Lars Svåsand,
Department of Comparative Politics
University of Bergen

Opposition in Malawi: what does it mean and how can opposition parties win office?
Introduction.

In the preface to the seminal volume on political opposition in Western democracies, Robert A. Dahl offered the following definition of what the concept of opposition means:

"suppose that A determines the conduct of some aspect of the government of a particular political system during some interval.....Supposed that during this interval B cannot determine the conduct of the government, and that B is opposed to the conduct of the government by A. Then B is what we mean by “an opposition” (Dahl, 1966) xvi).

This definition has three elements:
- that there are at least two actors in a democracy, A and B. (A and B are in democracies represented by political parties),
- an actor who cannot determine the content of government policy constitute the opposition,
- A’s and B’s roles are delimited by a time interval.

In this paper I will apply Dahl’s concept to the study of opposition in Malawi, discussing the problems of transferring this concept to the study of the Malawian polity.

Using the three elements I identify the A’s and B’s during the time after the fall of the Banda regime.

I discuss three issues concerning the opposition – government divide:
a) which parties constitutes ‘the opposition’ in the post-Banda period? 
b) what is it that the opposition (B) wants that is different from the government (A)?, and 
c) under what circumstances can the opposition (B) replace the incumbent government (A)?

The first topic identifies the units that qualify as the ‘opposition’. Fragmentation is the key word characterizing the opposition.

The second of the issues takes as the point of departure that opposition implies a party – or set of parties - that offer a policy package that differs from the incumbent. A brief examination
of party policy, as promoted in the electoral manifestos, indicate that the new DPP does differ in some ways from the other parties.

The third issue outlines some of the factors that impact on the chances for an opposition to replace the incumbent regime. Here three sets of factors are discussed: a) macro-level characteristics of the political system, including the organizing of elections, b) meso-level factors, such as the structure of the opposition parties and party system, with an emphasis on fragmentation and organizational problems, c) micro-level factors: how the electorate perceives political issues and evaluates the presidents’ performance.

This paper emphasizes the formal aspects of political opposition; the legal frameworks and the structure of the political institutions and formal processes, such as elections. However, the status of opposition is also strongly impacted by the practices of the government, as well as by the opposition parties themselves. I discuss this in the concluding paragraph.

**The concept of opposition and Malawian politics.**

In this section I use Dahl’s definition to identify ‘the opposition’ in Malawi. The section includes an overview of the number of registered parties over time, their ability to nominate candidates and the problems of distinguishing between parties inside and outside of the government, which in Dahl’s concept is the key element in the definition of the concept.

Dahl’s three elements of opposition are: 1) that there are at least two actors in a democracy, A and B. (A and B are in democracies represented by political parties), 2) that an actor who cannot determine the content of government policy constitute the opposition, and 3) A’s and B’s roles are delimited by a time interval, has a focus on the role of political parties. This will also be the focus of this paper. I acknowledge that opposition to the government of the day can also be found in other types of collective actors, but the crucial point about opposition **parties** is that they are the only ones who can replace an incumbent party through a democratic electoral process. ‘Opposition’ is also a recognized in the Malawian parliament’s Statutory Order, which defines the Leader of the Opposition as:
“the parliamentary leader of the largest party, elected by the parliamentary membership, which is not in Government or in coalition with a Government party, and who is recognized by the Speaker as such;” (Malawi, 2003)¹

The Leader of the Opposition is awarded several prerogatives, in terms of speaking time and remunerations from the government, similar to members of the cabinet. Also other opposition parties are recognized in the statutory orders. Formally therefore, ‘opposition’ in the Malawian polity corresponds closely to Dahl’s concept. Nevertheless, the party system in Malawi and the individual parties fit less elegantly into the government-opposition dichotomy as understood in Western democracies. One of the reasons for this is the implicit assumption in the studies of parties in established democracies that parties can be considered as unitary actors that are held together by a combination of ideological cohesiveness and accepted organizational procedures. These two conditions are not present in Malawi.

**The parties in Malawi**

Political parties are in this context those organizations that are registered as such under Malawian law and which present at elections candidates running for offices to be filled in presidential and parliamentary elections. This part of the party concept is both simple and problematic when applied to Malawi. There exists a formal registry of political parties, but as we shall see, only some of the many registered parties are able to field candidates for all offices.

Table 1 Registered parties, 1994-2009²

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<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFORD, UDF, UFMD, MDP, MNDP, MCP, MDU, CSR</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDP (later changed to SDP), NPF, NUP, MFP, PDP, LP, UP (cancelled in 08.02.2002), SNDP, FP, MMY, NSM, CoNU,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NIP, MAFUNDE, PFP, PETRA, NDA, (cancelled on 09.08.04) New Dawn for Africa, PPM, PF, MGO, Mtendere Ufulu Party, The RP, NCD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDP, DPP, NRP, MPP, NARC, CODE,</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

¹ Immediately after the 2009 election DPP used its majority to change the election of the Leader of Opposition to include all MPs as legitimate participants in the election. This change was overturned by the courts.
² Table from (Magolowondo & Svåsand, 2009)
Table 1 displays the number of parties formed since 1994, during each electoral term. The party system has become increasingly fractionalized, at least at the formal level, in front of and following the election in 2004 (Lise Rakner, Svåsand, & Khembo, 2007).

Since the 2009 elections, three additional parties have been formed:
- National Salvation Front (NASF). NASF’s leader, James Nyondo ran as an independent presidential candidate in 2009,
- People’s Development Movement (PDM). PDM was formed by politicians defecting, or expelled from, DPP, following opposition inside the DPP, particularly from the Northern region in Malawi,
- People’s Party (PP). PP is lead by the vice-president of Malawi, Joyce Banda, who was expelled from DPP in December 2010, but has also attracted politicians from UDF and other parties.

Thus, the party system, at a formal level, continues to expand numerically and by implication also the number of opposition parties. There are almost five times as many parties today, as at the start of the multi party era. Whether or not this also means that the party system offers more choices in terms of policies is more disputable, but which can not be assessed further here.

*The opposition parties in Malawi*

Dahl’s concept links opposition to lack of control of government policy. Thus, any political party that does not have any members of government at a given time point, constitutes an opposition party. Since there are far more parties in total than in the parliament, we will first make a distinction between extra-parliamentary and parliamentary opposition parties. Across time, we find that many of the registered parties have never succeeded in electing a single member to parliament.

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5 The party applied for registration April 4, 2011, but is yet to be registered.
The number of registered parties increased fourfold from 1994 to 2009, but their capacity to field candidates diminished (table 2). In 2004 and 2009 slightly less than half the registered parties contested at least in one constituency. Due to the FPTP electoral system, most of the parties running, have never won a seat. Thus, the party system contains – in theory – a significant number of parties that could form the basis for an opposition inside parliament, provided they first were able to contest in a number of constituencies – and win. But, of the 16 parties fielding at least one candidate in the parliamentary election in 2009, only six succeeded in winning at least one seat. Thus, there are a large number of opposition parties that are marginally located in the political process.

Among those that have been represented in parliament, we find three types of parties with regard to the opposition-government distinction since 1994:

- parties that have always been in opposition, (MCP, PPM, PETRA, MAFUNDE, MGODE, MPP),
- parties that have sometimes been in government, and sometimes in opposition (UDF (1994-2005), AFORD (1995-1996),
- parties that have been in government since their founding; DDP (2005- present).

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6 Table from  (Magolowondo & Svåsand, 2009)
First a brief note about what constitutes ‘the government’. Malawi is a presidential system. The presidency is the most important political office in terms of de jure and de facto power. Of direct consequence for our discussion is his prerogative to appoint and dismiss cabinet members. Cabinets may therefore include members from other parties than the president’s own, without there being a formal coalition agreement between parties. UDF won the three first presidential contests, 1994, 1999, and 2004, but without a majority of MPs, while Mutharika’s DPP party won the 2009 election.

Second, only the parliamentary elections in 2009 election lead to a majority for the governing party, all other elections have resulted in a minority of seats for the president’s party in parliament. In established parliamentary democracies it is common to classify governments along two dimensions, each with two categories. One dimension refers to the party composition of the government; one-party vs. coalition governments. The second dimension distinguishes between governments according to their parliamentary support: majority vs. minority governments. Table 4 displays the types of governments in Malawi since 1994, along these two dimensions.

Table 3. Governments in Malawi 1994-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of governments</th>
<th>Single party</th>
<th>Coalition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>DPP (May 2009-)</td>
<td>UDF + AFORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Basis</td>
<td></td>
<td>(July 1995- June 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>UDF (1994-July 1995,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DPP (Feb. 2005-May 2009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 The majority-minority categories are more complicated in real life as a government may enjoy majority support without being in coalition. Parties in parliament may agree to support a minority based single party government, Similarly some analysts of coalition governments distinguishes between majority governments and oversized governments. The former includes parties with more than 50 percent of parliamentary seats, while oversized governments include more parties than needed to have a majority support.

8 The DPP government 2005-2009 has been classified as a single party, minority government because DPP was formed after the 2004 election, and thus had no elected MPs supporting it in parliament. The government survived because many former UDF members decided to join the new party together with many elected as independents, and a few also from other parties. However, it remained unclear exactly how many members that
As we see there is one type of government; coalition government with minority support, that has never occurred. There is also only one case of a coalition government, that between UDF and AFORD from July 1995 to June 1996. However, already in September 2004 the party leader of AFORD and five other MPs had joined the UDF cabinet. The decision to enter into a coalition was apparently taken by the party leader himself, without consulting the party organization, creating a split in the party. The same division occurred when the coalition formally collapsed after less then a year. Several AFORD members, the party leader included, nevertheless continued in government. Thus, AFORD officially became an opposition party, but its leadership continued in the government at the same time (Kibasala, 2010).

Most of the time since the re-introduction of multi party system, Malawi has been governed by single party minority governments. This has been possible due to the strong presidential powers, which has enabled the incumbent party to muster majorities from time to time with the help of other parties. The 2004 election illustrates this well (Table 5)

In 2004 the incumbent party, UDF won only 49 out of 193 seats. Nevertheless, it was impossible for the opposition parties to coalesce to form a government for two reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party/Coalition</th>
<th>Number of Votes</th>
<th>% of Votes</th>
<th>Number of Seats (193)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malawi Congress Party (MCP)</td>
<td>785,671</td>
<td>24.85%</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Democratic Front (UDF)</td>
<td>801,200</td>
<td>25.34%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mgwirizano Coalition*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Party (RP)</td>
<td>(231,002)</td>
<td>(7.31%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People's Progressive Movement (PPM)</td>
<td>(98,548)</td>
<td>(3.12%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement for Genuine Democratic Change (MGODE)</td>
<td>(53,127)</td>
<td>(1.68%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People's Transformation Party (PETRA)</td>
<td>(21,153)</td>
<td>(0.67%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Democratic Alliance (NDA)</td>
<td>256,713</td>
<td>8.12%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance for Democracy (AFORD)</td>
<td>114,017</td>
<td>3.61%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress for National Unity (CONU)</td>
<td>7,410</td>
<td>0.23%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>26,609</td>
<td>0.84%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>766,137</td>
<td>24.23%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Malawi Forum for Unity and Development (MAFUNDE), National Unity Party (NUP), and Malawi Democratic Party (MDP) were also members of the Mgwirizano Coalition, but didn't win any seats in the election. Since the number and percentage of votes received by candidates of these parties isn't available, complete figures regarding the number and percentage of votes received by the Mgwirizano Coalition cannot be determined.

**Polling was postponed in six of the 193 districts due to errors with ballot papers.

- Source [http://africanelections.tripod.com/mw.html](http://africanelections.tripod.com/mw.html) (accessed 10.05.11)

formally joined the DPP parliamentary group and there was no formal coalition agreement between DPP and other parties.
First, it is the president who selects his cabinet. There exists therefore no formal mechanism which enables the parties in parliament to establish a government. Second, the strength of opposition ‘evaporated’ soon after the elections. This evaporation occurred when most of the independents joined the UDF caucus; the party most of them had belonged to prior to the election. Also the Mgwirizano coalition fell apart almost immediately when their presidential candidate, who was also president of the Republican Party (RP) joined the government, at the same time as the coalition he had represented was involved in a court case challenging the legitimacy of the election (Kibasala, 2010). Nevertheless, the government can not be classified as a coalition government because each of the ‘parties’ that entered into the government split a result. In the case of the RP cabinet position also apparently came with a price tag; dissolving the party. The decision made by opposition parties to enter the government seems to be made by the party leaders themselves without any consultation or attempt to arrive at a consensus in the parties. The benefits of entering cabinet seem to be primarily for the office holders themselves and have little to do with negotiating a new policy orientation for the government as a whole.

In Dahl’s definition of opposition, and in several theories explaining party behaviour (Strøm & Muller, 1999) there is an implicit assumption that does not hold up when confronted with the Malawian reality: that of the party as a unitary and cohesive actor. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Svåsand, 2008) Malawian parties have inadequate procedures for handling internal disputes. Thus, when confronted with a situation that forces the party leadership to make a choice of joining a government or not, it is difficult to arrive at a decision that is based on proper organisational procedures and therefore perceived to be legitimate. Kaare Strom and Wolfgang Muller have argued that in established democracies political parties can pursue different types of goals; seeking office, maximising votes or seeking policy implementation, trying to strike a balance between the three objectives while compensating those parts of the organisation who disagrees with the choices that are made. Such compensation is possible when there is predictability. When the party actors know that there will be opportunities to discuss or to change a policy decision at a later point in time, or if activists can be compensated in other ways with party offices etc., they may accept a controversial decision (Strøm & Muller, 1999). However, in weakly institutionalised parties such predictability does

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9 Most of the independent MPs were previous UDF member who had failed to secure re-nomination, but succeeded in the election itself running as independents.
10 The party leader tried this, but failed in the courts.
not exist. Opposition parties in Africa are often portrayed as vehicles for individual politicians, lacking in internal democracy and dependent on donor contributions for survival (Olukoshi, 1998). Malawian parties fit this pattern. Opposition parties are poorly equipped when confronting choice situations as described above, with party fracturing as the result.

‘Opposition’ as policy alternatives.
A function of opposition parties is to offer the electorate a set of alternative policies to that of the incumbent party. This function is a consequence of a democratic polity, in which there by default exists more than one political party that competes for votes in elections. Nevertheless, empirically this function is not as straightforward as it sounds. Downs for instance has argued that in a party system in which the electoral competition is structured along a single left-right dimension, a consequence of the competition is that the parties will adapt to the opinion distribution of the voters. As most voters tend to assume a position close to the median the competing parties will try to move as close as possible to the position of the median voter. The consequence for the electorate is not two sharply divided policy alternatives but two rather similar policy alternatives (Downs, 1957). An alternative view of policy alternatives is the so-called ‘saliency theory’: “What parties offer electors thus seems to be a choice between selective policy agendas, not between specific alternatives to items on a universal agenda” (Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994). While each of these perspectives comes with a number of qualifications and modifications they offer a useful starting point for mapping parties policy proposals. The parties’ electoral manifestos are commonly used to identify these proposals. This is itself not without controversies (Budge & Bara, 2001), but it is an issue that can not be pursued in this paper. In Malawi’s presidential type system, the electoral manifesto also seems to be primarily relevant for the presidential elections as many candidates running for parliamentary seats focus on local development issues and do not feel that their party’s manifesto to be relevant for their campaign (Mpesi & Svåsand, 2011).

The question for this paper is what the meaning of ‘opposition’ in the case of Malawian parties is with regard to ‘official’ party policy as found in the parties’ electoral manifestos. Do the opposition parties ‘offer’ something different from the incumbent party? Analysis of the parties’ electoral manifestos for the first three elections in Malawi, show some differences in issue saliency between the then two most significant parties, the UDF and the MCP, and also some changes in issue saliency across time for these parties. In the UDF for example issues that can be classified as economic or welfare issues rank the highest in the UDF manifestos across elections, but with lower frequency. On the other hand, agricultural issues have been
increasingly addressed. In the MCP economic issues have increased their share of statements across the elections, while agricultural issues have decreased slightly (Mpesi, 2011). Overall, Mpesi classify the UDF as more liberal on economic policy than the MCP.

The establishment of the DPP emerged as a result of a defection from the UDF. Has the new incumbent party distinguished itself from the opposition parties in terms of policies? It is not possible at this point to perform a detailed comparison with Mpesi’s classification of statements of the UDF and MCP platforms, but the DPP manifesto indicate a strong preference for economic growth with a state-centered orientation. The manifesto argues for shifts in macro-economic policies that the party expects will lead to economic growth. The party program is more dirigist than leftist or rightist. The implementation of the fertiliser subsidy program is one of several elements of a state led policy shift. Other elements are diversification of the economy by stimulating the cultivation of new crops, industrialization to limit import and increasing export and “… convert all of Malawi into a free-export processing zone”. The program also identifies population growth as a major impediment to further economic progress. The dirigist nature of the program is emphasized by the party’s view on how policy is made: “...we cannot build a new Malawi based on old institutions”, and economic progress, poverty reduction etc require “...change in the way our country had been governed”(p. 2). There must be “… national solutions to development challenges”. These views are reflected in the party’s view on the structure of the political system. While other parties often mention the need to strengthen the legislature, there is no indication of this in the DPP program. On the contrary, it is specifically stated that “The Legislature shall never be allowed to usurp the powers off, or to interfere with the Executive” (p 14). Centralisation is also implicit by the conspicuous absence of any mention of “local government” issues in the program. Moreover, the vice president – who in the current political system is elected together with the president – will in the future be appointed by him, report to him, and “will be the Leader of the government in the legislature” (p 14). In this way, the party seeks to avoid conflict between the president and his vice-president, as has happened during both of Mutharika’s presidential terms, and also shifted from being part of the executive to the legislature.

11 Previously, Mutharika had run as a candidate for the Unity Party in 1999, polling 0.47 percent of the votes. He became the UDF candidate in 2005 as an outsider, having spent a career in the African development bank.
Clearly, as Mpesi has pointed out, the party manifestos do not explain why DPP was more successful than the opposition parties in the 2009 elections. However, DPP’s program appears to be much more state-centred than the two opposition parties. The formation of the DPP has therefore created a more accentuated policy difference between the government and the opposition.

Prospects for opposition victory.

As pointed out by Rakner and de Walle, few African presidents actually loose elections (Lise Rakner & Walle, 2009). In most other cases the party the came to power during the first multi-party election tends to hold on to power later on (Walle, 2003). This is also the case in Malawi. The change in government in 2005 was not caused by election defeat, but through creative political engineering.

Why has the incumbent party been re-elected each time? Explanations for the lack of opposition victory may vary from one election to the next. Nevertheless, there are some structural features of the Malawian polity (macro-level variables) that impact on the opposition’s chances in each election, such as the structure of the polity, the electoral system, and the implementation of the election laws. There are also characteristics of the opposition parties themselves that may increase or decrease their winning chances (meso-level variables). Among these are the nature of the political parties, leadership domination, fragmentation and fractionalization. Finally, in each election there are micro-level factors, such as the electorate’s policy preferences and their evaluations of parties and politicians performance.

Macro-level factors and the chances for opposition victory.

The Malawian polity has some features that may make it possible for an opposition party to oust an incumbent.

Because of the presidential type of political system, winning the presidency is the critical office. Whoever occupies that office controls access to almost any other significant political and senior administrative position in the country, with the exception of the parliament. There are two characteristics of the presidential system that in theory could make possible for an opposition to win over an incumbent: the electoral system and the term limitations.
The president is elected by simple majority in a nation wide contest. Any candidate with one vote more than any other candidate is the winner. The three first presidential contests were won with simple majorities. Thus, a coalition of opposition parties rallying behind one candidate could mobilize enough votes to beat an incumbent. The creation of the Mgwirizano-coalition is an example of this type of cooperation between some of the opposition parties. A second feature of the presidential system is the two-term limitation. Generally, incumbent presidents often have an advantage over a challenger, unless he/she has presided over a catastrophic political and/or economic development. The opposition’s chances of winning are therefore greatest if there is ‘an open seat’, that is no incumbent is running for re-election. The 2004 election presented such a scenario.

So why has the incumbent party always won the presidential elections? One of the reasons has to do with the opposition parties themselves, discussed further below, while another reason could be the advantages of the incumbent party in tilting the playing field in its favour (Lise Rakner, 2009; L. Rakner, Khembo, & Bakken, 2007). State radio and television are supposed to provide equal coverage of the contesting candidates and parties. Yet, it has been documented that this is not the case. The incumbent party is overwhelmingly covered positively in the state media. Private media, particularly newspapers are more balanced, but Joy Radio was as biased in favour of UDF as the state radio was in favour of DPP in the 2009 election (Neale, 2009). Election observers remark that vehicles belonging to state or para-statal organisations are used by the incumbent party for election purposes and that the police do not intervene to prevent harassment of candidates or disturbances at party rallies for the opposition (Commonwealth, 2009; EU, 2004, 2009).

There is also an additional feature of the Malawian political system that in the long run also makes an opposition victory difficult. This is the absence of local and regionally elected offices. Although there are constitutional provisions for elected local councils, no such election has been held since the electoral terms expired in 2005 for the first, and so far the last, elected council members. The significance of this for the opposition is that they do not have an opportunity to build a cadre of experienced office holders that could be groomed for national offices.12

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12 This is an example of what Strom and Muller referred to as a way for party leaders to compensate activists in their parties (Strom & Muller, 1999)
Meso-level factors undermining the opposition.

The opposition itself has contributed to its inability to defeat the incumbent party. Three characteristics of the opposition contribute to undermine its effectiveness: leadership dominance, weak organisational loyalty, and increasing party system fragmentation. All studies of political parties in Malawi conclude that they are heavily dominated by the political leadership. The consequence is that many crucial decisions are made without a foundation in the parties’ own organizational processes, and hence lack in internal legitimacy. The outcome is internal disputes and lack of conflict resolution mechanisms leads to defections and/or expulsions. The way AFORD and RP joined the UDF/DPP government, illustrates this problem. Also, MCP, UDF and AFORD in the post-2009 period display internal rivalries about who should lead the parties. Defections, voluntarily or by force, from a party leads to new parties, rather than to joining existing parties. In this way the party system continues to fragment. Although it would ‘rational’ from a mathematical point of view to build an electoral alliance of opposition parties in front of an election, the overriding concern of the party leaders seem to be securing office benefits for themselves, rather than ousting the incumbent party (Kibasala, 2010; Magolowondo & Svåsand, 2009)

Micro-level factors: the electorate’s view of candidates, policies and parties.

The macro- and meso-level factors are characteristics that are more or less constant across time, particularly the macro-level ones. These may be pulling the outcome of an election in a predictable direction, regardless of the particularities of each electoral contest. To be sure, this could also be the case with micro-level factors, as we can see from the traditional, regionally based support for some of the political parties. However, micro-level factors also include variables that may change from one election to the next. How well the political parties are able to connect to the electorate is one such factor. Figure 1 displays the electorate’s rating of Mutharika’s performance, compared with the predecessor Muluzi at similar time points in the electoral term, and in Figure 3, the electorate’s rating of the Mutharika administration in the period prior to the election, compared with the Muluzi administration prior to the 2004 election on various policy issues.

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13 See for instance (Kadima & Lembani, 2006; Kibasala, 2010; Ngwira, 2010)
14 Forming new parties is made easy by minimum requirements needed for registration, 100 signatures from registered voters, and some formal party documents: electoral manifesto, party statutes and list of office holders.
It appears from these two figures that in 2009 it was extremely hard for the opposition to win over the incumbent, given the generally high approval rating for Mutharika as a leader, as well as the generally strong appreciation of Mutharika’s administration on several policy issues. Only in terms of ‘water’ did Muluzi score higher than Mutharika did, and only marginally better. On all other issues the electorate had a much more favourable view of
Mutharika’s administration. That included issues such as food shortage, which the voters rated as the most important issue (61 percent) that government should address (Chinsinga, 2009). What is more striking in the figures is why the opposition did not win in 2004, when the electorate held a mostly negative assessment of the outgoing administration. A possible explanation could be that Muluzi was no longer a candidate running for office, combined with the splintering of the opposition vote between MCP and the Mgwirizano coalition.

Conclusion

The concept of opposition as understood in established democracies is applicable in Malawi in a formal sense, since opposition is a recognized feature of the Malawian parliament and also in general political debates. Nevertheless, the concept’s implicit understanding of a party as a unitary actor does not hold up when confronted with the reality of Malawian politics. This is due to the lack of established organizational procedures inside the parties accompanied by a strong and centralized leadership. The consequence is inability to deal with conflicts, triggering party fragmentation and the formation of new parties. The opposition therefore contributes to the incumbent party’s electoral success. However, although there are indications that the incumbent party does present a different policy program from that of the major opposition parties, this is not necessarily the major explanation for electoral outcomes. The elections themselves do not constitute a level playing field, but are tilted to the advantage of the incumbent party. To the extent that the parties address the concerns of the voters, the 2009 elections indicate that the incumbent party succeeded better in this respect than the opposition. However, the strong support for the DPP can also be interpreted as a protest vote against the chaotic horse-trading among the opposition parties. Future success of the opposition depends to a great extent on their ability to organize themselves.

Nevertheless, although opposition parties can and do field candidates competing in elections, and oppose the government in parliamentary proceedings, the status of the opposition is difficult. The current government has introduced a series of measures that in reality makes it more difficult for the opposition parties than the formal institutions allow for. It has proved difficult for some parties to be registered, the latest casualty is the vice-president’s PP. Opposition parties are frequently denied permission to organise rallies. The government has introduced a fee for organising demonstrations, and it has called on its youth supporter to defend the government against its opponents, reminiscent of the Malawi Young Pioneers
during the Banda era. A law allows ministers to ban publications if found contrary to the national interest. These are some of the examples of practices and new regulations that in total make life for the opposition far more difficult than the formal institutions allow for.

References.


