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Examining the Relevance of Political Parties in Malawi

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1. Introduction

This briefing paper examines the relevance of political parties in Malawi's democracy. Beyond the functionalist assumption that existence suggests some positive contribution of an organ to the whole, this paper looks at social operational pre-requisites that justify the relevance and existence of political parties. Specifically the paper focuses on the linkage role of political parties. While assessing other aspects such as organizational structure, financial base, forms of mobilization, intra-party democracy and leadership styles is informative, this paper is anchored in the argument that the linkage function can be understood better by considering people's attitudes and assessment of the political parties. Therefore, this examination of relevance of parties is achieved by looking at adult Malawians' opinions and attitudes regarding attachment to political parties, trust in political parties, and the responsiveness of political party manifestos to problems expressed by the people, as well as individuals' level of contact with political parties. The discussion shares the view of Hetherington (1998) that attitudes towards institutions and evaluation of their performance reinforce each other.

The nexus between political parties and democracy and democratic consolidation is not short of coverage. In this discourse, the assumed logical positive relationships between the two are widely echoed. Olukoshi (1998:19) declares that the institutionalization of multi-party politics is indispensable to the principle and practice of democracy. Sandbrook (1996) reaffirms this by arguing that above all things the consolidation of democracy entails the institutionalization of political parties and party systems. This view of political parties is probably best underlined by Patel (2006: vii) who argues that "there is no gainsaying that political parties play a critical role in the democratization process... It is also incontrovertible that political parties are key to the institutionalization and consolidation of democracy... Democracy is unthinkable without political parties."

However, some observations conclude that political parties have not always produced desirable results for democracy. For example, Randal and Svasand (2010:32) note that political parties in Africa are "regularly perceived to be a weak link in the chain of elements that together make for a democratic state, or even to have helped undermine democracy through the irresponsible and self-interested actions of their leaders". In the same vein, Burnell and Randall (2008) argue that political parties may be a problem to democracy as much as they may contribute to institutionalization of democracy. These divergent prospects for parties and their contribution to democracy are based on the extent to which parties perform their democratic functions. In the context of Western democracies, the debate continues regarding the place and state of political parties (Broder, 1972; Burke, 1998; Dalton, 2000; Herrnson, 1986; Scarrow, 2002; Valelly,

2000; Diamond and Gunther 2001). These scholars have approached the issue from different angles. Some have declared that the 'era of the political party is over' meaning it has lost its relevance and place in society. Others argue that political parties remain relevant except that they are adapting to a changing environment and performing new non-traditional roles. In Africa, the debate about the role and relevance of political parties has especially focused on the effects of ethnic mobilization, legacy of one party dictatorship on current political parties, the role of political parties in a neo-patrimonial context, as well as the dominance of party leaders and consequent lack of intra-party democracy. This paper examines the relevance of political parties in Malawi.

To eschew the risky assumption of conceptual obviousness, the concept of relevance as used in this paper means the degree of being useful or valuable¹. Thus, a party would be said to be relevant or irrelevant to the same extent it is regarded as valuable or useful to the society in which it exists. In this regard, we draw lessons from the three dimensional analysis of the functions of political parties by Randall and Svasand (2002). They contend that functions of political parties can be categorized as: 1) those oriented toward the electorate (representation and integration); 2) those that are linkage related (interest aggregation and recruitment and training); and 3) government-related roles (implementing policies and holding government accountable). By looking at the network of interaction between political parties and the people, particularly the issues advanced by political parties compared to those raised by the people in the country, this paper captures these elements to examine the relevance of parties generally without assessing each function of political parties individually. The argument is that political parties perform the functions propounded by Randall and Svasand to the extent that they have good interaction with the public and to the extent that the parties' priority issues dovetail with the popular aspirations of the people.

1.1 Political Party System in Malawi

The history of political parties in modern Malawi dates back to the struggle for independence. Malawi had its first multi-party elections in 1961. However, in 1966, during the reign of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi became a one-party state and the Malawi Congress Party was the only party by law. This changed again with the re-democratization in what has been popularly termed the third wave of democratization. In a referendum that took place in 1993, Malawians overwhelmingly voted for multi-party democracy rather than one-party state. Since then, political parties have mushroomed in the country such that over 40 political parties have been registered by the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties.

Literature on or related to role of political parties in Malawi is not scarce (Rakner et al, 2007; Magolowondo and Svasand, 2009; Patel, 2006; Khembo 2004; Mpesi, 2011; Lwanda, 2004; Phiri, 2000; Svasand and Khembo, 2007; Lembani, 2008). A review of these works shows that the literature has focused on problems of organization and institutionalization, ideological nuances of party platforms, ethnic mobilization, intra-party undemocratic tendencies, patronage politics, big man syndrome and the coalitions that have formed between and among political parties. However, the discussion of weakness and challenges has not extended to inferring or

¹ Informed by Cambridge Advanced Learners (2010), Third edition

making explicit evaluation of the actual contribution of the parties in terms of positive or negative input to the democratic process. This is the subject of this paper based on Afrobarometer survey results from 1999 to 2012.

2. Afrobarometer Surveys

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, evaluations of the quality of governance and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The Afrobarometer's main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research, and sharing research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as four rounds of surveys have been held from 1999 to 2008 and Round 5 is currently underway.

Afrobarometer surveys use a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries and over time. The methodology was based on a national probability sample of 2,400 adult Malawians selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a sampling margin of error of +/- 2% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions, gender as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Malawian citizen had an equal and known chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Malawi was conducted by the Centre for Social Research based at the University of Malawi, between 4th June and 1st July, 2012. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999 (Round 1), 2003 (Round 2), 2005 (Round 3), and 2008 (Round 4).²

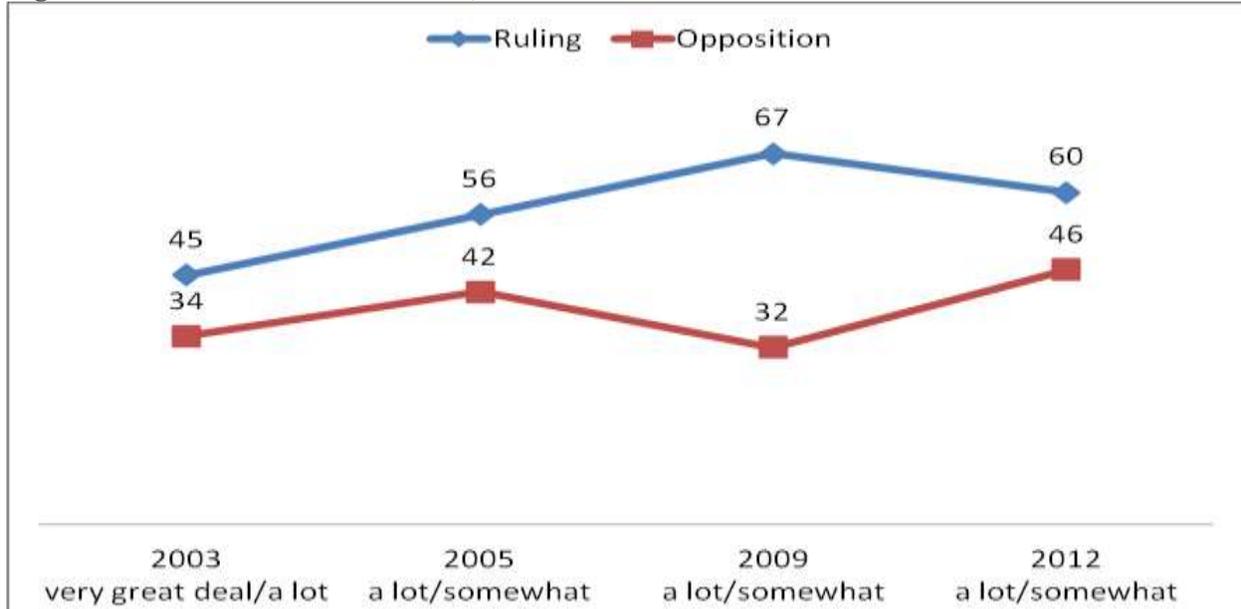
3. Relevance and Trust in Political Parties

In the discourse of trust in institutions, Hetherington (1998) argues that trust should be understood as both a dependent and independent variable. The argument is that the level of trust changes with performance of political actors but the level of trust also affects how people rate performance of the actors. That is, on one hand, trust in political parties can rise and fall based on performance of the parties. On the other hand, people may rate a political party's performance as low just because of past mistrust not actual present performance. This paper argues that low levels of trust indicate a deficiency in party relevance, and again this can be understood as working in two directions. That is, low levels of trust indicate *both* that political parties are not serving the purposes of the people, and that they are not performing to the satisfaction of the people, which, again, may further undermine trust.

When asked about their own levels of trust, more than half of Malawians (60%) indicate "somewhat" or "a lot" of trust in the ruling political party. The picture is significantly gloomier for opposition parties though, who have earned the trust of less than half of Malawians as shown in Figure 1 below.

² In earlier rounds sample size averaged 1200 respondents, with a sampling margin of error of +/-2.8% at a 95% confidence level.

Figure 1: Trust in Political Parties, 2003-2012



How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say The ruling Party? ... Opposition Parties?

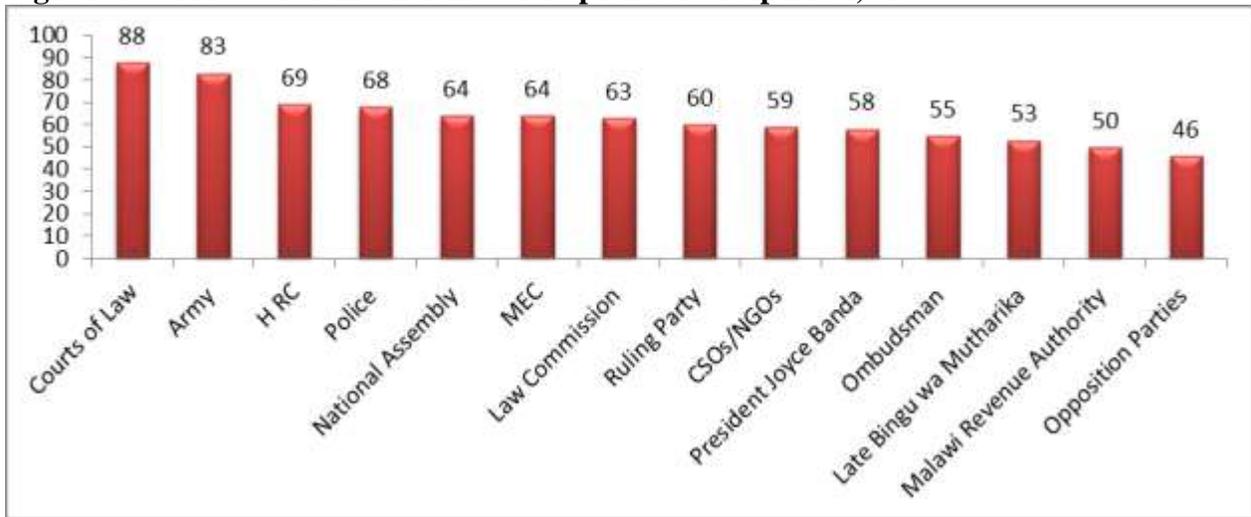
Note: As indicated, the response categories used in 2003 were different from those used since 2005.

As the figure shows, opposition political parties have always commanded low trust with the highest being 46% recorded in 2012 and the lowest 32% in 2009. Several factors can account for this disparity in trust between the ruling and opposition parties but it can be argued that the major factors are lack of clarity about the role of the opposition, coupled with frequent defections to ruling parties, and further exacerbated by the failure of opposition parties to outline alternative policy solutions. The multiplicity and fragmentation of opposition parties complicates the equation further.

For the ruling parties³, the average of 57% trust may be considered not very worrying. It could be that Malawians have generally low trust in public offices and institutions. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis of trust in other institutions sheds more light on this. This is shown in the table below.

³ The ruling party in 2003 was United Democratic Front (UDF). In 2005, the ruling party was the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) after president Mutharika left the UDF, on whose ticket he won 2004 elections, and formed DPP. DPP ruled until 2012 when Mutharika died. At the time of 2012 survey, the ruling party was Peoples Party, which President Joyce Banda founded after she was expelled from DPP and when she was Vice President of the country.

Figure 2: Trust in Political Parties in Comparative Perspective, 2012



How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say Courts of Law?... Army?...The ruling Party?...Opposition Parties? (figures shown are percent responding "somewhat" or "a lot")

The findings clearly show lower trust in political offices than in other public institutions such as courts of law and the military. Opposition political parties are the least trusted among the key institution assessed during the study. Much as the ruling party is high, it also falls in the bottom half among the other institutions. Without getting into the trap of a debate about whether the glass is half-full or half-empty, this comparative analysis shows that parties, in general, do not enjoy high levels of trust among Malawians.

4. Relevance and Public Contact with Political Parties

The level of contact is a clear manifestation of the relevance of political parties. It can indicate how much people regard political parties as sources of solutions or as avenues for channelling their concerns to relevant authorities. It can also indicate the territorial reach or penetration of political parties, which Randall and Svasand (2002) identify as signs of weakness or strength of political parties. Beyond that, it can indicate how elitist or mass-based a party is. Ordinarily, where there is intra-party democracy the space for public input can encourage contact between the two. Therefore, contact with political party leaders would also be indicative of intra-party democracy. All these would point to the relevance of a political party.

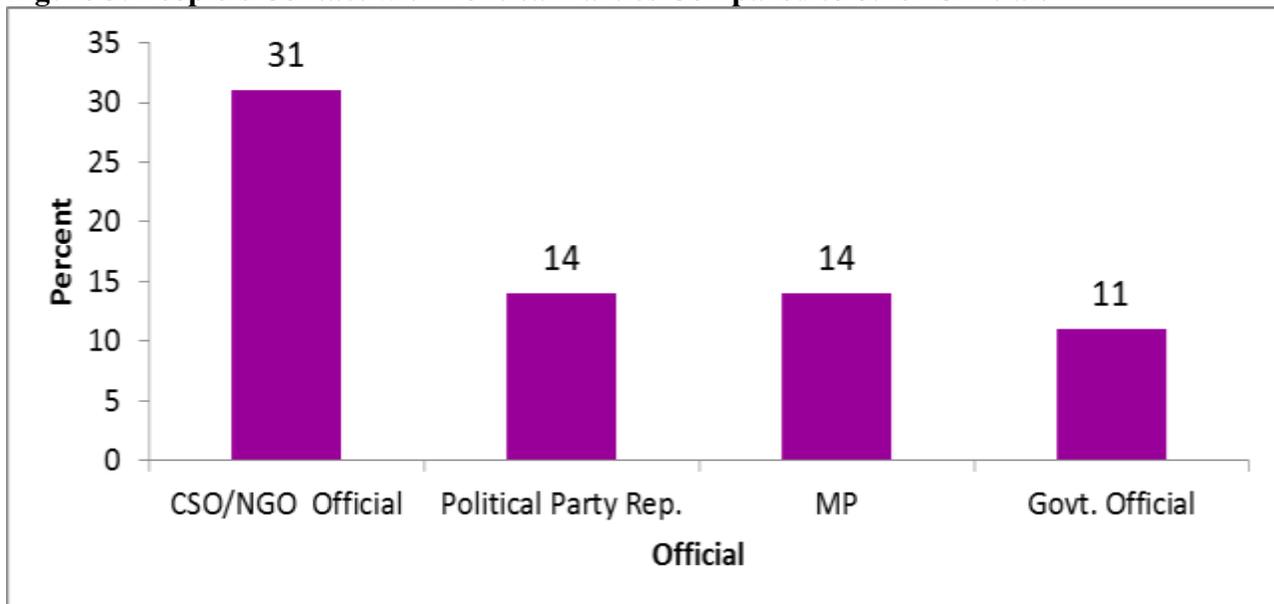
In the Afrobarometer survey, Malawians were asked how frequently they had contacted political party officials. There are, obviously, questions regarding what level of party official is being referred to. In terms of practical understanding, the concept of presence of party officials is not strange to Malawians. The following narration of Malawians' 30 year experience with MCP illustrates this:

The MCP had an efficient structure down to the grassroots level and was therefore present even in the remotest villages as a quasi-state institution. A well organised special branch system supported by the paramilitary movement, Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) – trained by the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad, and the police force – kept tight control on all parts of society. Even the slightest critical comment about the MCP, the government or the life president carried serious consequences for the critics if they were discovered. Militant members of the League of Malawi Youth – a wing of the MCP – forced all Malawians to renew their annual party membership. The membership card was used as a quasi identity card (there are no ID-cards in Malawi). It was checked in every market, on buses and in hospitals (Meinhardt, H., and Patel, N. 2003: 4).

This graphic presentation makes at least one point: that Malawians clearly understand the concept of contact with political party officials such that they would not be lost in answering a question about the extent of their contact as posed in Afrobarometer surveys.

The latest Afrobarometer survey in Malawi reveals that only 14% of Malawians had made at least one contact with officials of a political party in the past year. Like the government officials and members of parliament, the contact level is low, and parties are actually doing worse than Civil Society Organisations (Figure 3).

Figure 3: People’s Contact with Political Parties Compared to other Officials



During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?...a political party official? (figures shown are percentages of those who reported contact with officials at least once, i.e. “only once”, “a few times” or “often.”)

This problem is not only observed in 2012. Even across time, the contact level has been low. It was 22% in 2003. In 2005, only 10% of Malawians indicated that they had made at least one contact with a political party official over the preceding year.

As argued above, the low level of contact between the principal - the people – and political parties acting as agents casts doubts on the relevance of political parties and their effectiveness in playing their representative role. While the trustee theory of representation may suggest that it is possible to have a representative who is not in constant contact with the represented, it is increasingly becoming a consensus that the electorate should not resign after casting a vote if democracy is to work (Chandhoke, N. 2009; Luna, J.P and Zechmeister, E. 2005; Panday, P.K. 2008).

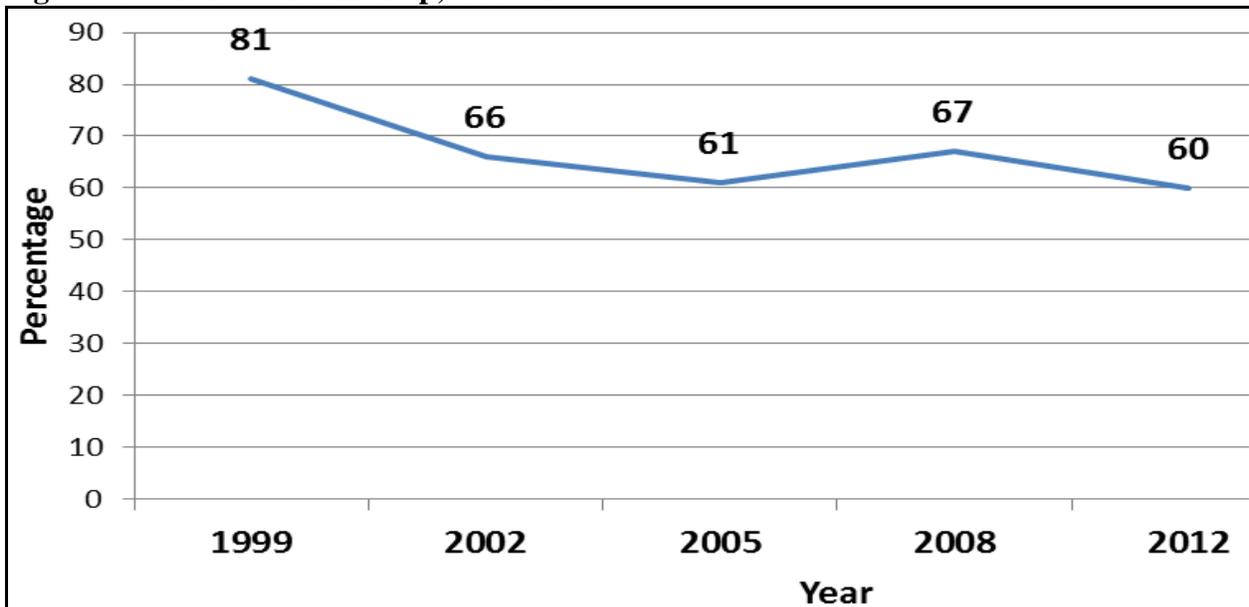
5. Relevance of Political Parties and Political Party Affiliation

Borrowing from Easton (1966) (cited in Hitherington, M. J. 1998), support for political parties can either be specific or diffuse. Specific support comes from approval of the performance of the institution, in this case, the political party. Diffuse support is the positive attitude that people have regardless of performance. By asking Malawians about whether they feel close to a party, the study captures support from both angles. There are various factors explaining levels of people's non-attachment to political parties. These include proximity to election, salience of heavily contested issues, and the fact that some members of the society are apathetic. Granting that these are important, if people feel no sense of attachment to political parties, it suggests that the parties have no value to them or, at least, the motivation to align with the parties is not appealing enough. Even if this non-affiliation does not spring from poor delivery, the very essence of political parties is under threat when the people, that parties purportedly serve, feel no attachment to them.

The observation of partisanship in Malawi can be analysed from two angles. First is the broad question of whether people feel attached to a party. The second is which parties have this attachment and what proportion of the total number of parties in the country are they? While the former concerns the broader situation of partisanship, the latter is about isolating the standing of specific political parties within the system. The idea is to examine whether some parties are more relevant than others.

With respect to general levels of partisanship, the majority of Malawians indicate some attachment to a political party, although the proportion has declined very significantly in the past decade (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Trend in Partisanship, 1999-2012



Do you feel close to any political party? (figures shown are percentages of the respondents who said “yes”)

Overall, the figure shows a positive vote for political parties. On average since 1999, approximately two-thirds of Malawians indicated they feel close to a political party. This is significant to the parties since in a way they can justifiably claim relevance regardless of whether it is diffuse or specific support. This high rating is however diluted by the quite substantial fall in partisanship over time, from 81% in 1999 to 60% in 2012. The trend itself shows parties’ failure to sustain the appeal they had in the eyes of the public. While this could be a result of many factors including people’s frustration with their leaders switching from one party to another, it suggests that parties have delivered below the expectations that people had in 1999.

When asked to identify the party they feel close to, some parties attracted considerable support, while others were not mentioned at all (Table 1).

Table 1: Trends in Political Party Support, 1999-2012

Party	Support (%)				
	1999	2003	2005	2009	2012
Alliance for Democracy (Aford)	27	4	2	0.4	0.02
Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)	NA	NA	21	48	16
Peoples Party (PP)	NA	NA	NA	NA	27
Malawi Congress Party (MCP)	24	15	14	6	4
United Democratic Front (UDF)	46	44	22	9	9
Republican Party (RP)	NA	NA	1	0.4	0.05
Peoples Progressive Movement (PPM)	NA	NA	1	0.1	1
Peoples Transformation Party (Petra)	NA	-	-	-	0.05
Maravi Peoples Party (MPP)	NA	NA	NA	-	0.1
Malawi Democratic Party (MDP)	0.4	-	-	-	0.04
Malawi Forum for Unity and Democracy (Mafunde)	NA	-	-	0.4	0.2

'NA' means the assessment did not apply because the party had not yet been founded

Do you feel close to any political party? [if yes] Which party is that? (figures shown are percentages of respondents who mentioned the respective political parties that they felt close to)

The table shows all parties that have been mentioned by at least one respondent (i.e., 0.05% of the sample) at any point in their respective histories.⁴ As summarised in the table, only four parties, namely PP, DPP, MCP, and UDF, got support from more than 1% in the 2012 survey. The rest of the parties are simply insignificant and do not command support. In Malawi, the concept of 'briefcase parties' is widely used and understood. It refers to entities that are registered as political parties but are only identified with their leader. While in the context of neo-patrimonial politics the leader is the figurehead in most parties, the 'briefcase parties' have little or no identifiable structure and few members. But it is also clear that even some of the once well-established parties are witnessing a decline in support: the MCP, UDF, DPP, and Aford are all on their way to extinction if the present trends continue.

It should be noted that since 1993 over 40 political parties have been registered. While United Party, Mass Movement for the Young Generation, National Independent Party, and National Democratic Alliance are known to have been deregistered, the rest remain political parties on paper. Therefore besides those outlined above there are many others that even challenge the very conventional definition of parties. Svasand and Mpesi (2012) conclude that political parties in Malawi meet most definitions of a political party. Contrary to this, there are some 'parties' that best epitomise what Sartori (2005, cited in Svasand and Mpesi 2012) calls problem of conceptual travelling. They do not field candidates thereby negating what is at the core of any definition of a political party: an effort to assume political power.

6. Relevance and Party Manifestos

Political parties are said to be "the specialised [interest] aggregation structure of modern societies" (Almond and Powell 1966: 102). As rightly argued by Svasand and Mpesi (2012; 8),

⁴ Keep in mind that the margin of error is +/-2%, so the distinctions shown in the table among various parties receiving less than 1% of the votes are not statistically significant.

“electoral manifestos are a concrete expression of the interest aggregation function performed by political parties”. The content of the electoral manifestos reflects how political parties plan to address issues of national concern. Ideally, manifestos should reflect the concerns of the people since political parties are supposed to be simply converting popular demands into policy alternatives. A discord between the interest of the people and the content of political party manifestos would thus be an indication of irrelevance of the political parties and their failure to successfully serve as link agents.

Here we examine how manifestos of major political parties in Malawi dovetail with or depart from the issues of primary concern to Malawians by outlining the five top national problems identified by Malawians over the past decade, and then compare these with the content of political party manifestos.

When asked what they consider the most important problems warranting government action, Malawians have generally been quite consistent over time, albeit with some minor shifts in the order of priority (Table 2).

Table 2: Malawians’ Five Most Important Problems, 2003-2012

Rank	Most Important Problem			
	2003	2005	2008	2012
1	Food Shortage/famine (29%)	Food Shortage/famine (49%)	Food Shortage/famine (37%)	Food Shortage/famine (19%)
2	Farming/Agric. (12%)	Farming/Agric. (12%)	Farming/Agric (14%)	Management of the Economy (18%)
3	Poverty/destitution (12%)	Water Supply (6%)	Water Supply (11%)	Farming/Agric (9%)
4	Unemployment (10%)	Education (4%)	Poverty/destitution (7%)	Water Supply (7%)
5	Management of Economy (9%)	Poverty/Destitution (4%)	Management of the Economy (5%)	Poverty/destitution (7%)

In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address?

Note: Respondents could give up to three answers. (Percentages shown are the proportions of all substantive responses received)

The table shows that food shortage and famine has been the most frequently cited problem during every survey between 2003 and 2008, followed in most years by farming and agriculture related issues. In 2012, management of the economy replaced farming and agricultural as the second most important problem facing Malawians. Other problems that have been considered important are unemployment, poverty/destitution, water supply, and education. Ordinarily, political parties would be expected to draw manifestos reflecting these problems as their own

priority areas. Below is a catalogue of priorities and their rankings for each of the major political parties in Malawi based on their manifestos (Table 3).

Table 3: Political Party Priorities According to Electoral Manifestos, 1999-2009

PARTY	PRIORITIES		
	1999	2004	2009
UDF	1. Guaranteeing food security	1. Empowering local communities	1. Guaranteeing ethical governance agenda
	2. Delivering universal health care	2. Guaranteeing food security	2. Fostering prosperity, eradicating poverty
	3. Advancing quality education	3. Delivering universal health care	3. Consolidating agriculture, fisheries and livestock
	4. Ensuring economic prosperity	4. Advancing quality education	4. Advancing quality health care
	5. Devolving power to the community	5. Creating employment opportunities	5. Delivering quality education
MCP	1. Good governance, accountability and transparency	1. Good governance, accountability and transparency	1. Good governance, accountability and transparency
	2. National Security	2. National Security	2. National Security
	3. Civil service reform	3. Civil service reform	3. Civil service reform
	4. Economic growth and development- agriculture, food security, education, health and population	4. Economic growth and development- agriculture, food security, education, health and population	4. Economic growth and development - agriculture, food security, education, health and population
	5. Environment	5. Environment	5. Environment
DPP	Not yet founded	Not yet founded	1. Zero tolerance to corruption 2. Creating new worth 3. Human rights and rule of law 4. Producing own goods 5. Agriculture and food security
Aford	1. Good government and rule of law	Aford formed an electoral alliance with UDF	1. Delivery of basic needs
	2. Human rights		2. Building of economy and creating jobs
	3. Democratisation of the government		3. Combating crime and corruption
	4. Building economy		4. Transforming the state
	5. Economic production sector		5. Building a better Africa

It should be pointed out that most of the electoral manifestos are comprehensive, touching every aspect of the social and economic lives of Malawians. The summary above is an attempt to identify issue saliency, i.e., the issues that “a party thinks are most important, and therefore pays much attention to” (Svasand and Khembo, 2007:231).

A comparison of the most important problems singled out by Malawians with UDF's priority issues reveals that UDF was devoted to addressing food security during its term of office (1999-2004), the same issue which Malawians singled out as their top priority. But in 2005, food security remained the top problem, amongst citizens, whilst "empowering of local communities" became the UDF's priority, followed by food security. In 2008, Malawians highlighted the same problem, but this ceased to be a top priority issue for the UDF party. Thus, in more recent years there has been a growing distance between the top five priorities for the party and the 'demands of the people'.

The structure of the MCP manifestos has remained unchanged through the years from 1999 to 2009. The party's priority issue has always been good governance, accountability and transparency. This is followed by national security in second position, with the civil service reforms as third. The popular focus on food security only falls fourth for the MCP under economic growth and development. In its discussion of strategies for economic growth, the first is food security and agro-based cash income, which are the critical problems for the citizens. Some sense of responsiveness is reflected by this ordering. That granted, the rigid structure suggests a lack of dynamism and responsiveness to the changing demands of the people. The broad issue about the structure, though, is that lumping together all the strategies under economic development or social development obscures the priority arrangement of the issues. What the current arrangement means is that all issues identified as critical problems by Malawians are consistently fourth in MCP manifestos.

The Democratic Progressive Party has only participated in one general election, in 2009. The top ranking issue in its manifesto is zero tolerance for corruption, followed by creating new wealth, human rights and rule of law, and domestic production of goods. The popular priority on agriculture and food security only ranks fifth on the DPP's agenda; the party's other top issues do not reflect the people's ranking.

The Alliance for Democracy had two manifestos within the period under analysis. In 2009, Aford prioritised delivery of basic needs followed by building the economy and creation of jobs. Much as delivery of basic needs includes improving the agricultural sector, there is no reference, let alone explicit mention of food security (people's popular demand) in the manifesto. In general, Aford manifesto is wanting in focus and detail as a document for policy options. As a result it is difficult to relate Aford's manifesto to the issues raised by the people.

This analysis shows some variation in the degree to which political party agendas dovetail with the aspirations of the citizenry. However, the big picture from this comparison is that political parties have not adequately prioritized the issues regarded as critical by the electorate.

7. Conclusion

While this paper presents no conclusive verdict on whether "the political party is over" or the "political party is back", the following summary and conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing discussion regarding the relevance of political parties.

First, about half of Malawians do not trust political parties in general. The picture is particularly bleak for opposition parties. If this absence of trust affects people's assessments of the performance of political parties, and then in turn further undermines trust, then political parties in Malawi face a stiff test of relevance. Considering the fact that there is more distrust in opposition parties, the risk of a *de facto* one-party system is very real.

Second, levels of contact between political parties and the people they purportedly connect to the state and policy makers are very low. With such limited contact, parties' claims of relevance in terms of representing the people are called into question. If the principals (the people) have only limited contact with the agent (the party) to transmit their views, demands and interests then the representation role of parties cannot be fulfilled.

Third, Malawians are highly 'partisan' in general. At least two-thirds of the population have indicated feeling close to a political party over the years. This suggests people still find parties relevant in themselves or to serve some ends. This silver lining is tainted by the fact that partisanship is declining. Worse still, only a few parties can claim significant support. The majority are 'souvenir parties' and as good as none existent, which is a highest mark of irrelevance.

Fourth, the analysis of party manifestos reveals a significant discord between the parties and the people. Popular demands are not adequately aggregated into policy options. The problem is with priorities as much as it is with failure to clearly isolate issues to reflect the concerns of the people. Whether based on a general outline of areas of focus or on detailed assessments of issue emphasis, the people and their political parties intersect on few junctions. The disconnection between people's needs and party manifestos can partly be attributed to the limited amount of contact between the electorate and party officials, making it difficult for the parties to know the aspirations of the people.

In a nutshell, while scholars continue to examine the strengths and weaknesses of political parties by evaluating them against the theoretical standards of the functions of political parties, this paper has used people's attitudes and opinion to reveal that political parties have to recapture their relevance. As contended above, people's attitudes and assessment of performance create a self-driven and self-perpetuating spiral. The current picture suggests political parties' relevance is under real threat of decline and on course for further decline.

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