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News release

Most Malawians see declining quality of elections, express little trust in the electoral commission

A majority of Malawians believe the quality of their elections has declined and express little trust in the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), a new Afrobarometer survey shows.

Nine months after the May 2019 presidential contest, public debate over the outcome rages on, fueled anew by a Constitutional Court ruling this week striking down the MEC's declaration that President Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won re-election. His closest challengers, Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party and Saulos Chilima of the United Transformation Movement, had asked the court to annul the electoral results, claiming they were rigged.

Findings of a national Afrobarometer survey, conducted last November-December, show that as the pivotal legal challenge advanced, a majority of Malawians shared serious concerns about the 2019 election. Evaluations of election quality differed sharply by respondents' political-party affiliation, but even DPP supporters were more likely to see election quality as deteriorating than as improving.

Among concerns about various aspects of the electoral process, the major shortcoming cited by a majority of respondents was a faulty declaration of results by the MEC, which was widely perceived as lacking impartiality and trustworthiness.

Key findings

- Almost three-fourths (73%) of Malawians said the 2019 election was worse in quality than previous elections (Figure 1). Even among supporters of the ruling DPP, more saw a decline in election quality than an improvement (50% vs. 41%) (Figure 2).
- Looking at the electoral process, about three out of 10 Malawians expressed concerns about media fairness, fear of political intimidation or violence, and ballot secrecy. Smaller proportions reported irregularities such as voters who cast multiple ballots and interference by security agents. But a majority (57%) pointed to the MEC's declaration of the election results as faulty (Figure 3).
- Only four in 10 Malawians (40%) saw the MEC as impartial (Figure 4), and only one in three (34%) said they trust the commission "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 5). Citizens' views differed sharply by political-party affiliation, but overall, the MEC ranked last among key public institutions on both of these indicators.

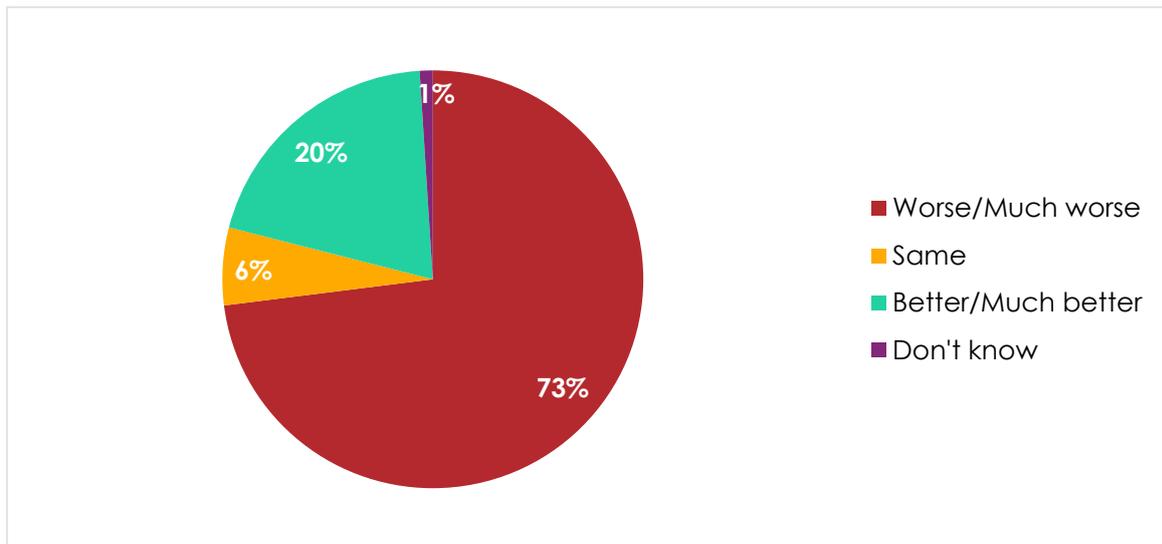
Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are being conducted in 2019/2020. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in November and December 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

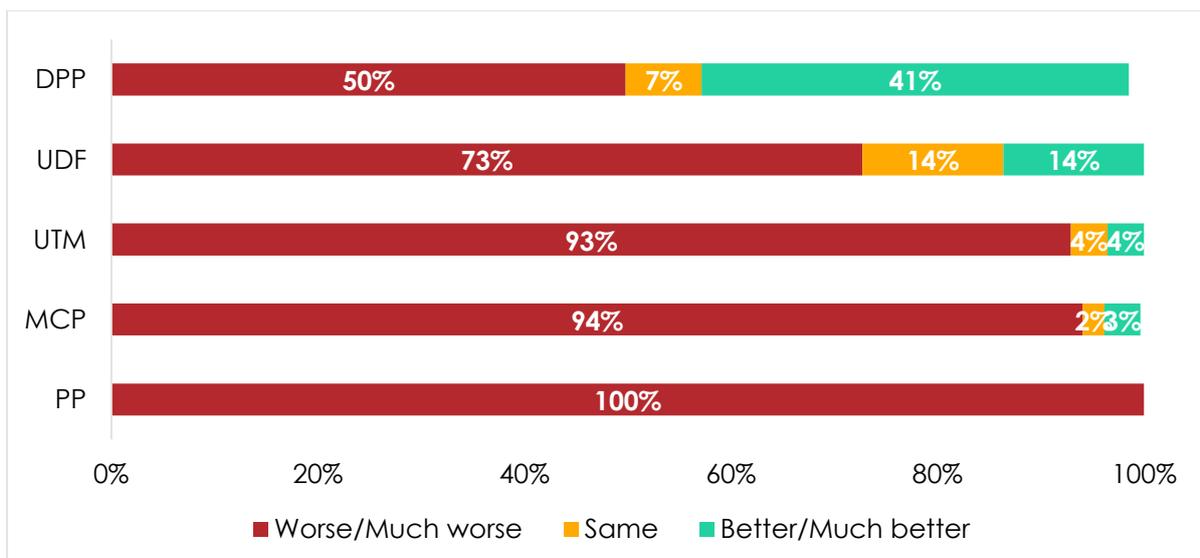
Charts

Figure 1: Quality of 2019 election compared to previous ones | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Compared with previous elections in Malawi that you are aware of, would you say that the quality of the May 2019 tri-partite elections was better, the same, or worse?

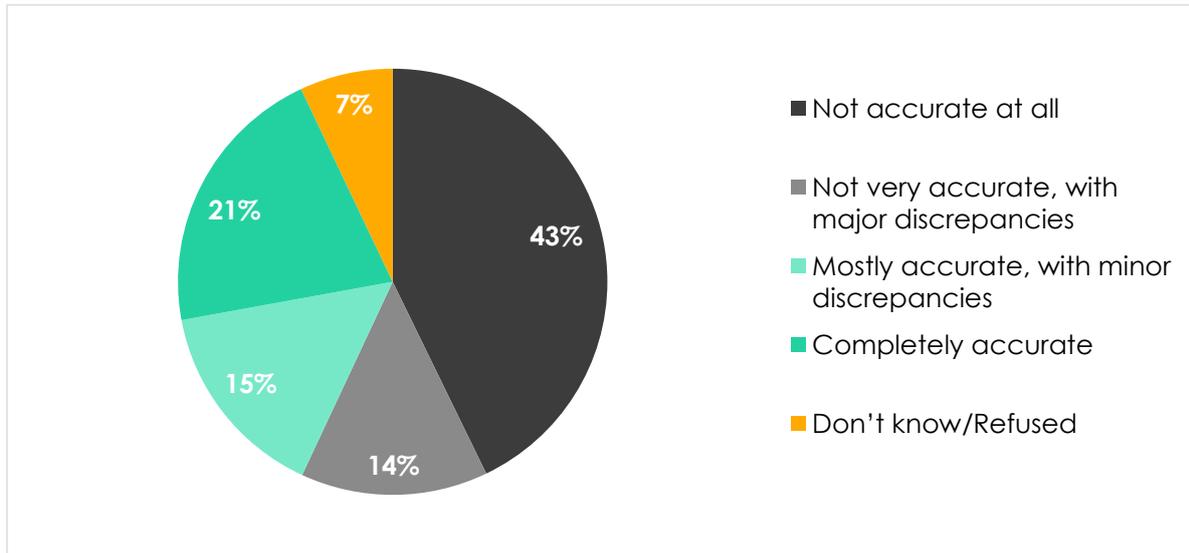
Figure 2: Quality of 2019 election compared to previous ones | by party affiliation | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Compared with previous elections in Malawi that you are aware of, would you say that the quality of the May 2019 tri-partite elections was better, the same, or worse?

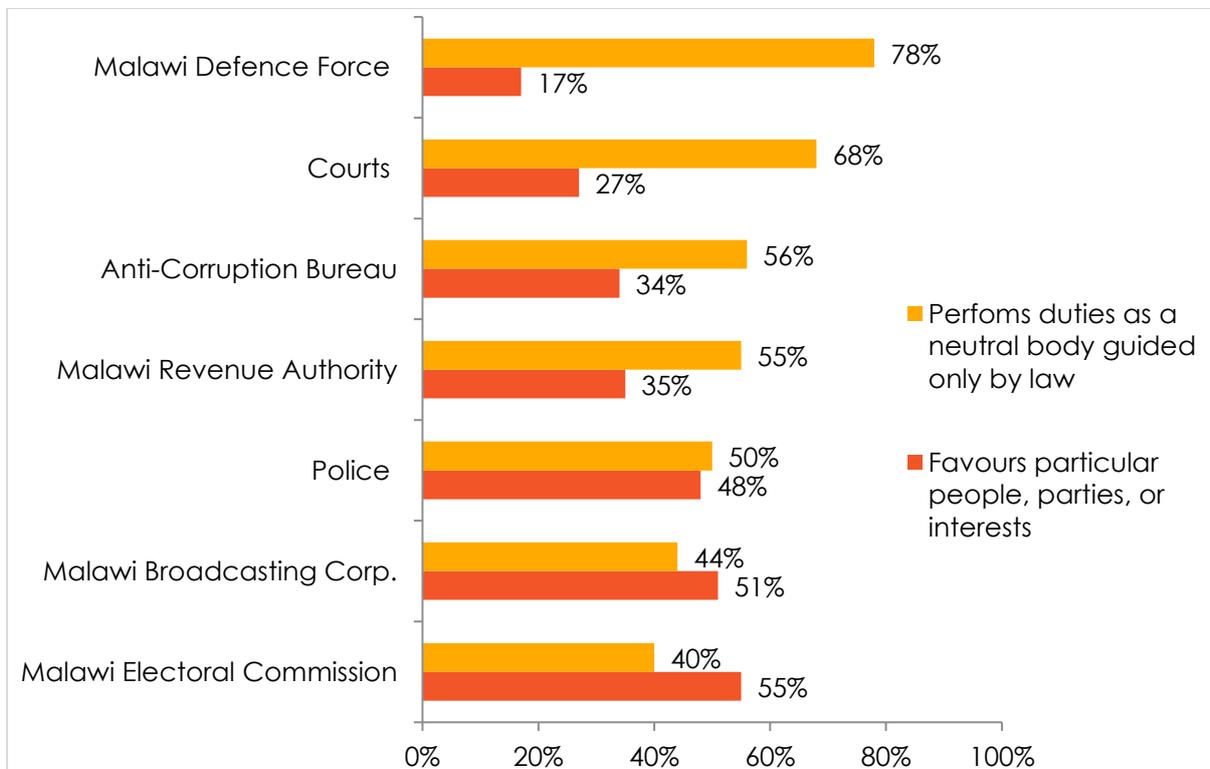
(Note: Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?")

Figure 3: Accuracy of declaration of election results | Malawi | 2019



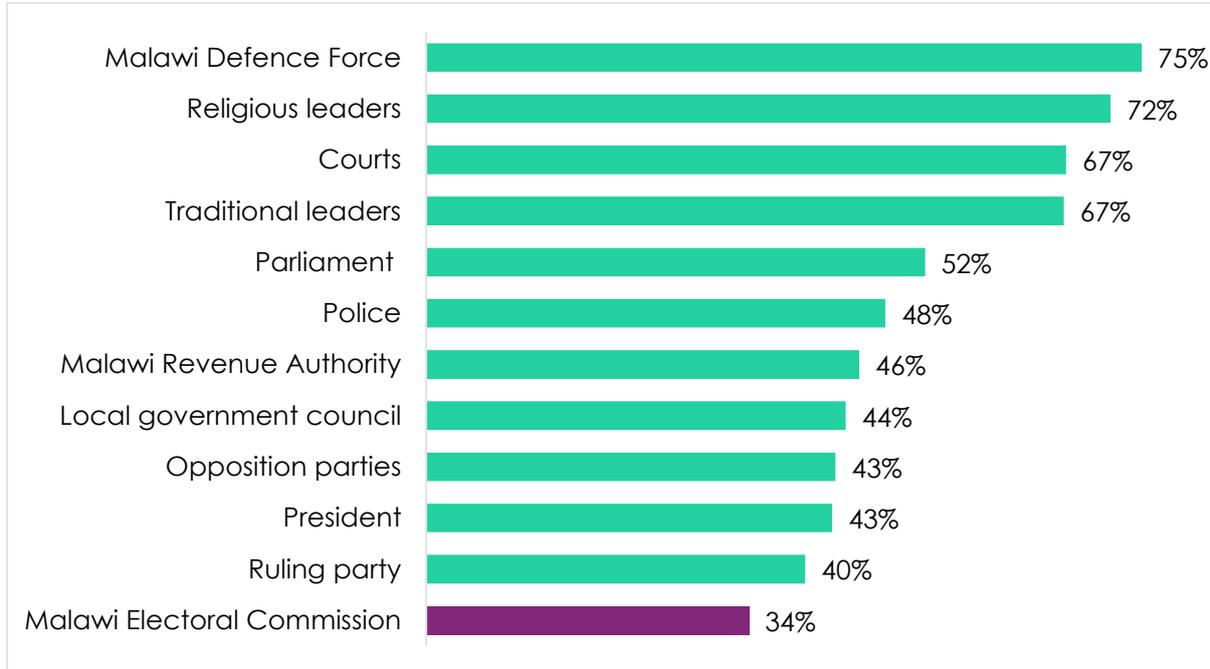
Respondents were asked: With regard to the last national election in 2019, to what extent do you think the results announced by the Malawi Electoral Commission accurately reflected the actual results as counted?

Figure 4: Neutrality of electoral commission and other state institutions | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: It is sometimes said that some government departments and agencies perform their duties and functions as neutral bodies, guided only by law, while others make decisions that favour particular people, parties or interests. For the following organizations, please tell me whether you think they perform their duties as a neutral body, guided only by law, or would you say they make decisions that favour particular people, parties, or interests?

Figure 5: Popular trust in the electoral commission and other state institutions
 | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

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