

Malawians increasingly cautious about exercising right to 'free' political speech

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 176 | Thomas Isbell and Joseph J. Chunga

Summary

Under the one-party reign of President Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi was described as a country "where silence rules" (Carver, 1990) because of the regime's effective machinery for squashing dissent. This era ended with a 1993 referendum endorsing a multiparty democracy and constitution enshrining freedom of expression and of association (Malawi Government, 1994).

While these freedoms include the right to join political parties and criticize leaders, Malawi's political space in 2017 has been awash in media reports of political violence and intimidation involving the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and main opposition Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (Faiti, 2017; Gwede, 2017). Targets have included journalists (Kamtambe, 2017; Kumbani, 2017) and supporters of opposition parties (Muheya, 2017; Pondani, 2017). Religious groups, traditional leaders, and the international community have joined activists in expressing concerns about Malawi's protection of fundamental freedoms (Khunga, 2017; Mwale, 2017).

How do Malawians assess the state of their liberties? Results of an Afrobarometer survey last December and January show that fewer Malawians consider themselves free to say what they think, especially when it comes to politics. More are being careful in expressing their views, and most say they don't feel free to criticize the president or security forces. Yet a majority say that in the years preceding the survey, Malawians were gaining greater freedom to function in political and civil-society organisations.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in December 2016 and January 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

- While three-fourths (77%) of Malawians feel at least "somewhat" free to say what they think, the proportion who feel "completely free" has dropped by 29 percentage points since 2014, to fewer than half (48%).

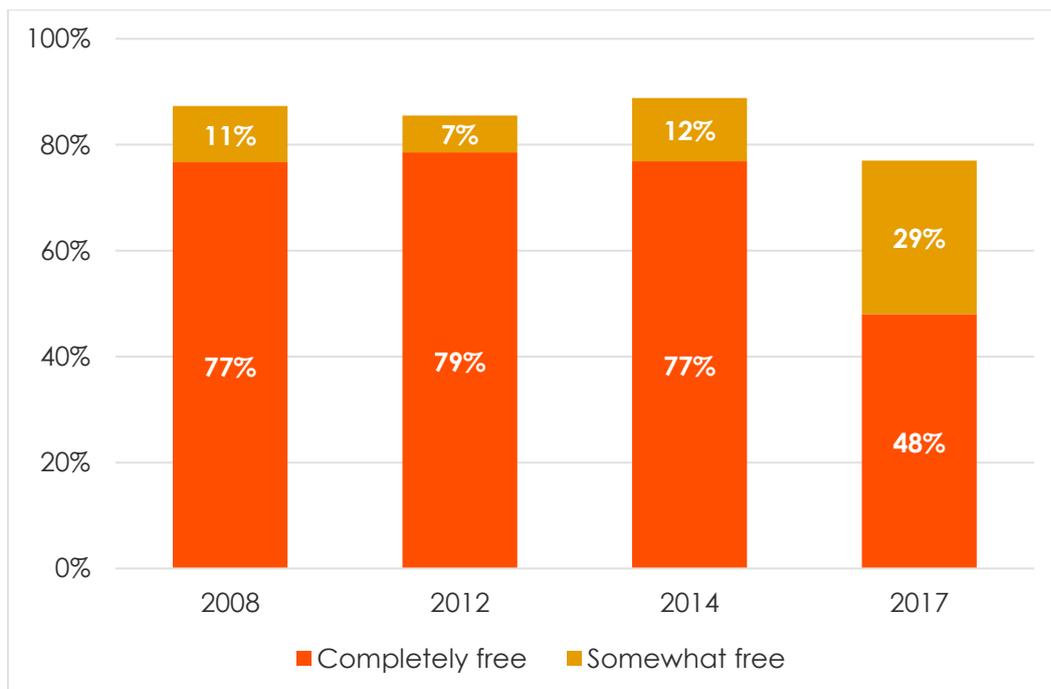
- For the first time in five surveys over 14 years, a majority (53%) of Malawians now say they “often” or “always” have to be careful what they say about politics – more than double the proportion in 2003 (24%).
- Larger majorities say they do not feel free to criticize state officials and leaders such as the army (76%), the president (72%), and the police (65%). Fewer respondents express the same reservations about criticizing local government councillors (46%) and traditional leaders (39%).
- A majority of Malawians say that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about how they vote (62%) and about which organisations they join (52%).
- Even so, a majority say the country has gotten better over the past few years in opening space for citizens to join political organisations (76%), for independent groups and opposition parties to function (54% each), and for the media to investigate and criticize the government (53%).

Narrowing space for free expression?

More than three-fourths (77%) of Malawians say they feel “somewhat free” or “completely free” to say what they think. This marks a significant drop from previous survey rounds, when between 86% and 89% considered themselves at least “somewhat” free (Figure 1). Moreover, between 2014 and 2017, the proportion who feel “completely free” dropped from 77% to 48%.

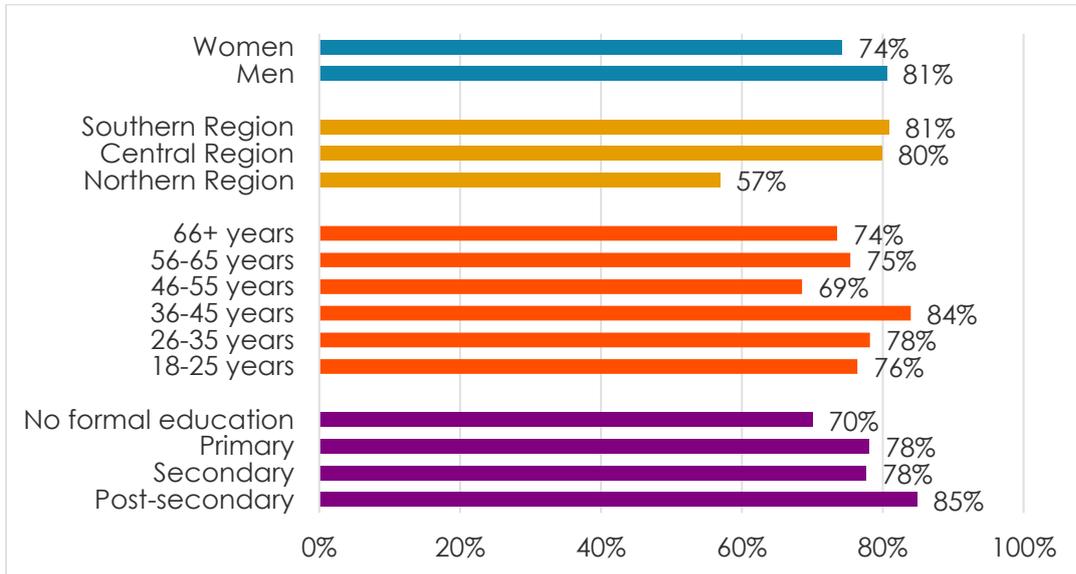
Men (81%) and better-educated respondents (85% among those with post-secondary qualifications) are most likely to feel free to speak their minds (Figure 2). In the Northern Region, only 57% of respondents say they feel free to say what they think.

Figure 1: Freedom to say what you think | Malawi | 2008-2017



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to say what you think?*

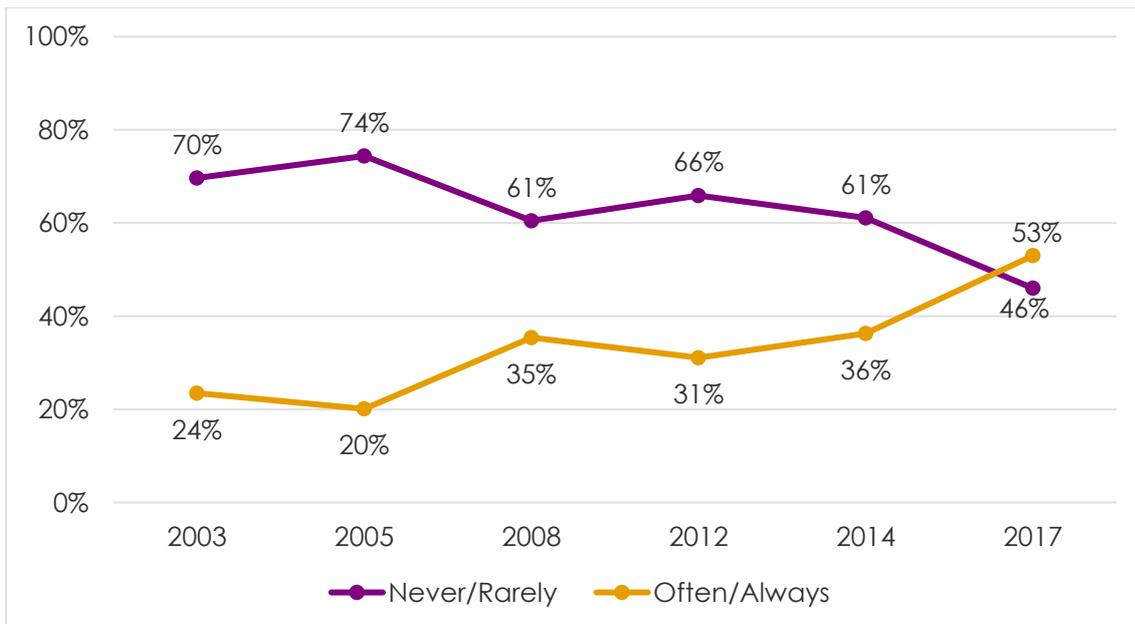
Figure 2: Freedom to say what you think | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? (% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")

While most Malawians claim the freedom of expression in general, the picture changes when the question specifically concerns political speech. For the first time in five surveys over 14 years, a majority (53%) of Malawians now say they "often" or "always" have to be careful what they say about politics – more than double the proportion in 2003 (24%) (Figure 3). The proportion of respondents who say they "rarely" or "never" have to be cautious in expressing political opinions has dropped from 74% in 2005 to 46%.

Figure 3: Have to be careful what you say about politics | Malawi | 2003-2017

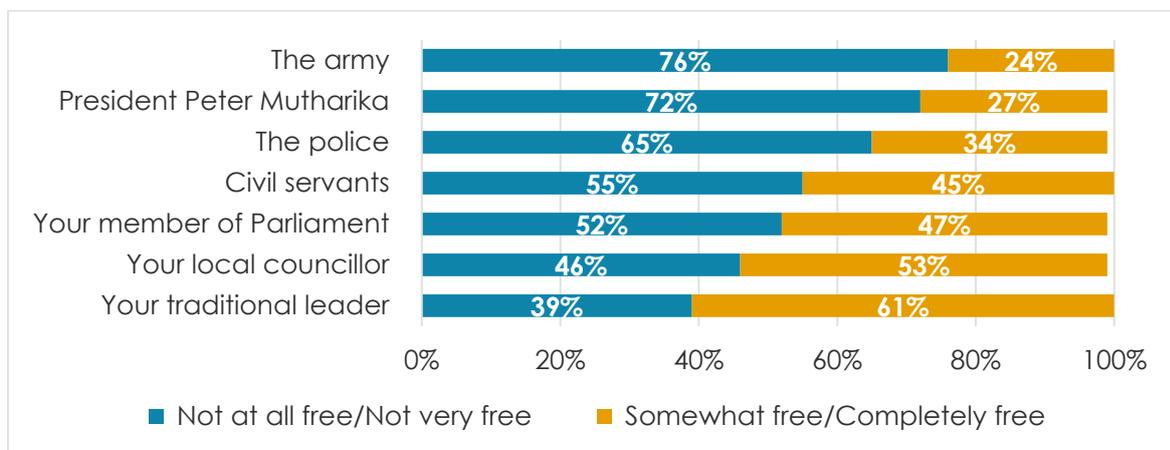


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?

Moreover, even larger majorities of Malawians do not feel free to criticize state officials and leaders. Most say they feel “not very free” or “not at all free” to criticize the army (76%), the president (72%), or the police (65%) (Figure 4). More than half of respondents say the same with regard to civil servants (55%) and members of Parliament (MPs) (52%), while large minorities feel this way about criticizing local councillors (46%) and traditional leaders (39%).

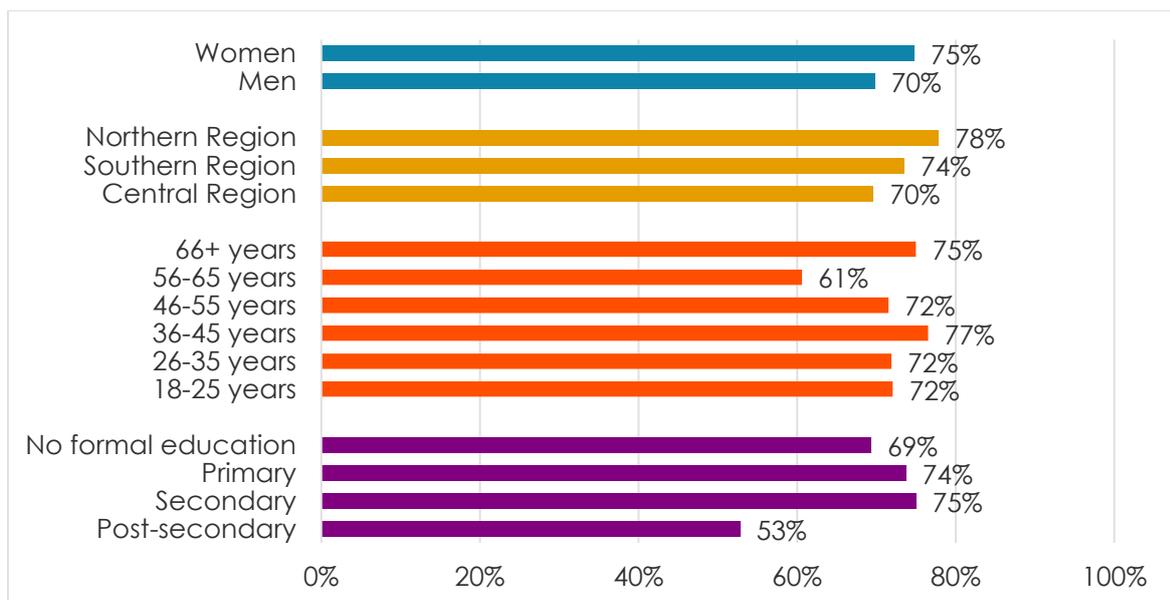
Women are somewhat more likely than men to feel unfree to criticize the president (75% vs. 70%) (Figure 5). By region, the proportion of respondents who don't feel free to voice negative opinions about the president range from 70% in the Central Region to 78% in the Northern Region. Respondents with a post-secondary education are significantly less likely to feel unfree to criticize the president (53%) than their less-educated counterparts (69%-75%).

Figure 4: Free to criticize state officials and leaders? | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following: Your ward councillor? Your member of Parliament? Your traditional leader? Civil servants? The police? The army? President Peter Mutharika?

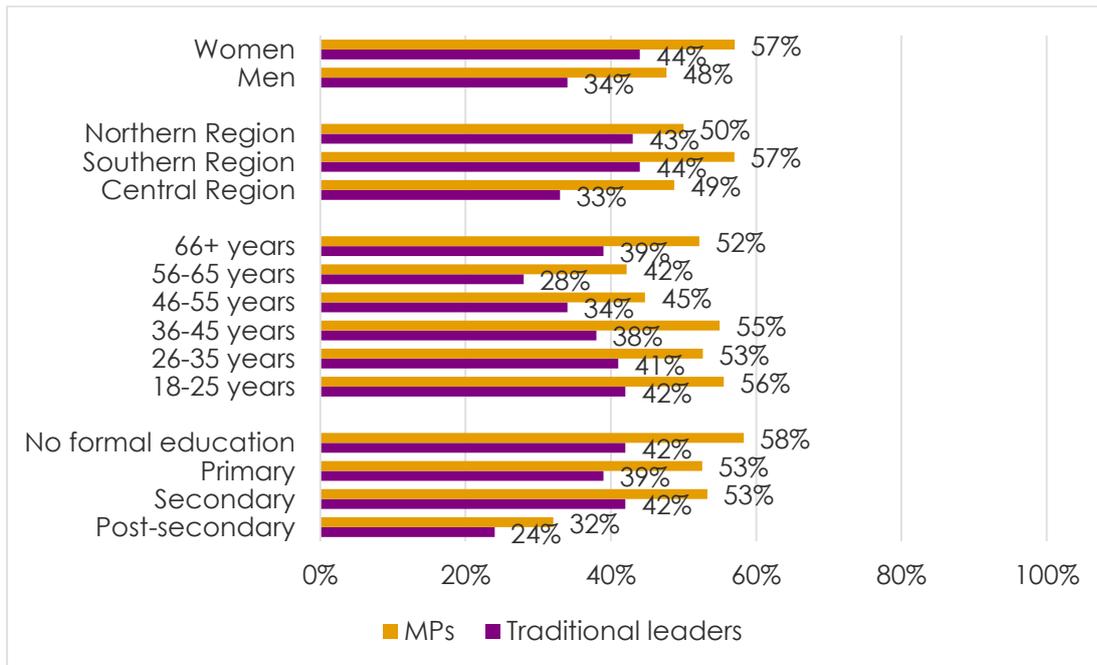
Figure 5: Not free to criticize the president | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following: President Peter Mutharika? (% who say “not at all free” or “not very free”)

The pattern is similar with regard to MPs and traditional leaders (Figure 6), with men and respondents with post-secondary qualification less likely to feel unfree to offer criticism than women and respondents with less education.

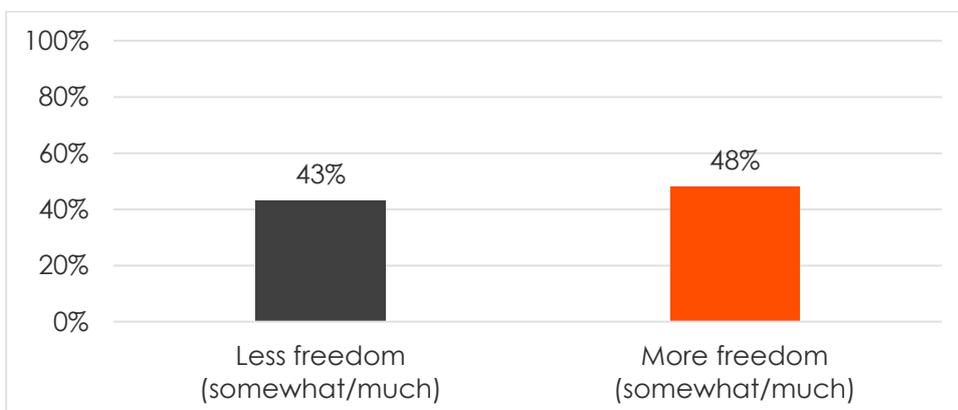
Figure 6: Not free to criticize MPs, traditional leaders | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following: Your member of Parliament? Your traditional leader? (% who say “not at all free” or “not very free”)

Overall, Malawians are divided as to whether the space for political speech has been expanding or shrinking: 48% say citizens have “somewhat” or “much” more freedom to say what they think about politics than they did “a few years ago,” while 43% say they have somewhat/much less freedom (Figure 7).

Figure 7: More or less freedom of political speech than a few years ago? | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?

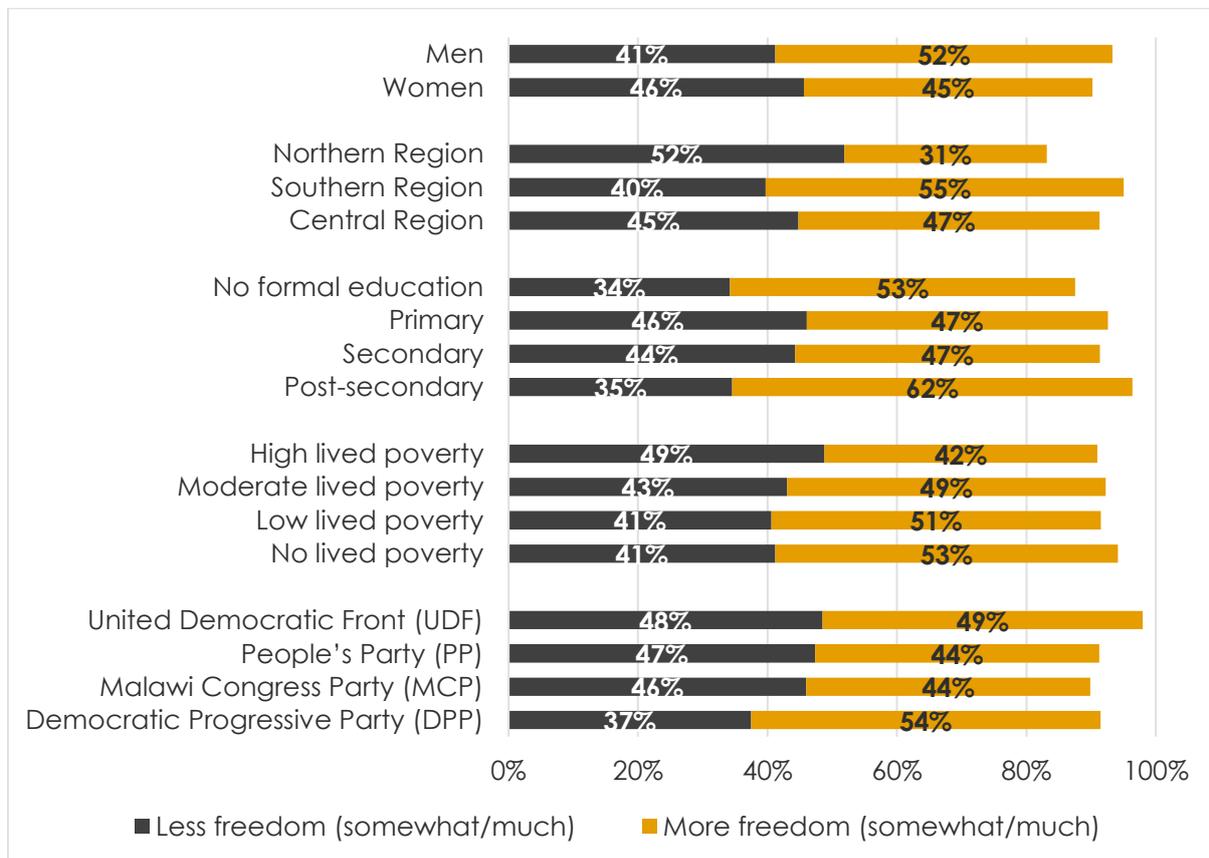
Women are somewhat more likely than men to complain of diminishing freedom of expression, 46% vs. 41%) (Figure 8), and respondents in the Northern Region (52%) are significantly more critical of shrinking freedom than their counterparts in the Central (45%) and Southern (40%) regions. Poor respondents (i.e. those with “high lived poverty”¹) are more likely to report less freedom of expression (49%) than those experiencing low or no lived poverty (41%).

Respondents with post-secondary education most frequently report improving freedom to express political views (62%).

Supporters of opposition political parties² are considerably more likely to complain of declining freedom of political speech (46%-48%) than are supporters of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (37%).

Figure 8: More or less freedom of political speech than a few years ago?

| by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?

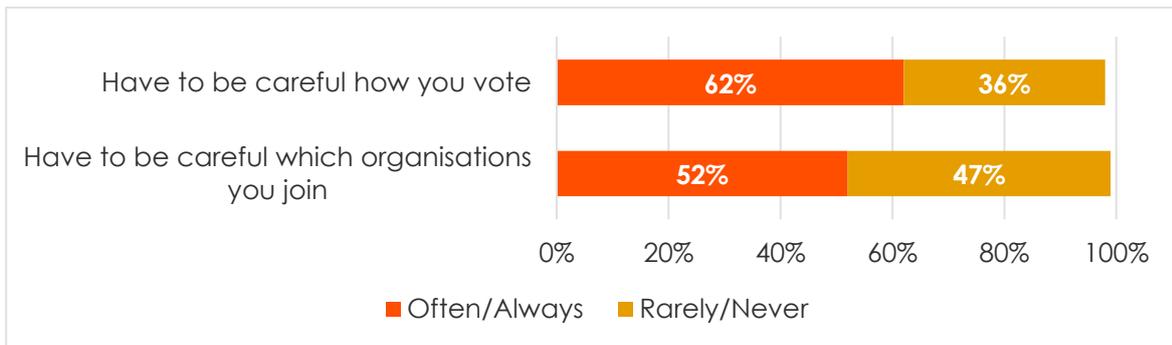
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

² Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

Other political and civic freedoms

In line with some caution about political speech, majorities of Malawians say that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about how they vote (62%) and about which organisations they join (52%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Have to be careful about voting and joining organisations | Malawi | 2017

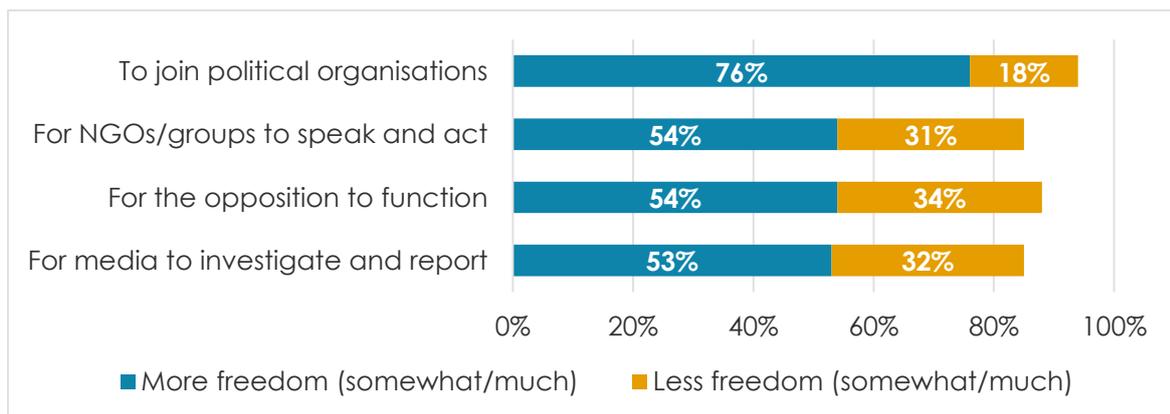


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country:

- Do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election?
- Do people have to be careful about what political organisations they join?

However, compared to “a few years ago,” three-fourths (76%) of respondents say they now have “somewhat more” or “much more” freedom to join any political organisation they want (Figure 10). Smaller majorities say the country enjoys more freedom than a few years ago for independent groups or non-governmental organisations to meet and advocate their views (54%); for opposition parties or candidates to speak, hold rallies, and criticize the government (54%); and for the news media to investigate and report on government mistakes or criticize the government (53%).

Figure 10: More or less freedom than a few years ago? | Malawi | 2017



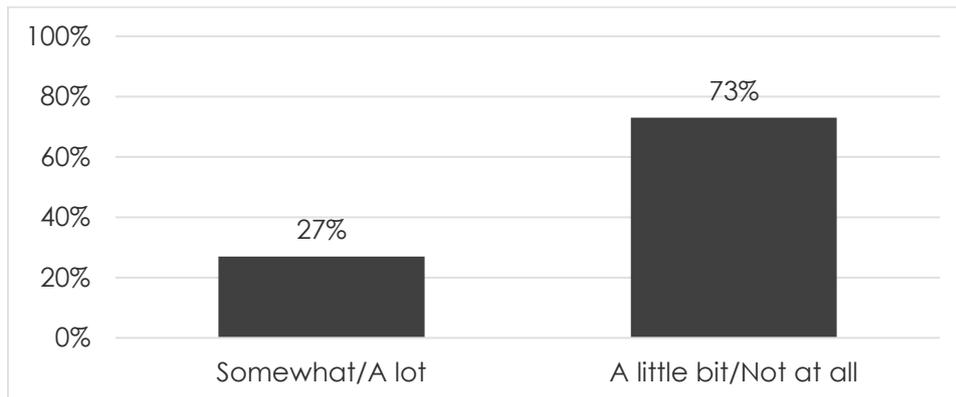
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same:

- Your own freedom to join any political organisation you want?
- The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organisations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?
- The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?
- The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?

Fear of intimidation or violence

Despite recent media reporting of political conflict and dispute in Malawi, at the time of the survey, most Malawians (73%) said they feared political intimidation or violence only “a little bit” or “not at all.” About one in four (27%) reported they feared such violence “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 11).

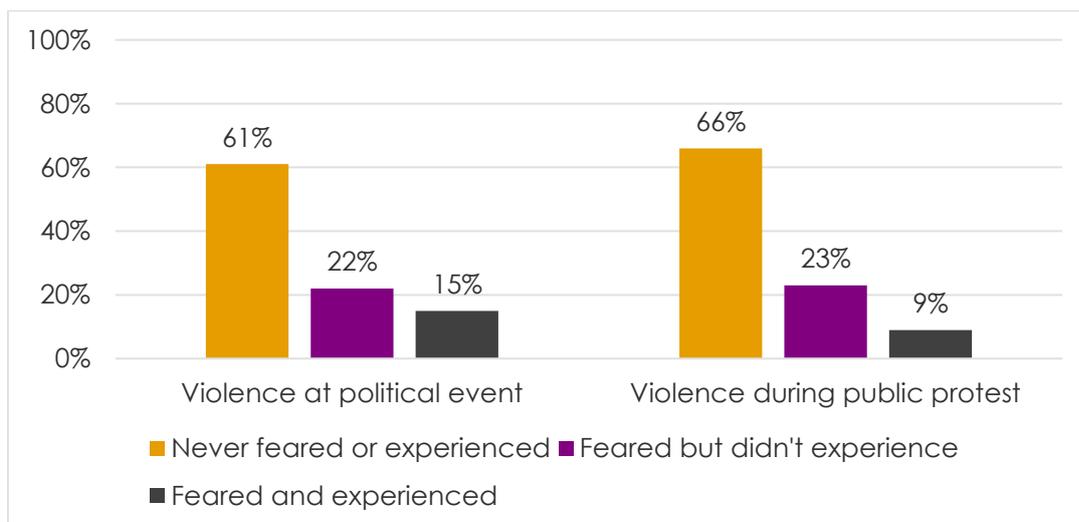
Figure 11: Fear of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns
 | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

When asked about their experience of political violence during the two years preceding the survey, 15% of Malawians say they experienced violence at a political rally, while 9% say they experienced violence during a public protest. More than six in 10 say they “never” feared such violence, while about one in five say they feared but did not experience such violence (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Fear of violence at political events or protests in past two years | Malawi
 | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence: Violence at a political rally? Violence occurring during a public protest or march? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?

Conclusion

Over two decades of experience with democracy, Malawians have moved away from “where silence rules.” Most feel at least “somewhat” free to say what they think, and many see positive change in space for civil liberties, especially freedom to join political organisations. On the other hand, the political realm remains characterized by some aspects of “silence”: The proportion of Malawians who feel “completely free” to speak their minds continues to shrink, and criticizing the president and security forces is something most Malawians do not feel free to do.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
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Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, and the National Endowment for Democracy.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 176 | 29 November 2017