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Party affiliation in new democracies: Local reactions to the split of the ruling party in Malawi

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The split within Malawi's ruling party in 2005 offers an opportunity to investigate underlying perspectives about what it means to belong to a political party in a new democracy. Although a mirage of a three-party system emerged after the first multiparty election in the early nineties, Malawi is a typical case where the fluidity of party membership is an ongoing process. By reading the existing literature on party affiliation in democratising states, one would expect that rank-and-file members of the political parties easily defect when a new ruling party is formed. This qualitative analysis of the responses from 54 political activists only to some extent supports this perspective, as the findings show a high degree of variation in party loyalty. About 39% defected, which provides limited support to the exiting literature on new democracies that shows how party affiliation is affected by leadership-centred parties and the dominance of the presidency. About 41% did, however, remain loyal. The in-depth interviews carried out with the loyal supporters revealed the importance of acknowledging the high level of partisanship in the electorate. This suggests that many decided to not change party affiliation because they tried to follow the changing sentiments in the electorate.

Key words: Democratic decentralisation, party affiliation, local politics, Malawi.

INTRODUCTION

In their efforts to stay in power, several African presidents have sought to change the rules of political competition by trying to remove the two-term limits on the presidency (Baker, 2002, p. 285). One example is Malawi, where President Muluzi attempted to manipulate the parliament ahead of the 2004 presidential election in order to remove the two-term clause from the constitution. However, as in Nigeria and Zambia, the president's effort was not successful, and he handpicked a successor with the intention of ruling behind the scenes. The ruling party's successor, Bingu Wa Mutharika, refused to be controlled by the ex-president and left the party while serving as president and formed his own party. The new democratic institutions thus passed an important test

when the rules of competition were not changed on the command from the president. Yet these tumults illustrate the unravelling of what looked like a relatively stable party system. In order to obtain a fuller picture about what happened when the three-party system based on regional allegiances fell apart, this study investigates how President Mutharika's party change affected the party affiliations of political activists on the ground. Through in-depth interviews with 54 local councillors in six districts in Malawi, this study examines factors involved in their decision to stay loyal to their original party or to follow the new president after the split of the ruling party.

The study is important for three reasons. First, it broadens our knowledge about the perspectives of local

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representatives. African governments have gotten billions of dollars from international donors to promote democratic decentralisation. In spite of this, research on the political motives, affiliations, and actions of local representatives is oft overlooked. Second, as the article focuses on the consequences that the party split had for local politicians, it offers a

bottom-up perspective on local–national relations. Is the local level linked to the national level through the office of the president or through the political parties? By this the analysis says something about the relevance of a neo-patrimonial paradigm for understanding party affiliation. Third, the article provides some insights into why the relatively stable party system suddenly unravelled. Based on the results of the first two election, held in 1994 and 1999, researchers have classified Malawi's three-party system as relatively stable (Kuenzi and Lambright, 2001, p. 448; Lindberg, 2007, p. 228). The breakdown of the Malawian party system as a consequence of tumults connected to the third election offers information on Lindberg's point that party system institutionalisation is not necessarily a process occurring over time going from fluid to stable systems (2007, p. 241).

PARTY AFFILIATION IN AN AFRICAN SETTING

Based on previous research, how do we expect the local councillors to react to the breakup of the ruling party? The mainstream literature on party affiliation, which is based on studies of parties in established democracies, rests upon an assumption that party switching rarely happens. Hence, this line of thinking would suggest that unless the new party of the president represented a new political issue that no existing party had embraced, most local politicians would remain loyal to their original party and not follow the president. The reason for this is that parties in established democracies are institutionalised, which means that for a great number of party members and leaders the preservation and survival of the party is the ultimate 'goal' of the organisation (Panebianco, 1988, p. 53). Party leaders distribute collective incentives (identity, solidarity, and ideology) and selective incentives (power, status, and material gains) to their members in exchange for loyalty and participation (Panebianco, 1988, p. 10). Most parties are thus rooted in prevailing social cleavages and are expected to preserve and advance the interests of a certain group (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The success of new parties depends therefore on a party's credibility and its capacity to mobilise a new social group for an important emerging issue (Hug, 2001, p. 148). As the new party formation is embedded in a stable party system and an institutional set-up, there are high costs involved in defecting from the mother party to form or join a newcomer. Transaction costs make switching very rare in democracies 'where partisanship is high and voters rely on party labels to pick candidates' (Desposato,

2006, p. 77). In such systems, frequent party switching indicates opportunistic behaviour and violates the expectations among voters that the party activists should demonstrate party loyalty. Voters are therefore likely to punish elites and their parties if they engage in such behaviour.

In contrast, research on party formation and party systems in Africa points to a high probability that the local councillors would decide to follow the president. These party systems are in general weakly institutionalised. National party systems in the democratic regimes in the region tend to be either fluid party systems with high volatility or dominant party systems with low volatility (Bogaards, 2008, pp. 126-127; Lindberg, 2007, p. 216). One of the reasons for this is the weak party organisation in most African countries. Election campaigns in Africa are dominated, for instance, by personality issues and not by struggles between various policy positions (Randall and Svåsand, 2002, p. 33). Some political parties that came out of freedom movements, like the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the United Independence National Party (UNIP) in Zambia, and the South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia, are institutionalised parties that can claim a historic, national mission. Yet most parties are portrayed as vehicles of ambitious political leaders rather than as aggregate institutions for likeminded individuals. One common explanation for this pattern is the dominance of the presidency in African politics. Control over resources and patronage continues to rest with the president, making the capture of the presidency the singular ambition of most politicians (Prempeh 2008; van de Walle 2003). In newly formed democracies there is an inherent gravity towards the governing party. Accessing state resources requires individual politicians to join the president's party or develop an independent powerbase to strike favourable deals with the president (van de Walle 2007, p. 61). However, as Chabal and Daloz (1999 p. 66) argue, it is important to acknowledge that the politicians are tied to structures outside the party system. Having the correct party label is not a question of gaining selective incentives; it is a question of whether or not development projects are allocated to their community. Therefore, there are two types of selective incentives: individual benefits to the party members and the distribution of development projects to their communities.

Previous research on party coalitions (Kadima and Lembani, 2006), party fragmentation (VonDoepp, 2005; Rakner et al., 2007), and party affiliations (Young, 2012) at the national level in Malawi show that the established parties had fragile roots in the society. Hence, even if something like a three-party system emerged after the authoritarian regime collapsed in the nineties, the parties had weak linkages to the citizens. Party leaders seemed, for instance, more concerned with preserving their personal power bases than building parties with an

independent status and value of their own. A study by Young shows that the flow of parliamentarians across political parties has been a regular feature of Malawian politics since multipartyism began in 1994; parliamentarians switched parties on 131 occasions and to seven different parties (Young, 2012, pp. 10–11). There are thus historically developed habits for dissent, to use VonDoepp's wording, as defections are not 'out of the ordinary' (VonDoepp, 2005, p. 71). One of the reasons realignments among parties are an important feature of politics in the country is that no party had, at least not until the general election in 2009, ever won the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections. Kadima and Lembani's study of party coalitions shows how parties often operate like private companies, where the making, remaking, and unmaking of political alliances are important for the party leaders to position themselves towards the government. A substantial number of parties are only active during electoral periods, and some tend to exist only on paper (2006, pp. 114, 142). This point is demonstrated by Svåsand (forthcoming, p. 8), who found that although the number of registered parties increased fourfold from 1994 to 2009, their capacity to field candidates diminished.

Most parties are thus weakly institutionalised and leadership-centred (Rakner et al., 2007, p. 1114) and exhibit minimal differences in issue salience across parties (Mpesi, 2011, p. 40). Some parties are even financed by one single person, who also happens to be the leader and who automatically decides what is on the party's agenda. This situation contributes to less loyalty in the party organisation, as there are few opportunities for the members to voice their views and to expect political advancement (VonDoepp, 2005 pp. 70–71). In Malawi party conventions are rare and manipulated (Svåsand, 2008), and party leaders often impose their candidates on the electorate in the primaries (Kadima and Lembani, 2006, p. 117). Hence, if a new influential party emerges there is a high probability that local councillors would defect to this party, as there are few collective and selective incentives that encourage them to stay. This assumption is strengthened when considering the dominance of the presidency in Malawian politics and the lack of a salient ideological cleavage (Rakner et al., 2006, p. 1132; Young, 2008, pp. 1, 27). Consequently, existing literature on Malawi gives us few reasons to expect that members of the political parties are loyal. However, as no previous analysis has investigated party affiliation among local representatives before, it is important to test the validity of this assumption, as there might be other factors involved in forming party identity at the local level compared to the national.

THE SPLIT WITHIN THE RULING PARTY

In the two first elections after the collapse of the authorita

-rian regime, a three-party system with regional features emerged. The most successful party in the electorate was the United Democratic Front (UDF), which represented the highly populated south. In the first two elections, the presidential candidate of the UDF, Bakili Muluzi, won with a simple majority. However, the party had no absolute majority in the parliament, governing instead by entering into and exiting out of coalitions with the opposition parties. The two main opposition parties in the first ten years were the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the country's old authoritarian party. The MCP won the majority of the votes in the Central Region while AFORD held the Northern Region. Ahead of the third election in 2004, tumults connected to the amendment of the third-term clause revealed the vulnerability of this regionally-based three-party system. Fragmentation of parties had been a continuing process through all the first years of democratisation, but when President Bakili Muluzi (UDF) convinced the party leader in AFORD to join an alliance to secure votes for the third-term bill, the two parties suffered from severe splintering. The consequence of the third-term debate and other personal and political conflicts within the parties was that thirty different parties were registered in front of the 2004 election (Kadima and Lembani, 2006, pp. 114–115). The third election was, in other words, a window of opportunity for ambitious politicians to re-evaluate their party affiliation (Rakner et al., 2007, p. 1113). The UDF and AFORD lost several votes to regionally-based splinter parties and independent candidates associated with the dominant party in the region (Ferree and Horowitz, 2007, pp. 1-2).

Prior to the election, President Muluzi (UDF) was forced to give up his ambition to change the constitution to allow himself a third term in office; he handpicked an outsider in the party, the fellow southerner Bingu wa Mutharika, as the new presidential candidate of the UDF. The apparent reasoning behind the move was that the relatively old and unknown political lightweight would be vulnerable to political influence, and President Muluzi could continue to run the country from behind the scenes (Maroleng, 2004, p. 78). Mutharika's first try at the presidency was in the 1999 election, but he came in last among the five candidates, taking home less than one per cent of the votes. In 2004, President Muluzi did all the campaigning on Mutharika's behalf, and this time he won, though not convincingly. Immediately after the new president was sworn in, the relationship between Mutharika and the UDF was severely strained. President Mutharika decided to leave the party and formed the DPP in 2005. This effectively transformed the UDF into an opposition party alongside the MCP.

The party split made the political situation even more chaotic. The new opposition, fronted by the UDF, moved to impeach President Mutharika, and supporters of both the new governing party and the opposition ran to the streets to demonstrate. Supporters of the opposition were

dressed in the UDF's yellow colour, chanting anti-Mutharika songs accusing the new president of theft, since they never voted for him personally, but for the UDF. Demonstrators supporting President Mutharika shouted: 'We want food and not impeachment'.[2] They wanted the bitter rivalry between Muluzi and Mutharika to end so that the president could concentrate on welfare issues. One of the reasons for this was that the conflict between the presidency and the opposition-run parliament had a negative effect on the passing of bills, such as the budget. The first problem that emerged was that about 60 to 80 parliamentarians had decided to unofficially support or to switch to the new ruling party, even if Section 65 in the constitution was amended in 2002 to prevent parliamentarians from crossing the floor during their electoral term. The clause gives the speaker the right to declare seats of MPs who defect as vacant and demand by-elections. President Mutharika argued that Section 65 was an offence to the freedom of association and took the matter to the Supreme Court. In a ruling on 15 June 2007, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of Section 65, but the speaker decided to not declare any seats vacant. The opposition thus refused to co-operate, and a situation of deadlock appeared when the opposition refused to discuss the 2008/09 budget until all the MPs who had defected to the DPP declared their parliamentary seats vacant. President Mutharika's reaction was to suspend the parliament, threaten to withhold the MPs' salaries, and say that he intended to rule on decree until the opposition leaders promised to pass the budget. After a few months the opposition agreed to pass the budget.

In addition to this, the party split had a negative effect on the process of democratic decentralisation, which influenced the political opportunity structure for the local politicians. The term of office for the local assemblies expired soon after the DPP was formed. In February 2005, the local councillors received a message on the radio stating that local assemblies were dissolved, and instead of arranging new local elections, President Mutharika rescheduled them to a tripartite election in 2009.[3] High economic expenditures were used to explain why the democratic local government structures were abolished, but it was apparent that the president bought time, as the DPP lacked roots in society. Actually, only after Mutharika won his second presidential term in May 2009 did a representative of the government announce that local elections were scheduled for May 2010. One common explanation for the delay is that since the DPP was founded from above and consisted of parliamentarians who defected from other parties and

[2]Africa News Update, The Norwegian Council for Africa, Raphael Tenthani, 'Malawi: Opposition supporters back move to impeach Mutharika', 19 October 2005.

[3] As of 10 February 2009, such a bill has not yet been presented to the National Assembly.

independent candidates, the party needed time to ensure that it had enough support throughout the country to run the risks of a local election. President Mutharika has lived most of his grown-up life abroad, and the party had at the time very weak ties to groups in society. On the contrary, the UDF had been in government since 1994, and they won a landslide victory in the local elections in 2000, taking some 71% of the votes. Members of the UDF were elected into political offices all over the country, something that tied the party to grassroots structures even outside its stronghold. The formation of the new incumbent party opened up the political opportunity structure for local politicians at the same time as old avenues for political influence were closed with the abolition of local assemblies. But to what extent did this affect the party affiliation of the local representatives?

METHODOLOGY

Research for this study was conducted from April to June 2006. The semi-structured interview was the preferred research strategy. As the government had dissolved the local assemblies in 2005 and subsequently decided to postpone the local elections scheduled for 2006, a few difficulties emerged. First, I had to draw a sample of former local councillors from lists provided by the district administration, as there were no official local representatives operating at the time of the research. Second, as the local representatives had no official obligations at the district headquarter, it was sometimes difficult to get a hold of the former councillors. Yet great efforts were made to cover councillors from various parts of the district. In all, 54 former councillors were interviewed for this study. The councillors were asked some 20 questions about their role in local politics and the local power relations. The questions that form the basis of this study are as follows: 'When and why did you decide to get engaged in politics?'; 'In the 2000 local elections, did you run for a specific party?'; 'Are you a member of that party today?'; and 'Why have you decided to stay/change (in that) party?' In-depth interviews were also carried out with an additional 110 local stakeholders, such as local party leaders, members of parliament, traditional leaders, religious leaders, journalists, business people, members of NGOs, teachers, and administrative employees. These interviews contributed to a further understanding of the political context within which the political activists operate, though they are not used as a direct source of information in this article.

Districts selected for research were Nkatha Bay and Mzimba in the Northern Region, Kasungu and Ntcheu in the Central Region, and Mangochi and Mulanje in the Southern Region. The selection of districts was guided by the following criteria: (1) representation of the three regions of Malawi because of the regionalistic features of

the party system; (2) exploration of the urban–rural divide (the two town assemblies in Mangochi and Kasungu); and (3) proximity to the current and former presidency. The interviews were conducted at the respondents' workplace, in their homes, in their gardens, at the premises of the district administration, or at a restaurant. Most respondents answered in English, but in a few cases a translator interpreted the conversation. The respondents answered about twenty standardised questions, but they were always encouraged to clarify and elaborate beyond these. Questions were asked about their motives for joining politics, their former and current membership in political parties, why they had joined a certain political party, and why they had chosen to stay loyal to this political party or why they had chosen to support another political party.

STABILITY AND CHANGE IN PARTY AFFILIATION

After the transition to democracy in 1994, the central government delayed for years the process of establishing local democratic institutions. The reason for this was, according to Kaunda (1999, p. 591), that it expected the opposition would win local elections in their electoral strongholds and then compete with the government over scarce local revenues. The first local multiparty elections were held in 2000, and in spite of the regionalistic features of the party system, the UDF won the majority of the seats in both the Southern Region as well as in the MCP stronghold, the Central Region. AFORD managed to win a considerable share of the votes in the Northern Region (Table 1). The UDF won 93.1% of the seats in the Southern Region, 75.9% of the seats in the Central Region, and 19.9% of the seats in the Northern Region.

Three factors influenced the outcome of the election. First, the quality of the election is debatable, as the voter turnout was only 14%. The low turnout in the local elections is ascribed to rampant sabotage, use of threats, lack of civic education, and voter apathy, all of which are more prevalent in local elections versus national elections. Many voters either voted on the basis of fear and coercion or stayed away from the polls altogether .

According to results provided by the Malawi Electoral Commission, the voter turnout of registered voters was slightly higher in the north than in the Central and Southern Regions. For instance, in Soche West in the Blantyre Town Assembly in the Southern Region, only 610 out of 13,036 voters turned up on election day. Second, local opinion leaders, like traditional authorities, stressed the importance of supporting the government of the day to make sure that development projects were distributed to their communities. If the local assembly was dominated by members of the opposition parties, it might limit the opportunities of the communities to receive government grants. The pull towards the incumbent was enforced by the presence of the UDF's Young Democrats, who inherited some of the Young Pioneer's methods

of using violence and threats to secure obedience to MCP rule under Dr Banda. Third, local elections were new for the electorate and the office-seeking local candidates, while the roles and the functions of the local technocrats, the MPs, and the institutions of the traditional authorities were well known. The low voter turnout can therefore be credited to lack of civic education about what the role of the local councillors should be.

Even if it is possible to question the legitimacy of the local elections in 2000, it is still interesting to study how the party affiliation of local representatives had developed and reacted to the split within the ruling party. Table 2 shows the number of political activists included in this study whose party support in 2006 was the same as it was in 2003. This table also captures the realignments among the parties.

Of the 54 interviewed, 22 local representatives had not changed party affiliation from 2003 to 2006, while 21 said they had defected to another party. Among the respondents, eleven argued that they did not have any party affiliation at the time of the interview. Out of these, four were waiting out the situation while seven had left the political arena. In other words, 41% remained loyal to the party with which they were affiliated in 2003, while 39% had defected to another party. None of the respondents had defected to one of the key opposition parties, while as many as 90% of the defectors had defected to the ruling party. This finding revealed a high degree of variation. Thus, there is reason to expect a complex array of factors affecting party affiliation among local representatives. There are, however, three main tendencies: first, quite a substantial number of UDF supporters remained loyal; second, the AFORD members switched to DPP; and third, almost all who defected switched to the ruling party.

LOYALTY IN THE UDF

Most of the loyal UDF supporters were from Mangochi, known as the *Chimbundi*[4] of ex-president Muluzi. The majority of the population in the district shares the same ethnic identity as Muluzi, as they are Yao-speaking Muslims. The respondents did not point to their own regional, ethnic, or religious identities when they explained why they decided to remain loyal. Yet some pointed to the partisanship in the electorate. For instance, a few said things like 'the voters support UDF here', which meant that there was no reason to defect if they wanted to run in an election again. The primary concern among the respondents seemed to be the voters rather than putting themselves in a favourable position towards the president. One possible explanation for this is that

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[4] An expression used for a large fence that surrounds the Yao population.

quite a few were disappointed with what they actually had gained by being local councillors.

A common complaint made by councillors all over the country, but particularly in the Southern Region, was that rather than gaining tangible benefits, they had lost their property by entering politics. Some said that they had a small business when they got elected, but lost it because they spent so much time tending to other people's problems. One former councillor revealed that he ran away to the UK in order to get away from his electorate. He had a car when he was elected as a councillor, and after the election people regularly came to ask for favours. As a councillor, the electorate expected him to 'drive their sick sister to the hospital or move their dead relatives from their house'. No one paid for anything, and he said, '[i]n the end, I could not afford it. I had to sell the car and buy a ticket to the UK' (former councillor in Mangochi, 2006, interview, 26 May). Hence, many in this area found that resources did not trickle down to the local level even at times when the councillors were closely related to the acting president. So the expectations of getting access to resources by following a president were low.

However, loyal party members resided outside the stronghold of the UDF as well. For instance, in Kasungu Town Assembly in the Central Region many of the UDF members remained loyal. This supports the finding that the motivation for belonging to a specific party sometimes transcends pure self-seeking interests. In some areas, the local party branch, at least in the times when the local assembly was operating, had meetings on a regular basis, and the members also had valid reasons for preferring the leadership of one party to that of another. When asked about why they stayed loyal, the most frequent explanation provided by the respondents was the policies of the UDF. The political activists painted the contours of a political cleavage between strong law enforcement, represented by the MCP and the DPP, and the right to freedom, represented by the UDF. The loyal UDF activists argued that they stayed loyal because their party represented political, economic, religious, and ethnic freedom. In their descriptions, the UDF was the party that brought political freedom to Malawi after decades of MCP rule. The UDF government introduced local elections, which increased popular participation and downsized the role of traditional leaders. The fact that the DPP government had abolished local assemblies strengthens the reliability of these statements, as the political career opportunities of many local political activists were now stymied.

The economic policies of the UDF seemed equally important for the party members. When the party was in government, it had removed taxes and imposed few restrictions on self-made business people. The strong emphasis on economic policies must be understood in relation to two very unpopular policies implemented by the government at the time of the field study. In contrast to the UDF's more liberal orientation, the DPP government had just enforced legislation saying that all informal vendors had to be removed from the streets. There were also rumours of a new law that would make it difficult to drive pick-ups down to South Africa to buy goods that could be sold on the Malawian market. In particular, owners of small-scale businesses reacted negatively to these restrictions on their economic liberty. Therefore, there seemed to be some small, but significant, differences between the parties, as the DPP was presented as a party that represented strong law enforcement, centralised leadership, and development projects, like fertilizer distribution, provided to the community through the structures of the chiefs. In other words, the DPP rejected local democracy in favour of the chiefs who are appointed and remunerated by the president and who historically have been an important arm of the executive in issues of security, law, and order (Chiweza, 2007, p. 61). Many also expressed concern about the harshness in which certain laws were enforced, such as the removal of informal vendors from the streets. This sentiment was also shared by some of the councillors who had defected from the UDF to the DPP. One defected councillor put it like this: 'The DPP is more like a dictator type of government. They want to take decisions at the top' (former councillor in Kasungu, 2006, interview, 13 May). This means that in the eyes of the supporters, the party they were affiliated with represented something different than the other parties, even if there are minimal differences in the party manifestos and in how parliamentarians vote on legislation.

It is, however, likely that all governments, no matter which party they represent, have a reputation of restricting the freedom of the citizens. Knowledge about how the country was run by the UDF government gives reasons to be cautious about inferences drawn on the basis of interviews. The characteristic of the UDF as a freedom party is debatable. President Muluzi served as a secretary general in the MCP in the late seventies and early eighties, which means that he was an influential figure at some point during the former authoritarian regime. As mentioned earlier, the UDF government for years delayed the process of establishing local democratic institutions, and the vacuum in local governance was filled by chiefs (Chiweza, 2007, p. 61). Hence, when the DPP was launched, President Mutharika adopted Muluzi's strategy of delaying the process of democratic decentralisation. When different respondents criticised the harsh way in which the government enforced its policies, this was not a culture developed by the DPP. Incidents of political violence and restrictions on the opposition were common under both the MCP and UDF governments. It is therefore difficult to state that there is a salient ideological cleavage that separates the policies of the parties. Yet the respondents seemed to think that the two parties represented different leadership styles and had different political priorities. Irrespective of whether this is true or not, the party

supporters interviewed for this study seemed to think that there was a difference between the parties.

However, the most apparent reason for why most stayed loyal was the partisan character of the electorate. This category consists of responses where party affiliation was explained by the need to be affiliated with the most popular party. An example of such responses is, '[i]f there were elections today, the UDF would scoop all the seats. I think the DPP wants to penetrate, but that is very difficult here' (former councillor in Mulanje, 2006, interview, 30 May). Party loyalty can thus be explained by factors that are commonly used in the mainstream literature on party politics in established democracies. In some districts, there were obvious transaction costs of switching that were imposed by voters. Political activists who want to get elected into a political office will not switch parties if the constituency is partisan. The majority of the loyal UDF interviewees resided in the south and were from an area where the majority of the voters support the UDF or an individual candidate. There were thus high costs involved in running for a party that has no tradition for getting votes in this particular constituency. It is not always necessary to have the right party label if the candidate has important individual merits or resources, but having the wrong party label might be devastating in places where the electorate is relatively partisan. When some had not even been granted access to state resources by staying close to the ex-president, why follow the current president?

DEFECTIONS FROM THE AFORD

At the end of the 30-year-long MCP regime, AFORD was the first pressure group that came out in the open, with Chakufwa Chihana, a northerner, as the party leader. The party was branded a 'northern affair' by the MCP, even if its executive was regionally diverse (van Donge, 1995, p. 246). According to van Donge, the party portrayed itself as the intellectual, untainted party, as it was the only party with a leadership that lacked a real connection to the MCP past (1995, p. 249).

In the local elections in 2000, AFORD won 73.1% of the seats in the Northern Region, though they did not win the majority of seats in the Nkatha Bay and Likoma district assemblies. Voter turnout in most of the wards in the Northern Region was in fact higher than the national average. But by 2006, AFORD's popularity in the north had vanished. The local representatives affiliated with AFORD in 2003 were the least loyal in the sample. Six out of fourteen had defected to the DPP, while only one stayed loyal. It was rather the strategic choices made by the leadership in connection to the third-term debate and the third general election that were very unpopular among the members of the party and in the electorate. In the 2004 elections, AFORD lost 23 of its 29 MPs obtained from the 1999 elections, and Chihana was not

reappointed as second vice-president.[5] In the aftermath of the election and the death of the party founder, the party imploded as different factions fought to control the organisation. At the time of the research, it was already clear that DPP had filled at least parts of the political vacuum that occurred after AFORD crumbled. The DPP was the only party clearly visible in the landscape in the northern district of Mzimba, with a new office painted in blue – conveniently enough, the same colour as the AFORD symbol.

The majority of those who defected or had not decided which party they would join explained their decision by pointing to the meagre situation of their old party. As they explained, the party was no 'longer in tune with the current issues' (former councillor in Mzimba, 2006, interview, 2 May), and 'one has to go were the political wave is going' (former councillor in Mzimba, 2006, interview, 3 May). Hence, they had to find a new party. The obvious choice was the new ruling party – the DPP. Only one political activist interviewed for this study stayed loyal to AFORD. His reason for loyalty was simple: 'I believe that nothing is going to change me' (former councillor in Mzimba, 2006, interview, 2 May). Yet based on other interviews conducted in the area, this particular political activist was chased away from his village because he had misused funds that were allocated for a borehole project. Apparently, he could not run for any election again, and the importance of belonging to the most popular party in the electorate was rather irrelevant.

The reason the former AFORD supporters had defected to the DPP was that they saw the split within the ruling party as an opportunity to construct a new party on the remnants of the old. As the respondents explained, President Mutharika had no party when he left the UDF. As a result of this, they had to help him form one. The initiative, however, came from the ground and not as a consequence of the new party's effort to mobilise support countrywide. Apparently, the leadership of the DPP had not made any strong efforts to mobilise potential supporters in the region. It was rather ambitious local politicians who saw the DPP as an opportunity structure that enabled them to be among the first members of the most influential party in the country. Some of the new party members were disappointed in the leadership, as they had never held a national convention. When they joined they had 'looked for the party with highest chances of forming government' (DPP party member in Mzimba 2006, interview, 7 May), but the lack of internal distribution of resources to local party members made them question the leadership of the party. The party leaders made few attempts to build roots in society and provide their members with collective and selective incentives in return for their participation. This suggests

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[5] The position as second vice-president was created in 1995 solely for the purpose of establishing a coalition between UDF and AFORD.

that the local politicians' decisions to build a local DPP were motivated by the opportunity to get access to both development projects and personal advancement within the new party structure. The intriguing part is that the voters in the north had not turned to support the governing party in the three elections after 1994. Hence, the importance of staying close to the presidency entered as an important factor twelve years after multipartyism was reintroduced.

The respondents explained this by referring to the changing moods in the electorate. According to the respondents the community as a whole had started to embrace the leadership style and policies of the president. A former AFORD member said that in his community people were only talking about the DPP. At the moment they just hoped that the current president would make a difference, but 'if he doesn't deliver development, the Northern Region rejects him!' He then referred to the weak ideological link between the parties and the electorate in Malawian politics: 'All parties are pragmatic. They have no ideology. They just do politics day by day. So we join where we can eat, eat, eat' (DPP party member in Nkatha Bay 2006, interview, 1 May). Affections for the new ruling party seemed all in all low among the former AFORD members, but they were hoping that the new president would make a difference. As their old party had disappeared, they went searching for a new opportunity, and the split within the UDF seemed to be it. The northern embrace of the ruling party had thus an interesting consequence for the Malawian party system. President Mutharika is from the Southern Region, and the DPP has made inroads into the stronghold of the UDF at the same time as it captured the northern electorate. The regionalistic features of the party system are thus minimised as an effect of the growing importance of staying close to the presidency.

DEFECTIONS TO THE DPP

An observation that supports the findings of Rakner et al. (2007) and Young (2012) is that almost all defections are in favour of the incumbent party. Many of those who were recruited into politics as local councillors in 2000 by the UDF or AFORD defected to the DPP when the president formed the party in 2005. The most obvious reason to follow the president to the new party was to get access to state resources. But are there any signs that politicians at the local level would get access to state resources by supporting the ruling party? This is a tricky question. Some of the ones that had followed the president from the UDF to the DPP expressed disappointment over the fact that they did not really get their hands on more resources. One DPP supporter said that being a member of the DPP had not given him the benefits he had expected: 'Personally, I have not done anything for the DPP. There are no resources coming down' (DPP party

member in Mangochi 2006, interview, 25 May). Hence, one does not automatically gain access to resources simply by starting to build a local branch of a political party.

Yet there were certain benefits that one could get more easily by showing support to the ruling party. These benefits were not necessarily administered from above, but due to how certain projects were organised in the community. The importance of supporting the incumbent party was illustrated by a political activist who described the tensions between the UDF and the DPP supporters in Mulanje in the Southern Region. When the communities organised self-help projects, it was common practice to get some cash for working on that project. After the formation of the DPP, tensions often were raised over who had the right to work on this project or not. Some of the DPP's local party activists could say, '[t]his project has come to us because of the DPP, and we should only employ the supporters of the DPP'. Then the UDF supporters could reply, '[n]o! You are not the ruling party! People never voted for the DPP' (former councillor in Mulanje, 2006, interview, 1 June). This illustrates how patronage is connected to the ruling party and how the relevance of party membership is in some contexts important in between elections. The community knows the party affiliation of the inhabitants, and informal rules determine who should or should not benefit from development projects. Apparently, those associated with the ruling party benefited most from the projects introduced by the government. Community members were therefore looking at each other to find out who was entitled to earn a bit extra or not.

Another reason to join or even form the local branch of a new ruling party would be to enhance one's political career opportunities. As the DPP did not have an established party organisation, ambitious politicians could join in order to be the first in line to be picked as candidate in the next parliamentary or local elections. The weakness of the party organisation of the former parties was apparent as soon as the local councillors were elected. Members of parliament started to view the local representatives as enemies rather than as likeminded party fellows. According to interviews conducted with 163 stakeholders, as many as 89% of the respondents (excluding missing values) mentioned the strained relationship between the local representatives and the members of parliament. Party affiliations had apparently nothing to say for whether or not a conflict emerged. The conflict was just as often intra-party as it was inter-party. The problem was that the members of parliament became nervous as the local representatives challenged their patron-client relations. Taking care of their obligations as members of parliament required their presence in the capital, while the local representative could run around doing favours for individuals, families, or the whole community. As the story above shows, the voters expected the politicians to help them, often

immediately. Many complained about the members of parliament who just went to the capital, Lilongwe, and forgot all about them, while the local representative lived in the house next door. They were maybe not as affluent as the parliamentarians, but they had more time. In the end, only a few of the councillors who competed against an incumbent member of parliament succeeded in the 2004 election. It thus seems that in spite of their relative closeness to the electorate, it was difficult for local politicians to climb the ladder to the national level. The example does, however, show the fragile shape of the party organisations.

Hence, it seems important to belong to the ruling party. This finding is consistent with existing literature on democratisation (van de Walle, 2003, p. 310) and Rakner et al.'s (2008) and Young's (2012) studies on Malawi. The mixture of presidentialism and patrimonial practices in many democratising countries tends to produce a degree of executive dominance that exceeds what is prescribed in the constitution. There are numerous of examples of how the different presidents in Malawi have tried to manipulate and evade the legislative framework to secure their position. These include, for instance, accusing opponents of treason or corruption, the dissolution of local assemblies, and constitutional amendments to remove the senate. The presidents have also been outspoken about the negative consequences on access to development projects and promotions for those who do not support their government. As a result, the process of establishing linkages between parties and citizens has been damaged. Changes in party affiliation can thus be a result of the priorities of the electorate in different areas. Where the voters prioritise local and particularistic goods, politicians respond by switching to the ruling party, as that will maximise their ability to deliver development projects. As the study shows, there is not necessarily a direct link between supporting the ruling party and getting access to state resources and career advancement at the local level. At the end of the day it is the electorate that decides one's future.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to critically examine when and why local political activists change their party affiliations. The study was inspired by the literature on executive dominance and the importance of neopatrimonialism in Africa, and by reading this literature, one would expect that local political activists would follow the president of the day if the president decides to break with the party from which (s)he got elected and form a new party. The reason for this is that the local political activist is likely to get access more easily to patronage and economic resources as a party affiliate of the president than of the opposition. This analysis of the effects of the split of the ruling party in Malawi reveals a

much more complicated picture, as resources do not necessarily trickle down to elected leaders at the local level, and in spite of weak party organisations, party labels do have some meaning. Through interviews with 54 political activists across six districts in Malawi, it was obvious that local political activists had made a very conscious decision regarding how they should react to the party split. There were therefore several factors involved when activists made up their minds. However, one seemed most crucial: all had to think carefully about where the electorate was moving in this district.

The most apparent finding in this analysis is therefore not that about half of the local party members had decided to defect from the UDF to follow the president to the DPP. The most interesting finding is that the ones that followed the president gave relatively similar explanations as those who remained loyal to the UDF. Regardless of whether they defected or remained, most made a decision that was in line with the current sentiments in their local communities. This means that they did not stay loyal to the president nor to the party but to their fellow community members. The politicians seemed to be fully aware of the fact that it is the electorate that decides their political future. It does not mean anything to be the candidate of the presidential party if the electorate does not vote for you – something that is very well plausible as the entry of independent candidates has changed the political scene completely. It even seems like the power holders in the local community are the ones that judge who should and should not gain from development projects. Hence, situations where one is ostracised from development projects because one is affiliated with an opposition party are most likely to depend on the standing of the ruling party in that particular area. Apparently, Malawian voters know the power of the vote, and the local political activists behave accordingly. This case study thus exemplifies that there is power in the vote even if the wider political arrangement in a country seems to have a flare for neopatrimonialism.

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