parties through the central NGOs (Carothers 2006). Underscoring the problems of institutionalizing party-interest group ties in a context of aid-dependency, Zambian party representatives refer to civil society associations as political actors that are regarded as competitors for funding and political attention. In lack of ties between civil society and the pro democracy government/movement is even more pronounced in Malawi. Civil society itself is weak in Malawi. Civil society organizations are regulated in the NGO act and in the NGO code of conduct it is stated that “NGOs shall observe the principal of political non-partisanship in their operations” (NGO Code of Conduct for Malawi, 1997). There are also other reasons for why civil society and parties are kept apart. Party politics does not have a high status in Malawi and the parties are among the least appreciated institutions. Civil society organizations are also very much dependent on international support for their programs. It may therefore be more important for them to establish links to international donors than to political parties. Thus, rather than seeing
parties/civil society as indispensable alliances, in many instances party and civil society representatives noted that the two compete for political terrain and international resources.

**Conclusion**

The discussion above has addressed a paradox in the debate about democratic institutionalization in sub-Saharan Africa: Why is it that the political systems that have moved farthest in terms of democratic institutionalisation are the dominant party states? Why have not the pro-democracy movements that gained power in the 1990s been able to institutionalize to the extent that viable, stable opposition parties have been able to win elections and influence/check government policies? Addressing these questions, the paper has focussed on the process of party and party system institutionalization in Zambia and Malawi, two of the countries in the region that saw a pro-democracy movement becoming government in the early 1990s. Revisiting the political debates around the time of transition, the paper has addressed the inbuilt contradictions in the pluralist aims of the pro-democracy movements and the international donor community and the party institutionalization literature. Using the cases of Zambia and Malawi as illustrative cases, the paper has argued that the combined processes of political and economic liberalization largely contradict the aims of party institutionalization. The pro-democracy movements that turned into parties have not been able to form viable institutional links with civil society or party members. This again has hampered the development of an institutionalized party system.

Much of the literature discussed above on transitions to democracy during the “third wave” has tended to focus on the internal dynamics of change and has paid less attention to the role played by outside forces in shaping such processes. The discussion above has emphasized how external actors and external funding streams affect domestic power relations. Again, with the case of Zambia and Malawi as illustrations, the paper has emphasized how the international donor community through political conditionality and democracy assistance since the 1990s has become central political actors in sub-Saharan Africa. While donor assistance has succeeded in changing the organisational landscape of many countries, it is less clear that democracy assistance has succeeded in stimulating the emergence and/or further development of an active and vibrant home-grown civil society. Contrary to civil society, political parties were for a long time neglected by the international community as donors were reluctant to engage in work that is perceived as directly involved in domestic political
processes. Most studies addressing the weakness of opposition parties in Africa have pointed to the incumbency advantage stemming presidentialism and executive dominance. This paper has argued that in part the liberal political agenda and conditionality based aid of the international donor community have enhanced the powers of the executive, and the ‘premium of incumbency’. The general tendency of aid to support incumbent regimes and rely on agreements with the executive have contributed to the entrenchment of power within the executive and to an extent undermined other efforts at strengthening domestic accountability mechanisms.

Where does this conclusion lead in terms of the overall debate about democratization and opposition parties in Africa? It is certainly not a call for a return to the ‘bad old days of dictatorship’, or a romanticized version of the state controlled economies of the African economies before 1980. Rather, the aim has been to highlight the inherent contradictions in the democratic transitions of the 1990s. The process of democratization ‘backwards’ where competitive elections based on general suffrage and the availability of mass media are introduced without the presence of basic institutions in a democracy, including well organised political parties, has underplayed the complexities of institutionalizing party structures in a ‘competitive political marked-place’.

References


**Endnotes**

1 They identify seven forms of party origins in sub Saharan Africa: Military, ethnic associations, labor unions, one party state, liberation movements, pro-democracy activists, alliances to win power, Carey and Reynolds, *Parties and accountability*, pp. 266-271.

2 Personal interview, party representatives of MMD, UNIP and PF, Lusaka, February 9, 2009.