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PUBLIC OPINION AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY IN MALAWI

by Maxton Grant Tsoka

**A comparative series of national public
attitude surveys on democracy, markets
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Abstract

Just five years after Malawi's first multiparty elections, a 1999 survey of public attitudes reveals that the legacy of the one-party dictatorship may continue to have an important effect on people's views. Understandings of democracy still seem to be somewhat vague, and many Malawians think they are getting as much from democracy as they can expect. Although a majority prefer democratic to non-democratic forms of government, some aspects of the old regime are still applauded by many, and most would do little to defend democracy if it were under threat. In general, Malawians do not think that they have any means to influence the political and economic conditions affecting their lives. The perceived failure of the present government to meaningfully improve living standards since 1994 also hurts the prospects for building a strong democratic culture. Objective assessment of democracy and its values and achievements in Malawi is also strongly affected by partisan biases. Many respondents appear to have trouble distinguishing between their party preferences and support for or opposition to the democratic government. Since party support tends to break down along regional lines, the picture of public views that emerges at the national level is far different from that for each of the regions, where wide variations are apparent.

BACKGROUND

Since 1990, many African countries have witnessed the return of popular democracy. In the Southern African region, a number of countries have made the transition from authoritarian political systems to multiparty democracy. After long-term experience of non-democratic rule, democratic systems have been installed against a background of generally weak supporting institutions, attitudes and perceptions. These new democracies may therefore be fragile, and their consolidation is at stake if a supportive political culture is not in place or does not develop fast enough. It is, therefore, essential that, from time to time, popular opinion be measured so as to assess whether or not democracy is taking root.

Furthermore, democracy arrived in these countries amidst economic reforms that predate it by almost a decade. Under pressure from donors, and wishing to continue accessing international aid, the new democracies continued with these reforms, often with only cosmetic changes. Most of the reforms were introduced well before democratization brought about a measure of genuine popular participation in the affairs of the state. Do people understand and welcome these economic reforms? The popularity of structural adjustment and market principles may need to be tested as well.

It is in this spirit that the Centre for Social Research (CSR) at the University of Malawi conducted a nationally representative sample survey to assess what ordinary people think about democracy and the economic reform program. The Malawi survey is part of the 12-country Afrobarometer study that used similar questionnaires, sampling designs and approaches to data analysis. These results were analyzed as part of a set of seven Southern African countries that also includes Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Botswana.[ref] The questionnaire covered issues such as economic and security conditions, the government's management of economic and political affairs, popular participation in and knowledge of politics, and citizens' understanding of and support for democracy. We were especially interested in comparing popular attitudes toward the current democratic regime and the one-party regime that preceded it.

This report presents basic descriptive statistics on the *perceptions, attitudes and actions* of ordinary Malawians with respect to democracy and the economic reform program. It also offers some preliminary analysis and interpretation. The results are presented in five main areas: democratic consolidation, state legitimacy, government performance, economic reform and performance, and citizenship. The discussion is preceded by a brief presentation of the context of the study and the methodology employed.

POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

This section presents selected factors that have shaped people's perceptions and attitudes towards politics and economics in Malawi. These include the one-man and one-party rule of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the historical 1993 referendum, the introduction of a new constitution with its bill of rights, and the victory of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the first multiparty elections in 1994. Also discussed are the controversial UDF

win in the 1999 elections, the impact of identity and regional politics, and the prevalence of poverty.

The Legacy of the Banda-MCP Years

The Malawi Congress Party (MCP) under Dr. Banda ruled the country from 1963 to 1993. By 1967, the MCP had consolidated its position as the major political party and Malawi was a *de facto* one party state. In 1971, Malawi became a constitutional one-party state; Kamuzu Banda was made life president and assumed absolute powers. The 1971 constitution provided for the independence of the judiciary and Parliament and also the separation of powers among the three branches of the government. However, the absolute powers of Life President Banda made all these noble provisions invalid. In practice, the judiciary and legislature were mere rubber stamps for the strongman, and the citizens who fought against colonialism and federation were effectively turned into subjects.

Naturally, elections for members of parliament and president were not competitive, nor was there any direct campaigning. Some semblance of electoral competition was evident in the selection of members of parliament, but President Banda did not hesitate to use his powers to change the electorate's choices or to nominate additional members to parliament. Further, the President had the power to dissolve Parliament without cause. Over time, as people realized that their votes were ineffectual, political apathy set in.

Similarly, the independence of the judiciary existed only on paper. By hiring and firing judges, the President ensured that the high and supreme courts could not make independent decisions. He also established a parallel system of traditional courts, whose "judges" were drawn from the ranks of chiefs and headmen, invariably without legal training. Regional and national traditional courts handled major cases like treason, murder and related cases, assuring the government of guilty verdicts for those perceived to be enemies of the regime. Judges in both court systems feared for their lives, while the public had little trust in the judicial system because it was apparent to them that the courts were subordinated to the executive.

The three decades of Banda's rule were marked by the abuse of human rights and absence of freedoms. Detentions without due process, torture, political killings and mysterious deaths and abductions were common. The government and the party were one. The role of the police in keeping law and order were minimized as the MCP's paramilitary wing and youth league broadened their activities to include suppressing dissenting views, eliminating so-called subversive elements, conducting arbitrary arrests of suspects, and administering instant justice. Both the police and paramilitary worked against the people, and they were widely feared.

Indeed, everyone in the country, including the President, lived in fear. Banda's own paranoia led to the creation of the security system that protected his person and his regime. Since everyone was a suspect, people tried to live carefully to avoid crossing the path of the elaborate and ruthless security system, resulting in a culture of silence. There was no open discussion of politics or debate of government policies. Even the mention of the title or name of the President

was taboo. On a positive note, the extensive security system also limited the incidence of crime, thus affording people a measure of personal security which they now seem to miss.

Banda's regime also managed to suppress the entrepreneurial spirit of Malawians. The MCP slogan that "everything belongs to Kamuzu" and the practice of grabbing property from successful entrepreneurs (under the guise that they were rebels) had the effect of smothering individual initiative. One had to be a party loyalist to prosper under this economic regime, while at the same time making sure that one did not appear to be too prosperous. Party and government officials were on alert to pounce on anyone who dared show that he was "eating" well. Thus, with time, people became resigned to being poor. And while they may have wished to depend on provision of public services from government, in practice they learned to rely on themselves because government rarely delivered.

How then does Banda's legacy affect the environment for democracy and its consolidation? There are several possible impacts that we should watch for. First, we might expect to find that many people accept being subjects rather than citizens. They may welcome the new freedom of expression introduced by democratization but, at the same time, still feel hesitant to express their political opinions. They may also continue to shy away from criticizing government, remaining accustomed to being passive receptors of government policies. Malawians are generally secretive and suspicious of each other, especially in matters of politics, and even now, it is common for them to provide a "don't know" response or to refuse to answer survey questions on political matters. It should not be surprising if we observe that Malawians find it easier to go to political rallies than to engage themselves in open debate and discussion. The absence of a critical mind-set is manifested even in Parliament, where there is little meaningful debate on major issues affecting the politics and economics of the country.

Secondly, we may find that democracy continues to be an alien concept to both politicians and ordinary people, with important implications for the consolidation of the new political regime. Government remains suspicious of opposition forces, who, in turn, are themselves suspicious of the government. Sometimes government officials have problems accepting practices that ought to be commonplace in a functioning democracy. For, example, they do not take kindly to political criticism or to court rulings against the government. People, judges and media outlets that are considered pro-opposition are shunned and quickly dubbed "anti-development." Likewise, the opposition hardly appreciates positive aspects of the government, dismissing every government initiative just for the sake of opposition, and rarely granting credit when it is due. For example, the opposition "pats the back" of the judiciary if court rulings are in its favor, but otherwise the judiciary is labeled "biased" and "pro-government." Ordinary people, for their part, at times may abuse their new-found rights under democracy while shunning the responsibilities that go with them.

Thirdly, we might also find that people are risk averse and inactive as citizens (or subjects). They may not see themselves as agents of change, able to shape or direct the government's economic and development agenda. We may find that people are quick to mention what government should do for them, but slower to identify what they can do to assist themselves, which would lead them to evaluate the government's performance with questionable yardsticks.

To be popular, the government has claimed to be the principal provider of development, including services that could as well be provided by the private sector, while portraying economic and public reform programs as an imposition by donors. How has this approach affected the public's views?

The survey responses presented in this paper will help us to evaluate the truth of some of these expectations, and understand the legacies of Malawi's past, as well as the opportunities and challenges of the present, and how Malawians perceive their current system and the potential it offers for a better future.

The Second Republic

Malawi's Second Republic was born in 1993 when the public voted in a national referendum to adopt a multiparty system of government. Following multiparty elections in May 1994, a new government led by the United Democratic Front (UDF) under President Bakili Muluzi was sworn in. By the end of the same month, a new constitution, including a bill of rights containing all basic freedoms, was enacted. These constitutional guarantees opened up a degree of political space for some sections of the population, especially the youth, the educated, and urban dwellers, who have come to exercise their right to self-expression more freely than in the years before 1993. On the other hand, the relaxation of controls over society by the police, courts and prisons has ushered in a wave of crime and insecurity. Ordinary people have begun to wonder whether the government cares more about criminals' human rights than those of victims.

Regionalism, Religion and Ethnicity

Regional differences have played a major role in the shaping of the modern political landscape. Malawi has three administrative regions. The least populated is the Northern Region with 12.5 percent of the population, while 41.1 percent live in the Central Region, and the remaining 46.4 percent inhabit the Southern Region. Each of the three major political parties that emerged in 1993 has a regional stronghold. The Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) is strongest in the north, while MCP is strongest in the center and UDF dominates the south. UDF has a slight edge over the other two parties on the basis of demographics. As a result, in the 1999 elections, AFORD and MCP formed an election alliance to try to counteract UDF's strength.

Religion also plays a role in the political economy of the Second Republic. Under one-party MCP rule, Christianity was given prominence, and other religions considered themselves suppressed. The new constitution, with its freedoms, has revived a number of religions, among them Islam. Of the three parties, the ruling UDF, appears to be most sympathetic to Islam; the President and a number of cabinet ministers are all practicing Muslims. This has helped the UDF to gain support in some parts of the Central Region where Islam is predominant, giving it an additional edge over the other two parties.

Likewise, ethnic identities remain important. Under the previous MCP government, efforts were made to suppress tribalism in the name of national unity. However, Chewa-speakers of the Central Region, where President Banda came from, were considered to be favored. In the Second Republic, other ethnic groups moved to reassert themselves. In general, however, ethnic

identities are subsumed by regional biases because, with few exceptions, most tribes are regionally based. However, pockets of support for the non-dominant parties within each region suggest voting based on tribal lines. For example, the two southern-most districts of the Southern Region (a UDF stronghold) voted for the MCP in 1999, while some districts (or parts thereof) in the MCP-dominated Central Region voted for either UDF (among the Yao) or AFORD (among the Tumbuka or Tonga).

Poverty and Democracy

Malawi is a very poor country with lagging socio-economic indicators,¹ a factor which may threaten democratization. Low incomes and a high illiteracy rate, for example, can be real obstacles to democratic consolidation. Politicians generally take advantage of needy and ill-informed populations, easily swaying public opinion in favor of their causes without being challenged. Coupled with poor information flow, poverty makes the poorly-educated masses vulnerable.

Furthermore, poverty in general creates a dependency syndrome, which makes it a little harder for poor people to believe that they can participate in running the state. Further, most poor people are pre-occupied with keeping body and soul together; participation in politics is secondary in survival strategies. As President Muluzi, is often heard to say: “people cannot eat democracy.”

Thus, a combination of social and economic factors mitigate against informed political participation by the poor. The danger is that majority rule in a poor country may mean rule by people elected by a misinformed electorate. An electorate can easily vote on the basis of election handouts or other not-so-important issues like region, religion and tribe.

The Impact of the 1999 Elections

The survey was conducted just after the June 1999 elections, when the mass media and public spaces were still infused with partisan political messages. Posters of presidential candidates, their running mates, and parliamentary candidates were common, and political knowledge was generally high. There was considerable political tension immediately after the announcement of the results, especially among leaders and supporters of the major political parties. The opposition filed a suit challenging the results, and some suspected UDF supporters were chased away from the Northern Region. However, at the time of the survey the atmosphere was calm. The government was involved in a massive distribution of agricultural inputs, known as the “starter pack”; distribution was complete in some parts of the country, but others had not yet received the handouts. In the latter areas, the fact that households had not benefited from this program perhaps influenced individual perceptions during the survey.

¹ See Appendix A for major social and economic indicators.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted using a nationally representative, stratified, random cluster sample with a gender quota. The target was to sample 1200 households, and the actual survey included 1208 households. For a detailed account of the sampling methodology see Appendix B.

The number of respondents in each region (north, central and south) was proportional to the size of its population. Questionnaires were translated into three major languages, Chiyao, Chichewa and Chitumbuka, and the questionnaire was administered in the language of the respondent's choice. Data was entered by CSR using codes and an SPSS data entry template developed by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), which coordinates the Afrobarometer in the seven participating countries in Southern Africa. Data analysis and interpretation was coordinated by IDASA but conducted independently by CSR.

About the Sample

A total of 1208 households were visited in 151 Enumerator Areas (EAs) from 15 districts in the three administrative regions between November 29 and to December 22, 1999. Table 1 shows the comparison between characteristics of the sample group and the national picture based on the last census.

Of surveyed households, 12.7 percent were from the north, 42.0 percent from the Central Region, and 45.3 percent from the south, compared to census shares of 12.5 percent, 41.1 percent, and 46.4 percent, respectively. The gender quota was also met, as 51.0 percent of the respondents were female, compared to the census share of 51.6 percent.

The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 98 years; the survey protocol required that only eligible voters (i.e., those 18 and older) be included in the sample. Forty-five percent of respondents were between 18 and 29 years, 39.1 percent were between 30 and 49 years, and the remaining 15.9 percent were 50 years and above. To compensate for urban in-migration since the last census, and to provide a large enough sub-sample of urban respondents for statistical analysis, 23.2 percent of the sample came from the urban areas, compared to 11.0 percent in the census. Over-sampling the urban population increased the proportions of educated people in the sample, as shown in Table 1. In the sample, 13.7 percent had no schooling at all, 35.4 percent had some primary education, and 16.3 percent had completed primary school, while the census finds fully one-third of the population with no formal education, and nearly 55 percent with some degree of primary education. More than 31 percent had some or complete secondary education in the survey sample, as compared to just 10.5 percent in the census, and 3.5 percent had post-secondary education, in contrast with a just 1.1 percent measured for the nation as a whole in the census.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics Versus National Characteristics

Characteristic	Survey Sample	National Census
<i>Urban-rural shares</i>		
Urban	23.2	11.0
Rural	76.8	89.0
<i>Regional shares</i>		
North	12.7	12.5
Center	42.0	41.1
South	45.3	46.4
<i>Education²</i>		
No education	13.7	33.1
Incomplete Primary	35.4	24.0
Complete Primary	16.3	30.8
Incomplete Secondary	19.4	5.1
Complete Secondary	12.0	5.4
Post Secondary	3.5	1.1
<i>Age (years)³</i>		
Under 18	--	53.9
18-29	45.0	16.5 (35.8 of those 20 and over)
30-49	39.1	18.5 (40.1 of those 20 and over)
50 and above	15.9	11.1 (24.1 of those 20 and over)

All told, the sample of respondents is a reasonable representation of the population of Malawi. The views expressed by respondents in the survey can therefore be taken as a good reflection of the popular perceptions and attitudes of the population as a whole, with a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5 percent.

THE CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY

Do Malawians support democracy, or alternatively, do they back non-democratic regimes? This section presents findings on Malawians' understandings of, support for, and satisfaction with democracy, as well as their comparisons between the old and new regimes.

Support for Democracy

Using a standard question about support for democracy, respondents were asked to choose whether they would always prefer democracy to any other form of government, or whether, under

² The national education figures are from the Integrated Household Survey of 12,000 households. The "no education" category includes children below 18 years, while the "complete primary" is for all primary classes and the "incomplete secondary" is for those with JC. All the figures are simple averages across sexes.

³ The distribution in the national census is presented in five year age groups. Therefore, the census figure in the "Under 18" category actually includes those under 20, and the 18-29 category actually includes only those aged 20-29.

certain circumstances, they would prefer a non-democratic political system. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2: Support for Democracy

<i>With which one of these statements do you most agree?</i>	percent
Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.	66
In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable to democratic government.	22
For someone like me, a democratic or non-democratic regime makes no difference.	11
Don't know.	2

By this measure, most Malawians apparently support democracy. Almost two-thirds (66 percent) see it as always better than any other form of government. Whether this figure is high or low, however, is best understood in comparative context. Among seven Southern African countries where the same question was asked, Malawi falls in the middle. Support for democracy was higher in three countries: Botswana (84 percent), Zambia (75 percent) and Zimbabwe (71 percent). But it was lower in the other three: South Africa (60 percent), Namibia (58 percent) and Lesotho (40 percent).

There appears to be a substantial reservoir of nostalgia, however, for a non-democratic regime. At least one out of five people (22 percent) think that authoritarianism is appropriate under certain circumstances. By this measure, Malawi evinces the highest level of tolerance for authoritarianism in the region. The next closest country on this score is South Africa, where 13 percent would accept authoritarian rule, but fewer than ten percent of the populations of Botswana and Zambia feel this way. Notably, preference for a non-democratic regime is twice as high in Malawi's Central Region (30 percent), the homeland of Dr. Banda and political base of the MCP, as it is in the Southern Region (14 percent).

Women are also somewhat more likely than men to allow for a non-democratic government (23 percent versus 20 percent). Women in Central Region are particularly likely to accept a non-democratic alternative (31 percent). One possible explanation for this is that these women formed the core of support for the Banda regime, and now blame democracy for the loss of political power experienced by their region since 1994. Women are also more likely than men to say that the regime type makes no difference to them (13 percent for women versus 9 percent for men).

Majority support for democracy is confirmed, but at a lower level, by an alternate, more demanding measure. Respondents were asked whether "democracy is always best even when democracy seems not to work," or whether "when democracy does not work, we need a strong leader who does not bother with elections." In this case some 59 percent agree that democracy is always best, whereas 40 percent now opt for a strong leader. The fact that twice as many people

would tolerate non-democratic leadership in the event that democracy “does not work” suggests not only that the reservoir of authoritarian nostalgia is deeper than it at first appears, but that support for democracy hinges in good part on whether the new political regime is seen to perform well.

Another question asked respondents to consider a variety of alternatives to the current multiparty electoral system. Their attitudes toward these various alternatives are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Approval of Alternative Regimes

	Strongly disapprove	Disapprove	Neutral	Approve	Strongly approve	Don't know
One party rule	57	20	3	9	10	1
Rule by a council of elders, traditional leaders or chiefs	50	22	6	14	9	1
Military rule	66	17	3	6	7	2
One-man presidential rule (with no parliament)	62	25	3	3	5	2
Rule by economic experts	28	11	5	16	35	5
The old government of the MCP	59	13	4	6	17	1

Our current system of governing with regular elections and more than one political party is not the only one Malawi has ever had. Some people say that we would be better off if we had a different system of government. How much would you disapprove, neither disapprove nor approve, or approve of the following alternatives to our system of government with at least two political parties and regular elections?

One-man, non-elective presidential rule (without an elected parliament) is roundly rejected (87 percent disapprove), followed by military government (82 percent disapprove). Somewhat fewer people, but still very large majorities, reject one-party rule (77 percent disapprove), or a return to the old system of rule by the MCP (72 percent disapprove). The only alternative form of rule that a majority of Malawians are willing to countenance (51 percent approve) is a government run by economic experts, perhaps because people give priority to their economic objectives in life, as will be seen later.

Are there regional or demographic dimensions to the approval for “return to the old system we had under the MCP government”? As before, women disproportionately approve of the MCP-run government (58 percent). Younger people also tend to approve of the previous MCP regime

more than their elders: 36 percent of 18-29 year olds find it acceptable, compared to 17 percent of those in the 30-39 age group, and 23 percent of those aged 40-59. One possible reason is that many of those under 30 are too young to have any direct experience of the MCP regime as adults. Nevertheless, these data seem to suggest that, as young people age, they may carry with them a desire to return to forms of government that prevailed in the past.

Table 4 reveals the regional dimensions of these responses, indicating the numbers in each region who approve or strongly approve of each regime type. The results show that in general people in the Northern and Central Regions are the most likely to support alternative forms of government, including the old MCP-run government. Strangely, northerners express overwhelming approval of a government run by economic experts. Because technocratic government rests on the expertise of educated elites, northerners may feel that their educational advantages would stand them in good stead under this type of regime.

Table 4: Approval of Alternative Regimes, by Region

	Percentage who approve or strongly approve of this form of government		
	North	Center	South
One-party rule	16	25	16
Rule by a council of elders, traditional leaders or chiefs	26	28	16
Military rule	13	15	14
One-man, presidential rule (with no parliament)	9	11	7
Rule by economic experts	80	44	49
The old government of the MCP	37	33	11

Satisfaction with Democracy and the Present Regime

Respondents were next asked to compare the multiparty regime currently ruled by the UDF with the previous one-party regime under the MCP, as well as the government that respondents expect to have in the future. We began by asking respondents to rate each form of governing the country on a scale of 1 to 10 (0 being the worst and 10 the best). The original results were then re-coded into three categories: “negative” (ratings 0 to 4), “neutral” (rating 5) and “positive” (6 to 10). Tables 5, 6 and 7 summarize the ratings for each regime (past, current, and expected future), nationally and by region.

Table 5: Ratings of Past Regime, by Region

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
National	45	13	37
Regional			
North	86	8	6
Centre	53	18	23
South	27	11	59

We are now going to discuss how you rate different forms of government. I would like you to give marks out of 10. The best form governing gets 10 out of 10 and the worst form of governing gets no marks at all. What grade would you give to the way the country was governed under the MCP government?

Table 6: Ratings of Current Regime, by Region

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
National	54	15	26
Regional			
North	18	24	58
Centre	45	16	32
South	74	10	12

What grade would you give to our current system of government with regular elections where everyone can vote and there are at least two political parties.

Table 7: Ratings of Expected Future Regime, by Region

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
National	43	9	30
Regional			
North	18	9	48
Centre	35	9	29
South	58	9	26

What grade would you give to the political system of this country as you expect it to be in 10 years time?

The results in these three tables show that, nationally, the current multiparty regime is rated more positively than the past and future regimes. However, these national averages hide significant regional differences. Northerners clearly rate the past regime most positively. The 86 approval rating for the MCP regime in the north is the highest rating for any of the regimes in any region, and this contrasts with a very low approval rating of only 18 percent that northerners give to both the present and expected future regimes. People in Central Region also give their highest ratings to the past regime, though the margin is much narrower: 53 percent give that regime a positive rating, compared to 45 percent and 35 percent for the present and future regimes, respectively. Only southerners give their highest marks to the current regime (74 percent approval), followed by the expected future regime; the past regime receives a low 27 percent approval rating in the south. The regional distinctions are thus very clear. Northerners show a strong preference for the past regime, while southerners express opposite preferences, and those from the Central Region are more ambivalent.

Respondents were further asked to indicate whether “things today are worse, about the same, or better” compared to how they were under the previous system of one-party rule with regard to nine aspects of civic and political life. Table 8 reports the percentages that responded that things are now “better” or “much better” in each category on both a national and regional basis.

Table 8: Comparisons Between One-Party and Multiparty Forms of Government, by Region

	Things today are “better” or “much better”			
	National	North	Center	South
Anyone can freely say what he or she thinks.	89	85	82	96
People can join any political organization they choose.	93	96	87	98
People can live without fear of being arrested by the police if they have not done anything wrong.	75	79	65	85
Each person can freely choose who to vote for without feeling forced by others.	94	92	90	99
Everybody is treated equally and fairly by government.	57	15	48	78
People are safe from crime and violence.	14	7	13	18
People have an adequate standard of living.	51	12	43	68
People have access to basic necessities (like food and water).	60	27	51	77
Malawians are equal to one another.	49	20	49	58
Average	65	48	59	75

Some people say that today, under our current system of government, our political and overall life is better than it was under the MCP government. Others say things are no better, or even worse. For each of these following matters, would you say things today are worse, about the same, or better?

These results suggest that for the most part Malawians perceive the current form of government as being better than the previous one-party MCP government. Nationally, the current system fares very poorly only on the issue of crime and violence; a mere 14 percent of those interviewed said that internal security is better now than in the past. In general, the current system fares better than the prior regime with regard to basic political freedoms, although equal treatment of all Malawians appears to be an issue of concern, particularly in the north. This “bright” picture becomes more clouded, however, when aspects that require government resources for sustained achievement are considered; much smaller majorities perceive progress in access to basic necessities and improving the standard of living.

These results also have a strong regional dimension. Southerners consistently report that things are better under the current system of government than under the MCP government (the one clear

exception being crime and violence). Northerners are much more divided in their views; while they overwhelmingly acknowledge the enhanced political openness under the present regime, they appear to find life under the previous regime preferable in many other respects. Those from Central Region fall somewhere in between, neither as consistently positive as southerners, nor as disenchanted in some regards as northerners. The greatest divergence across regions is apparent with respect to “equal and fair treatment of all people,” “access to basic necessities,” and provision of “adequate living standards.” In all of these cases, southerners rate the present regime’s achievements much more highly than northerners, while those from Central Region fall somewhere in between.

Respondents were next asked to say whether or not Malawi is governed democratically. Table 9 presents the results. Clearly, the majority of Malawians consider the country to be democratic.

Table 9: Extent of Democracy

<i>On the whole, is the way Malawi is governed: _____ ?</i>	percent
Completely democratic	34
Democratic, but with some minor exceptions	28
Democratic, with major exceptions	23
Not a democracy	12
Don’t know/Don’t understand	3

When asked to mention “the most important things that need to be changed about the way we govern our country,” the responses varied widely (respondents could give up to six responses). The five answers most frequently cited in the first response include: 1) control the prices of goods (18 percent); 2) nothing (9 percent); 3) stop corruption (6 percent); 4) give people land (4 percent); and 5) stop crime (4 percent). The issue of prices is also the most frequently mentioned answer among second responses (6 percent), confirming its importance. Overall, roughly 37 percent of first responses related to economic issues, while 49 percent had to do with the provision of social and economic infrastructure or services, management of politics, and good governance.

When asked whether or not democracy functions well in Malawi, more than one-half of respondents say they are satisfied with the way it works in their country, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Satisfaction with Democracy

Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Malawi?	percent
Very satisfied	26
Fairly satisfied	31
Not very satisfied	19
Not at all satisfied	20
Malawi is not a democracy	2
Don't know	2

It is noteworthy that in response to a separate question, 34 percent of respondents say they believe that their country is completely democratic, and another 28 percent contend that it is democratic with only minor exceptions, while 23 percent believe it is a democracy but with major exceptions, while 12 percent indicate that they do not believe their country is a democracy at all. In comparison, in response to this question regarding satisfaction with democracy, just 26 percent say they are very satisfied with the way democracy is working in Malawi, and another 31 percent are fairly satisfied, while fully 39 percent are either somewhat or very dissatisfied. These findings thus raise the questions of what Malawians understand by the word democracy, and what benefits they expect from it.

Understandings of Democracy

Respondents were asked two questions to assess their understanding of the meaning of democracy. The first required them to mention up to three things that come to mind when they hear the word democracy, while the second asked them to identify essential characteristics of a democracy. We received over 100 diverse responses to the first question, perhaps indicating that democracy is “like an elephant to a blind man.” Only 25 percent of respondents were able to provide two answers, and just 8 percent could provide three. The three most common definitions include: 1) freedom of speech and expression; 2) multiparty politics; and 3) enjoyment of freedoms in general.

When the responses are grouped according to whether they represent positive, negative or neutral understandings of democracy, we find that the overwhelming majority of respondents (88 percent) provide positive meanings. Only one percent offered negative definitions, while the rest gave either neutral (3 percent) or null (8 percent) meanings. Among the positive responses, most (56 percent) fell within the category of meanings related to civil liberties or personal freedoms. Another 17 percent related to voting rights, electoral choice, and/or multiparty competition. All other groupings received less than five percent of responses, with the exception of the “don't know” responses provided by a relatively high eight percent of respondents.

Table 11 shows the results when respondents were asked about the essential components of democracy.

Table 11: Essential Components of Democracy

	Absolutely Essential	Important	Not Very Important	Not At All Important	Don't know/ others
Majority rule	66	21	8	4	1
Complete freedom to criticize the government	58	24	12	5	1
Regular elections	47	26	16	10	1
At least two parties competing with each other	45	29	17	9	1
Basic necessities like shelter, food and water for every one	77	17	5	1	<1
Jobs for everyone	55	28	16	2	<1
Equality in education	68	22	9	1	<1
A small income gap between the rich and poor	50	24	19	6	2

People associate democracy with many diverse meanings such as the ones I will mention now. In order for society to be called democratic, is each of these _____

These results suggest that Malawians place relatively high value on the economic and political components of democracy, although on average the economic features are considered important or essential by slightly higher proportions of Malawians. In fact, the two components considered most important are both economic: about 94 percent say that universal availability of basic necessities is essential or important to a democracy, while 90 percent consider equality in education a critical feature. Majority rule, jobs and freedom of expression received the next highest ratings, with 87, 83 and 82 percent, respectively. The high ratings for all eight features may result from the interplay between people’s direct experience of economic poverty and the recent flood of election campaign manifestos, promises and slogans.

INSTITUTIONAL AND STATE LEGITIMACY

State Legitimacy

Table 12 presents responses to questions aimed at evaluating the extent to which respondents consider the current government to be legitimate. For each statement, respondents were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree.

Table 12: Legitimacy of the Current Government

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
The government was elected to power by accepted procedures.	19	12	2	24	42	3
The government exercises power in an acceptable way.	17	15	3	26	36	3
The constitution expresses the values and aspirations of the Malawian people.	15	14	8	25	31	7
The government has the right to make decisions that all people have to abide by whether or not they agree with them.	43	20	7	15	14	2

Here are some things people often say about our current political system. For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree, neither disagree nor agree, or agree.

Solid majorities of respondents agree that the current government was elected to power by accepted procedures (66 percent agree or strongly agree) and a nearly equal proportion (62 percent) believe that it exercises power in an acceptable manner, but in both cases nearly one-third of respondents disagree. But an equally strong majority of respondents disagree with the proposition that the government has the right to make decisions that are binding for all Malawians (63 percent disagree or strongly disagree).

Table 13 presents the regional breakdown of responses, looking at those who disagreed with each statement.

Table 13: Legitimacy of the Current Government, by Region

	percent who disagree		
	North	Center	South
The government was elected to power by accepted procedures.	72	47	12
The government exercises power in an acceptable way.	80	38	14
The constitution expresses the values and aspirations of the Malawian people.	53	35	17
The government has the right to make decisions that all people have to abide by whether or not they agree with them.	65	53	70

Clearly, this regional picture mirrors earlier findings. The majority of northerners appear to view the current government as illegitimate, while southerners, for the most part, feel the opposite, and those from Central Region reveal a more ambivalent perspective. Strangely, however, even in the south the majority say that the government has no right to make binding decisions, although

they overwhelmingly agree that the government was duly elected and exercises its power in an acceptable way.

Trust in State Institutions

Respondents were next asked to state how often they feel they can trust various governmental or public institutions to “do what is right.” The results are presented in Table 14.

Table 14: Trust in State Institutions

	Never	Sometimes	Mostly	Always
The President	19	29	24	26
National Assembly	20	42	20	12
The Army	9	11	21	50
The Police	24	31	17	24
Courts of Law	19	28	20	28
Electoral Commission	27	18	19	30
Malawi Broadcast Corporation (MBC)	20	18	22	35
Government Press/newspaper	21	22	13	21
Independent Press/newspaper	19	22	18	18

How much of the time can you trust _____ to do what is right?

The army is clearly rated as the most trustworthy institution in Malawi (71 percent trust “mostly” or “always”), followed by the Malawi Broadcast Corporation (MBC) (57 percent). Fifty percent trust the President, but all of the other institutions fall below this mark. The least trusted institutions include the National Assembly (just 32 percent trust “mostly” or “always”), both the government and independent print media (34 and 36 percent, respectively) and the police (41 percent).

One possible explanation for the relatively low levels of trust in many of these institutions could be the contested election results. A case against the electoral commission was in the courts at the time of the survey. All of the other institutions also played critical roles during the elections with the exception of the army. The police, though taking a relatively neutral stance in the elections, are generally considered to be insensitive to people’s needs. In fact, a 1998 study showed that police are perceived as corrupt (Konyani, 1998).

Institutional Responsiveness

Respondents were also asked about the responsiveness of the President and the National Assembly to their needs and opinions. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63 percent) believe that the President is either “interested” or “very interested” in their welfare, while 36 percent feel that he is “not very interested” or “not at all interested.” The National Assembly receives more mixed reviews; while 47 percent say Parliament is interested in their welfare, an equivalent 46 percent say it is not. This finding is particularly interesting considering that it is the National

Assembly which is made up of the “people’s representatives” who are supposed to consider their constituents’ needs and take their views into account, and the survey was conducted immediately after parliamentary elections. This again suggests that democracy may still be an “elephant” to many a “blind” voter.

Corruption

Respondents were next asked about the extent to which officials of the current UDF government, the National Assembly, and the civil service are involved in corruption. Judging by the responses presented in Table 15, the public perception is that all three institutions suffer seriously from this problem. The National Assembly is perceived as the least corrupt, but even here 31 percent of respondents believe that most or all of assembly members are involved in corruption, and nearly half believe that the majority of civil servants are guilty. It is noteworthy, however, that this question only asked respondents about their perceptions regarding corruption, not their experience of it, and also that a significant proportion respond that they “haven’t had a chance to hear enough about them.” The next question concerning respondents’ personal experience of corruption is therefore particularly interesting. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which either they or a family member had had to pay for services or favors in the past year. The responses are presented in Table 16.

Table 15: Corruption in State Institutions

	All, almost all	Most	A few, some	None, almost none	Haven’t heard enough
UDF Government	15	28	31	9	18
National Assembly	6	25	36	8	26
Civil Service	13	33	33	5	16

What about corruption? (Corruption is where those in government and the civil society take money or gifts from the people and use it for themselves, or expect people to pay them extra money or a gift to do their job). How many officials in the ___ do you think are involved in corruption?

Table 16: Personal Experience with Corruption

	Never	Once or twice	A few times	Often	Don’t know
Getting a job	95	2	1	2	0
Getting a government payment	96	2	1	1	<1
Getting electricity or water	97	1	1	1	1
Housing or land	97	2	<1	1	<1

In the past year, have you or anyone in your family had to pay money to government officials (besides paying rates or taxes), give them a gift, or do a favor in order to get the following? If yes, was it just once or twice, a few times or frequently?

In fact, the responses to this question suggest that reality does not match perceptions; very few respondents report that they or their families have actually experienced corruption. How then are such negative perceptions about levels of corruption formed? Hearsay could be playing a major part in the formation of perceptions, or respondents may not be answering the second question

truthfully, but there is no obvious reason to conclude that this is the case. It is also possible that the particular examples of corruption used in the question were not exhaustive or not relevant to Malawi. Whatever the explanation, it appears that Malawians do not experience significant corruption at the personal or household levels.

Comparison of UDF and MCP Governments

Table 8 reported the responses to questions that made broad comparisons between the past, one-party MCP-run regime and the current multiparty system, presently run by the UDF. Table 17 presents the results for some additional questions that compare the job performance of the two regimes to determine whether the current government is viewed as more or less effective than the MCP government.

Table 17: UDF Government Job Performance vis-à-vis the MCP Government

	much more	more	same	less	much less
Interested in hearing what people think.	28	30	7	16	19
Corrupt	32	18	13	17	13
Trustworthy	20	27	14	20	17

You have told us how you feel about the effectiveness of the way government performs its job, its interest in what you think, corruption and your trust in government. But how does this compare to the government that this country had before under the MCP government? Is government today more, about the same or less _____ as under the MCP government?

As with the results presented in Table 8, we see again that in general the UDF-run government is rated somewhat better than the previous regime on most issues, but that there are notable exceptions. In this case, the exception is corruption; 50 percent of respondents believe that the MCP government was more successful in controlling corruption, compared to just 30 percent who think that the situation has improved. However, in the UDF’s favor, 58 percent feel that the current UDF government is more interested in hearing what people think than the MCP was, and 47 percent consider the UDF government more trustworthy, compared to 37 percent who find it less so.

However, even if many respondents prefer multiparty democracy and consider the UDF regime an improvement on the past, they are not willing to excuse the UDF government if it fails to perform effectively while attempting to shift the blame to the previous MCP government. As many as 72 percent say the UDF government “should be able to deal with problems right now regardless of who caused them.” Malawians apparently believe that an elected government should be capable of dealing with all of the country’s problems. Only 23 percent agree that “it will take years for our system of government to deal with the problems inherited from the MCP.”

GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

Some aspects of government performance have already been discussed in earlier sections. As such, the emphasis in this chapter is on critical issues like provision of basic social and economic services, and on what people think government should focus on. Comparisons with the MCP government are also made.

Job Performance

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they approve of the way the President and the National Assembly performed their jobs in the past year. It should be noted that in the case of the President, the “past twelve months” was divided in two periods: six months prior to the election, and close to six months after his re-election.

The President receives a higher rating than the National Assembly. As many as 53 percent of the people approve of the President’s job performance, while about 35 per cent disapprove. The National Assembly receives a 48 percent approval rating, but 44 percent disapprove of its job performance.

Priority Problems

Respondents were next asked to identify and prioritize the most important problems facing the country that need to be addressed by government; up to three answers could be given, but one of them was to be identified as the most important. There were as many as 210 different problems identified as “most important.” This long list gives an idea of how easily a government can be rated as “not performing.” It would take a lot of resources to address all of these “most important problems.”

The long list also means that only a few people agree on any one problem. (This is why in cases of priority setting, PRA methods are helpful because they manage to build a consensus among the people.) The top five problems identified as highest priority are: 1) prices too high (16 percent); 2) food shortage (8 percent); 3) starvation (6 percent); 4) security (6 percent); and 5) poverty (5 percent). All five of these problems are related.

The long list of problems was grouped into 15 categories. Table 18 presents a summary of the categories of problems identified as highest priority.

Table 18: Most Important Problems Facing Malawi

	percent
Economic or financial problems	39
Food security and food supply problems	15
Personal security problems	12
Health-related problems	10
Agricultural problems	6
Water-related problems	6
Governance problems	5
Education-related problems	3
Transport-related problems	1
Political problems	1
Human rights problems	<1
Regionalism or tribalism problems	<1
Social or community services problems	<1
Injustice and laws related problems	<1
Don't know or no problems	3

What are the (up to three) most important problems facing this country that the government should address? Which of these is the most important?

Handling of Critical National Issues

Table 19 presents how respondents rate the government on several issues. As can be seen, the government is perceived as performing well (i.e., “fairly well” or “very well”) in three policy areas. The highest approval rating is for “delivering basic services like water and electricity” (66 percent). As expected, the government also receives a high rating on education (63 percent) thanks to the free primary education policy. The third highest score is for “making sure everyone has enough land,” for which 51 percent of respondents say the government performs well. The lowest positive ratings are on the issues of controlling inflation (8 percent), reducing crime (22 percent), and managing the economy (26 percent). These high and low ratings imply that the responses reflect more than just partisan preferences. In fact, the ratings are more or less reflective of the actual situation in Malawi. Inflation and open crime have reached their highest levels under the UDF government. Likewise, economic sectors like manufacturing have been on the decline due to cheap imports following the trade liberalization policy.

Table 19: Rating of Current Government Performance

	very well	fairly well	not very well	not at all well	don't know
Creating jobs	10	20	24	42	3
Building houses	12	26	25	29	8
Ensuring that prices remain stable	3	5	27	65	<1
Reducing crime	3	19	23	55	<1
Improving health services	13	33	23	30	1
Addressing the educational needs of all	31	32	16	21	1
Managing the Economy	8	18	30	42	4
Delivering basic necessities - water/electricity	29	37	13	19	2
Making sure every one has enough land	21	30	19	27	3

How well would you say the government is handling the following matters?

Table 20 breaks down the national-level findings to the regional level. Although the pattern is similar to the others already seen before, all regions “agree” that the government’s performance on controlling inflation, reducing crime, and managing the economy is not satisfactory. This is true even in the south, where people have generally been pro-government. It is opportune here to report that when the UDF and MCP governments were compared, the UDF government receives a positive rating from 53 percent of the respondents, while the MCP government’s positive rating is 47 percent. Thus, on balance the UDF government is perceived to be slightly more effective than the MCP government in terms of job performance.

Table 20: Rating of Current Government Performance, by Region

	percent answering “very well” or “fairly well”		
	North	Center	South
Creating jobs	9	27	40
Building houses	16	32	50
Ensuring that prices remain stable	3	7	10
Reducing crime	9	20	27
Improving health services	19	34	64
Addressing the educational needs of all	29	58	76
Managing the Economy	11	26	28
Delivering basic necessities-water/electricity	47	57	78
Making sure every one has enough land	39	51	54

Government Treatment of Identity Groups

When asked to name their main identity group, over half of respondents identify themselves according to their tribe. These tribes are generally regionally based, except in urban areas. Table 21 presents perceptions about the attitude of government towards respondents’ identity groups. Asked “do you think that the government represents the interests of all Malawians or of one group only?,” 62 percent say “all Malawians,” while 35 percent say “one group only.” Just 5 percent feel that the government always treats people of their identity group unfairly, although an additional 13 percent believe that it does so “to a large extent,” and 29 percent claim their group experiences at least some discrimination at the hands of government. Nearly half of respondents feel that the government shows equal interest in the views of their own group and those of others, while 31 percent think it shows less interest in their group, and 17 percent see greater interest. Thus, these findings suggest that the government is generally perceived to be treating people’s identity groups relatively fairly.

Table 21: Government Attitude Towards Identity Group

	Always	To a large extent	To some extent	Hardly at all	Never
<i>To what extent are _____ people treated unfairly by the government? Is it</i>	5	13	29	9	37
	Much less interest	Less interest	About the same	More interest	Much more interest
<i>In general, do you feel that people in government are less interested, or more interested in what _____s think compared to other groups, or is it the same?</i>	9	22	45	12	5

ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND REFORM

National Economic Conditions

The majority of respondents consider the economic conditions of the country to be less than satisfactory. About 69 percent say they are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, while just 26 percent claim they are satisfied. When comparing 1998 and 1999, as many as 53 percent think economic conditions have gotten worse, while only 24 percent say economic conditions have improved. Respondents' perceptions of their future prospects are also pessimistic. While as many as 48 percent believe economic conditions are likely to be worse in 2000, only 25 percent think they will improve.

National Economic Reform Program

When asked whether they have ever heard anything about the government's economic reform or structural adjustment program, 51 percent say they have, while 47 percent have not. About 22 percent of those who have heard about the program either agree or strongly agree with the statement "the program has helped most people; only a minority have suffered," while 65 percent feel the opposite is true, i.e., that "the program has hurt most people and only benefited a minority." About 50 percent claim that the program has made their own life worse or a lot worse, while only 18 percent feel the program has made their life either better or much better. About 23 percent say the program has had no effect on them, and 9 percent say they don't know what the effect of the program has been.

Individual and Group Economic Conditions

Respondents were also asked to compare their personal economic conditions with those of other Malawians. About 53 percent believe their conditions are either worse or much worse than those of others, while 29 percent see their conditions as better or much better, and about 18 percent say their conditions are about the same. Asked whether the economic conditions of their identity group are better or worse than other identity groups, many say their group's economic conditions are about the same as other identity groups (42 percent), but one-third say their group's conditions are worse, while 20 percent think their group is better off.

CITIZENSHIP

This section focuses on respondents' civic knowledge and their behavior with respect to their rights and obligations as citizens in a democratic system of government. We explore their knowledge and use of their leaders, their exercise of their rights in expressing their views, joining civic and political organizations, and participating in civic and political activities, and their likely actions in defense of democracy.

Knowledge and Contact of Political and Community Leaders

Respondents were asked to name the country's Vice President, the Minister of Finance, and their member of parliament (MP). Of the three, the MP is the most well known (84 percent), followed by the Vice President (79 percent). But as shown in Table 22, only 26 percent were able to name the Minister of Finance correctly. These results should be viewed against the background that 1999 was an election year in which MPs and, to a great extent, the Vice President were frequently heard about on radio as well as seen in person and on posters. The Minister of Finance, on the other hand, had only been named after the President was sworn in, well after the elections, so he could only be known by keen followers of local news on the national radio.

Table 22: Knowledge of Political Leaders

	Right Answer	Wrong Answer	Don't Know	Can't remember
Vice President	79	5	12	3
Minister of Finance	26	13	50	11
Member of Parliament	84	3	8	5

Can you tell me who presently holds the following offices?

It should also be noted that as many as 89 percent of the people interviewed say that they voted in the 1999 elections.⁴ Only 3 percent decided not to vote, and 5 percent were unable to vote.

⁴ Eighty-nine percent is seemingly on the high side. This high figure may reflect the perception that receipt of "starter packs" of agricultural inputs would depend on who voted in the 1999 elections.

Although most respondents vote and know their leaders, however, the majority of them do not get in touch with their leaders. About 91 percent indicate that they had never contacted any government or political party official in the previous year. Five percent had contacted such officials once or twice in the past year, 2 percent had done so a few times, and just one percent claimed to be in frequent contact with their leaders. About 52 percent of those who did make contacts had approached their MP, while another 23 percent contacted political party officials. Similarly, only about 24 percent had contacted any other influential person in the past year, and again, the contacts were infrequent. The majority of these contacts were with church leaders (13 percent had made contact in the past year) and traditional leaders (9 percent).

People’s Exercise of Rights

Discussion of politics is not a pre-occupation of many Malawians. When asked how often they discuss politics with friends, about 45 percent of respondents reply that they do so occasionally, while 36 percent never do so. Only 19 percent say that they regularly discuss politics with their friends. Asked whether they follow what is going on in government and public affairs, 32 percent say they do some of the time, and 18 percent do so most of the time or always. The remaining 50 percent follow these issues only now and then or hardly at all. Thus, we can conclude that about half of the people follow what is going on relatively closely, while the other half do not. These results may explain a lot about respondent’s views on the other questions in this survey.

Further, it appears that people rarely participate in activities that citizens are free to do in a democratic country. Asked how frequently they engage in community and political activities or express their views in a newspaper, in most cases a majority say they have not, though many claim that they “would do it if I had the chance,” as shown in Table 23.

Table 23: Citizen’s participation in Various Activities

	Often	A few times	Once or twice	No, need chance	No, never
Participate in addressing community or national issue.	17	16	8	36	22
Attend an election rally.	38	21	13	13	16
Work for a political candidate or party.	4	3	3	46	44
Write a letter to a newspaper.	1	2	2	51	44

Here is a list of things that people sometimes do as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you have engaged in this activity or not.

The main exception is attending election rallies. Fully 72 percent have attended at least once, and as many as 38 percent have actually done so frequently. Writing a letter to a newspaper is the least popular; a mere 5 percent have taken this step. Writing a letter may be less popular in

part because many Malawians are illiterate; most of the respondents “hid” behind the option “no, but I would if I had a chance.”⁵

This general impression of inactivity is also borne out by respondents’ level of participation in civic organizations. The majority had not attended any meetings in the previous year. Even in the case of the most popular activity, religious meetings, just as many had never attended (35 percent) as those who had attended often (32 percent). Attendance at meetings of self-help associations was fairly low also. About 56 percent never attended, while only 23 percent attended often. Consistent with the dormant state of trade unionism, as many as 92 percent never attended trade union meetings. These results are shown in Table 24. Averaging across the six activities (average not shown in the table), we find that a mean of 71 percent of respondents could be described as inactive in each category, with at best only “infrequent” attendance (i.e., “never” or “once or twice” only) at any kind of civic organization meeting.

Respondents’ perceptions of their ability to affect their own lives or politics in general may be one of the explanations for these low levels of participation in activities and meetings that matter. Moreover, the inclination to attend meetings like political rallies, where the flow of information is largely one-way and attendees are only recipients of views, may also be due to the perception that their voice would have limited impact. Table 25 presents responses to questions related to respondents’ ability to control their own lives and influence political affairs.

Table 24: Attendance at Meetings of Civic Organizations

	Never	Once or twice	A few times	Often	Don’t know or others
Religious Group	35	15	18	32	0
Self-help Association	56	9	12	23	<1
Area/village Committee	56	15	12	18	<1
Commercial organization	69	8	8	15	<1
Community Assistance Group	64	8	9	19	<1
Trade Union	92	1	1	2	4

Over, the past year, how often have you attended meetings of a _____ ?

⁵ Responses to this question might have been clearer if the “chance” had been well defined. For example, it is unlikely that there was no community or national problem to address. Rather, it is more likely that there was no particular meeting or forum in which respondents could discuss such issues, although someone who was really interested could have initiated such a meeting.

Table 25: Perceptions of Control over Lives and Politics

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel I have little or no control over my own life.	11	20	5	26	36
I do not have enough information about political life and government actions.	23	33	4	22	18
Politics and government affairs are too complicated for me.	32	34	4	14	16
I must be careful with what I say about politics.	19	14	6	17	42

Do you agree, neither agree nor disagree, or disagree with the following statements?

The majority feel that they do have control over their own lives: more than 60 percent disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that they have little or no control over what happens to them. Only 31 percent agree or strongly agree with this statement. A majority is also aware that they can talk freely about politics. About 59 percent either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that “in this country, you must be very careful of what you say or do with regard to politics.” However, a majority agrees with the statements that they “do not have enough information about political life and the actions of government” and that “sometimes political and government affairs seem so complicated that I can’t really understand what’s going on.”

A majority of respondents have exercised their right to free political association. Close to half of the respondents (46 percent) identify the UDF as the party that they are closest to, 24 percent name the MCP, and another 7 percent are closest to AFORD. As many as 18 percent say they are not close to any party. Of the 81 percent who acknowledge a party association, 36 percent say they are “very close” to their political party, while another 28 percent are “somewhat close.” The remaining 18 percent say they are “not very close” to the party they named. Thus, a total of just 35 percent either have no party affiliation, or at best only a quite weak affiliation.

Defending Democracy

One would expect that respondents’ perception that they have control over their lives and freedom to express themselves on political issues would translate into actions like protests and attendance at demonstrations, but this was not the case. Respondents were asked what actions they have taken when the government does something they consider wrong or harmful. The majority of people said they would never take any of these actions. For example, as many as 67 percent said they would never attend a demonstration, while 73 percent said they would never participate in a boycott of rates, services or taxes. As expected from docile and peaceful people, 84 percent said they would never participate in sit-ins, disruptions of government meetings or offices, while 90 percent said they would never use force or violent means such as damaging public property. Table 26 presents the results in detail.

Table 26: Response to Wrong or Harmful Actions of Government

	Often	A few times	Once or twice	No, need chance	No, never
Attend a demonstration or protest march	1	1	4	27	67
Participate in a boycott of rates, services, or taxes	1	<1	2	24	73
Take part in sit-in, disruption of government meetings or offices	<1	<1	1	15	84
Use force or violent means such as damaging public property	<1	<1	<1	9	90

Here are a number of different actions people might take if government were to do something they thought was wrong or harmful. For each of these, please tell me whether you have engaged in this activity or not.

These responses cast some doubt as to whether people would defend democracy if it were under threat. Asked how they would feel and respond if the government were to take certain undemocratic actions such as shutting down critical media outlets or banning political parties, large majorities said they would oppose or, in most cases, strongly oppose such actions. However, when asked what actions they would take in response, the bulk of respondents say they would do nothing. This may be a reflection of the fact that the majority feel that their actions would not seriously influence the government. The only actions respondents say they would take are perhaps less effective means of changing the actions of government. For example, speaking to others and contacting government officials or representatives would hardly attract the attention of the government in the same way that a march or demonstration would. Only 9 percent, said they would join a march. These results are presented in Tables 27 and 28.

Table 27: Opinion about Undemocratic Actions of Government

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Oppose	Strongly oppose
Shut down newspapers and radio and TV stations critical of government	2	2	2	25	69
Dismiss judges who rule against it	7	5	3	23	63
Ban political parties	4	5	2	22	66
Suspend the Parliament and cancel the next elections	3	2	3	23	66

If the government were to take the following actions, would you support it, neither support or oppose, or oppose it?

Table 28: Action in Response to Undemocratic Actions of Government

	Nothing	Speak to others	Write to newspaper	Phone radio/TV	Contact official	Join march or demonstration
Shut down newspapers and radio and TV stations critical of government	40	19	5	3	21	9
Dismiss judges who rule against it	46	19	5	<1	21	7
Ban political parties	42	20	5	1	18	11
Suspend the Parliament and cancel the next elections	41	20	5	2	19	11

If the government were to take the following actions, what, if anything, would you do about it?

When asked whether or not they have engaged in various illegal actions such as avoiding paying rates or income taxes, a large majority say they have never done so. However, on average about 11 percent (calculated from, but not shown in, Table 29) say they would if they had the chance. This is most pronounced in the case of receiving government benefits that one is not entitled to.

Table 29: Participation in Illegal Activities

	Often	A few times	Once or twice	No, need chance	No, never
Claim government benefits one is not entitled to	1	<1	<1	17	81
Avoid paying city/municipal rates and market fees	3	1	1	12	77
Avoid paying income tax	2	1	1	11	82
Avoid paying for services like electricity/water	1	<1	<1	6	76

Here is a list of actions ordinary people are taking in a political system. For each of these, please tell me whether you have engaged in this activity or not.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of factors that may have had a bearing on the responses given during the survey. The first is that the survey was conducted barely five years after the country's first multiparty elections. The legacy of the one-party dictatorship probably still had an effect on people's views. The second factor is that the three major parties that emerged in the first multiparty elections in 1994 were based primarily on regional lines, and despite minor changes, this has been the case ever since. The third factor is that the survey was conducted in November and December 1999, six months after the second presidential and parliamentary elections. In those elections, two of the parties, AFORD and MCP, formed an election alliance but still lost the elections. The alliance filed a case in Malawi's high court contesting the results, which was still undecided at the time of the survey.

Malawians have some ideas about what democracy is, and while most reflect standard understandings of democracy, some do not relate to traditional definitions of democracy at all. All in all, Malawians' understanding of democracy therefore seems to be somewhat vague. However, even among scholars there is considerable debate about the definition and content of democracy, and there is no consensus.

On the basis of their vague ideas, many Malawians think they are getting as much from democracy as they can expect. The only exception is for those who expected democracy to improve their economic well being. On the whole, more support democracy than dictatorship, although some aspects of the old regime are applauded by many.

The majority of Malawians prefer democratic to non-democratic forms of government, but they actively participate in democracy only via elections and attendance at political rallies. Moreover, the majority would do very little to defend democracy if it is under threat. This is because many people think that they have no means to influence the political and economic conditions affecting them.

On the whole, the UDF government is viewed as legitimate and as having been elected through acceptable procedures. However, many think that this “duly elected” government should not make decisions that are binding on all Malawians. This contradiction arises from the fact that there is not overwhelming support for the state, and trust in many state institutions, including the presidency, National Assembly and courts of law, is generally weak. Only the army, as a state institution, is trusted by the majority of the people.

Objective assessment of democracy and its values and achievements in Malawi may also be affected by regional biases. Many respondents appeared to have trouble distinguishing between their partisan preferences and support for a democratic government, which they took to imply support for the UDF government. Government and the ruling party are still seen by many as the same thing. Likewise, those sympathetic to the UDF have problems objectively assessing the failures of democratic government. To them, government is the UDF and the UDF is government. The regional breakdown of various responses also clearly shows that the average (national) picture painted is far different from that at the regional level, where wide variations are apparent.

It is too early to expect genuine consolidation of democracy in Malawi; it will take some time before such a system can take root in the country. The perceived failure by the UDF government to meaningfully improve the living standards of the people since 1994 is hurting the prospects for a strong democratic culture. It will take not just the enjoyment of greater freedoms, but improved living standards as well, to convince people that democracy is indeed always preferable and something to be defended at all costs.

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Appendix A: Malawi - Major Social and Economic Indicators

Table A1: Major Social and Economic Indicators for Malawi

Indicator	Period	Level
GNP (US\$ billion)	1997	2.1
GNP per capita (US\$)	1997	210
Net ODA (US\$)	1997	350
Total External Debt (US\$ billion)	1997	2.206
Debt-Service ratio (percent of exports)	1997	12.4
Exchange rate (Malawi Kwacha/US\$)	1997	15.3
Average annual rate of deforestation (percent)	1990-95	1.6
Female economic activity rate (percent)	1997	46.7
Life expectancy (years at birth)	1997	39.3
Female (years at birth)	1997	39.6
Male (years at birth)	1997	38.9
Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	1995	135
Under five mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	1995	215
Maternal mortality rate (per 100,000 live births)	1995	560
Infants with low-birth weight (percent)	1990-97	20
Immunization rate, one year olds (percent)	1995-97	
TB		100
Measles		87
HIV prevalence rate (percent)	1996	13
Cumulative AIDS cases (per 1000)	1997	505.4
Cumulative TB cases (per 1000)	1996	209.8
Population (million)	1998	9.8
Female (percent)	1998	51.1
People with disabilities (percent)	1985-92	2.9
Adult literacy rate	1997	57.7
Female	1997	43.4
Male	1997	72.8
Gross Enrolment Ratio (percent)	1997	95
Net Enrolment rate (percent)		
Primary School	1997	98.7
Secondary School	1997	72.6

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report, 1999.

Appendix B: Methodology

Sampling Method

Sampling was done in four stages in the rural areas and three stages in urban areas. In rural areas, the first stage was to select a random sample of Traditional Authorities (TAs), followed by selection of Enumerator Areas (EAs). Households within the EAs were then identified, and finally, respondents within households were selected. Identification of EAs and villages was done using the latest maps from the 1998 population census. In urban areas, the first step was to select wards (equivalent to an EA), then households and finally respondents were selected. The number of EAs per TA and, by extension, per district, was determined based on the population size of the TA and district. Fifteen districts were sampled, giving a proportion of over 55 percent of the 27 districts. A total of 41 TAs and 119 EAs were sampled in rural areas. A total of 32 wards were sampled in urban areas, giving a total of 151 EAs.

A total of 1208 interviews were conducted, 21 percent of which were in urban areas. Household sampling was done by counting five houses from either a starting point or the household where the last interview was conducted. Identification of a member within the selected household to be interviewed was done jointly with the head of the household by giving each eligible household member a number, and then randomly drawing one number. The survey protocol had predetermined that there should be an equal number of male and female respondents. To ensure that this was so, the sex of the desired interviewee in each household was to be the opposite of that of the previous interviewee. Replacements of households was done only if a sampled household did not have any eligible interviewees of the desired sex. In such cases, the next household was sampled, or if that one also did not qualify, the fifth house from it was sampled.

A summary of the number of TA, EAs and interviews conducted per district or urban area is presented in Table B1.

Table B1: Number of TAs, EAs and Interviews Conducted, by District or Urban Area

District/Urban Area	Number of TAs	Number of EAs	Interviews
Chitipa	1	3	24
Mzimba	3	9	72
Nkhatabay	1	4	32
Kasungu	5	11	88
Lilongwe	5	19	152
Ntchisi	1	4	32
Salima	2	6	48
Ntcheu	3	9	72
Zomba	4	11	88
Chiradzulu	3	7	56
Blantyre	3	10	80
Chikwawa	2	6	48
Mulanje	4	11	88
Mwanza	2	4	32
Nsanje	2	5	40
Total Rural	41	119	952
Mzuzu City	1	3	24
Lilongwe City	1	12	96
Zomba Municipality	1	3	24
Blantyre City	1	14	112
Total Urban	4	32	256
Total Malawi	45	151	1208

Field Survey Administration and Logistics

The survey commenced with training of the survey team. Training was conducted by an official from IDASA, which is one of the managing institutions for the Afrobarometer project, and one of the CSR's national investigators. After the training, a one-day pilot survey was conducted in a nearby district. The main survey was carried out thereafter by four teams, each comprised of four field workers and one supervisor. The two national investigators developed the survey plan with the field supervisor, and monitored the progress of and provided technical and administrative support to all of the field teams.

Fieldwork commenced on November 29 and ended on December 22, 1999. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, each district's heads of administration and police, the traditional chief of the EA, and the village headman were notified. More detailed explanations about the survey were given to the traditional leaders.

Once in an EA, the first task was to establish a starting point. In most cases, features like hills, church buildings and bridges were used as starting points. The actual number of field workers assigned to a settlement and the sampling procedures generally depended primarily on the settlement pattern. If the area had thirty or more households, all four field workers were assigned to that settlement. For areas with less than fifteen households, one field worker was assigned, while two were assigned to cover medium-sized areas (16-30 households).

Problems Encountered During the Survey

The major problems encountered during the survey emanated from the fact that discussion of politics in Malawi is yet to be as open as it should. In general, people, including traditional leaders, were suspicious about the objectives of the survey. Some village headmen wanted to be interviewed first, possibly to ascertain the contents of the questionnaire. It usually took some discussions before these headmen would permit the team to conduct the interviews. In households where husbands were away, the wives were not willing to have their household interviewed, leading to some refusals.

Many refusals were also recorded in urban areas. In fact, some urban households demanded identity cards in addition to the official letters of introduction. Urban households also needed more explaining and convincing. In some cases, households were not co-operative because they seemed to lack patience or acted as if they were in a hurry. For both urban and rural households, there were cases where the respondents remarked that the interview was taking too long.

Apart from refusal to be interviewed, which comprised about one-third of the unsuccessful visits, there were several other circumstances that required substitutions to be made. In total, there were 110 reported unsuccessful visits, as detailed in Table B2. In one area where more than ten local dialects are spoken, there were problems with communication, although this problem could be solved by finding an interpreter. In urban areas it was sometimes difficult to find household members who worked outside of the household at home. As a result, successive replacements within households meant that house servants and watchmen were the most frequently found and interviewed.

Table B2: Number of Unsuccessful Visits, by Reason

Reason	Number of Cases	Percentage share
Refused to be interviewed	37	33.6
Sampled member not at home	11	10.0
Household members not available	28	25.5
Communication problem	2	1.8
Sampled member did not fit gender quota	19	17.3
Other reasons	13	11.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>110</i>	<i>100</i>

There were some questions that were particularly difficult for respondents to understand and respond to correctly, as evidenced by inconsistencies in their responses. [For example, responses to questions 50 and 107 were similar although these require different responses – put in the question wording].

Being an election year, campaign material were visible in most of the areas visited. Political party flags and posters of presidential and parliamentary candidates were prominent. The Northern Region mostly featured AFORD flags and posters for the MCP/AFORD presidential candidate and AFORD parliamentary candidates. The Central and Southern Regions featured MCP and UDF flags and posters for both presidential and parliamentary candidates.

Concluding Remarks

The survey was conducted with very little interference. There was no pronounced harassment of the field staff during the survey. Although the case challenging the election results had already been filed by the time of the survey, there was no political tension and intimidation. However, fear to participate in the study was possibly veiled by refusals to be interviewed or demands for identity cards and clear explanations. Judging by the diversity of responses received, especially on questions about politics and government, many respondents had problems with the interviews. Democracy and governance concepts are yet to be internalized by many people in Malawi. In fact, so far the subject is not yet clear even among literate people.

