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Malawi: A nation of strong citizenship ties and high – if imperfect – tolerance and fairness

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 570 | Joseph J. Chunga and Mphatso Luwemba

Summary

Like most African countries, Malawi is a land of diversity. According to the 2018 Population and Housing Census, 34.4% of Malawians are Chewa, 18.9% are Lomwe, 13.3% are Yao, 10.4% are Ngoni, and 9.2% are Tumbuka. While about three-fourths of Malawians are Christians, Muslims and adherents of other religions make up a significant part of the population (National Statistical Office, 2019).

The country is divided into three administrative regions (Northern, Central, and Southern), and since the rebirth of multiparty democracy in 1994, political mobilisation and politicking have largely played out along regional lines. Some who think the Northern Region is neglected in terms of development have called for it to secede; others have urged a change from a unitary to a federal system of government for the nation (Moyo, 2015; Khamula, 2019).

The Tonse Alliance administration, which came to power in 2020 following disputed elections in 2019, has introduced a Ministry of Civic Education and National Unity, whose mandate is to “create a conducive environment for civic empowerment of citizens and promote sustainable peace and unity for national development” (Government of Malawi, 2020, p. 1).

Under the leadership of this ministry, the government recently declared the first-ever National Day of Unity and Dialogue (14 October), observed with events under the theme “Living Together in Unity, Building Peace” (Mlanjira, 2022). Eleven cultural heritage groups “performed their cultural dances while expressing commitment to continue preserving peace” (Kapalamula, 2022), but one of the country’s major ethnic/tribal groups, the Lomwe, and the main opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) boycotted the event, citing victimisation of their members by the government (Mtenje, 2022).

In light of the ongoing discourse on nation building and differences, this dispatch looks at the state of social cohesion and identities in the country based on citizens’ views collected by the 2022 Afrobarometer survey.

Survey findings show that most Malawians feel strongly connected with other citizens and express tolerance for differences in ethnicity, religion, political party, and nationality, though not in sexual orientation. Most value their identity as Malawians at least as highly as their ethnic or tribal identity. But a majority also say the government at times treats their ethnic group unfairly.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys

(2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in February 2022. 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, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

Social fabric of trust and tolerance

- Malawians overwhelmingly (85%) say they trust their relatives “somewhat” or “a lot,” and most also express trust in their neighbours (66%) and fellow citizens (65%). Slimmer majorities say they trust people from other religions (57%) and other ethnic groups (52%), and only 47% express trust in “other people you know.”
 - Men are generally somewhat more trusting than women, but larger gaps separate older citizens from less-trusting youth, rural residents from less-trusting urbanites, and uneducated respondents from their more-educated but less-trusting counterparts.
- Most Malawians express tolerant attitudes toward people of different religions (90%), ethnicities (90%), nationalities (80%), and political affiliations (77%). More than nine out of 10 (93%) they would like it or not mind if a member of their family married someone from a different ethnic group.
- One exception to Malawians' tolerance is homosexuality: 91% of respondents say they would dislike having a neighbour in a same-sex relationship.

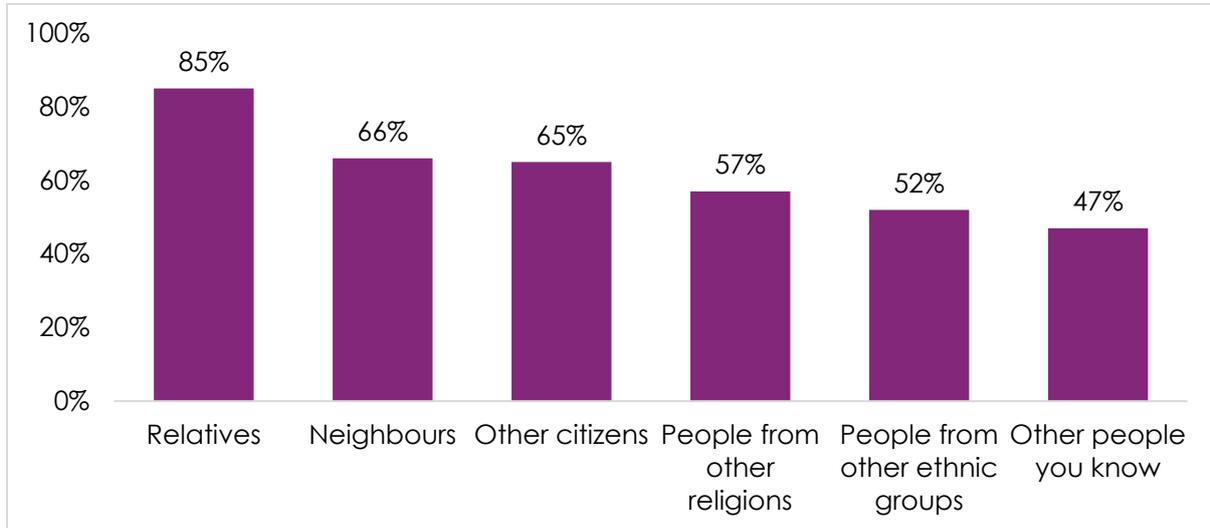
State and society

- Malawians have a strong sense of national unity. Nine out of 10 (90%) say they “feel strong ties” with other Malawians, and 93% believe that other citizens “think of me as a Malawian just like them.”
- Half (49%) of respondents say they feel equally attached to their Malawian and ethnic/cultural identities, while one-third (33%) feel “only Malawian” or more Malawian than ethnic. Only 16% say they value their ethnic identity more than their national identity.
- About three in 10 citizens (29%) say the government “often” or “always” treats their ethnic group unfairly. Another 29% say this happens “sometimes,” while 35% say it “never” happens.
 - Among the major ethnic groups in Malawi, the Chewa (36%) and Lomwe (33%) are most likely to feel frequently discriminated against by the government.

Trust in individuals and groups

Most Malawians (85%) say they trust their relatives “somewhat” or “a lot,” and about two-thirds say they trust their neighbours (66%) and “other citizens” (65%) (Figure 1). Smaller majorities express trust in people from other religions (57%) and other ethnic groups (52%), while fewer than half say they trust “other people you know” (47%).

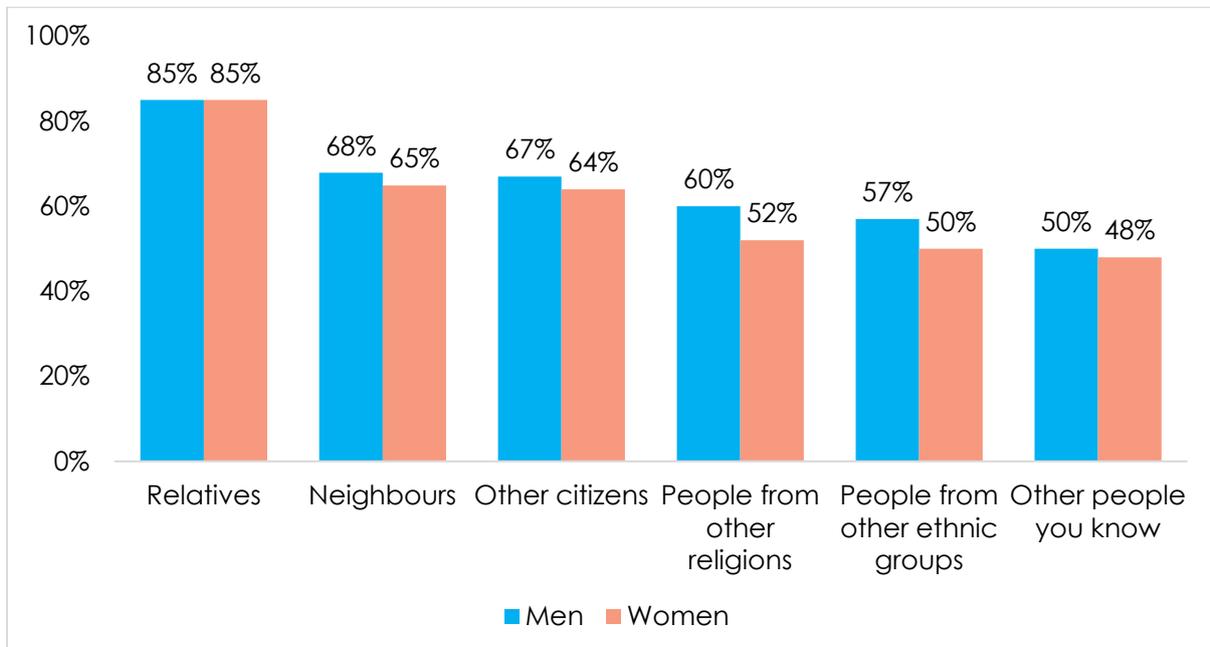
Figure 1: Trust 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people: Other Malawians? Your relatives? Your neighbours? Other people you know? People from other religions? People from other ethnic groups? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Men are somewhat more likely than women to express trust in others, especially when it comes to people from other religions (60% of men vs. 52% of women) and people from other ethnic groups (57% vs. 50%) (Figure 2).

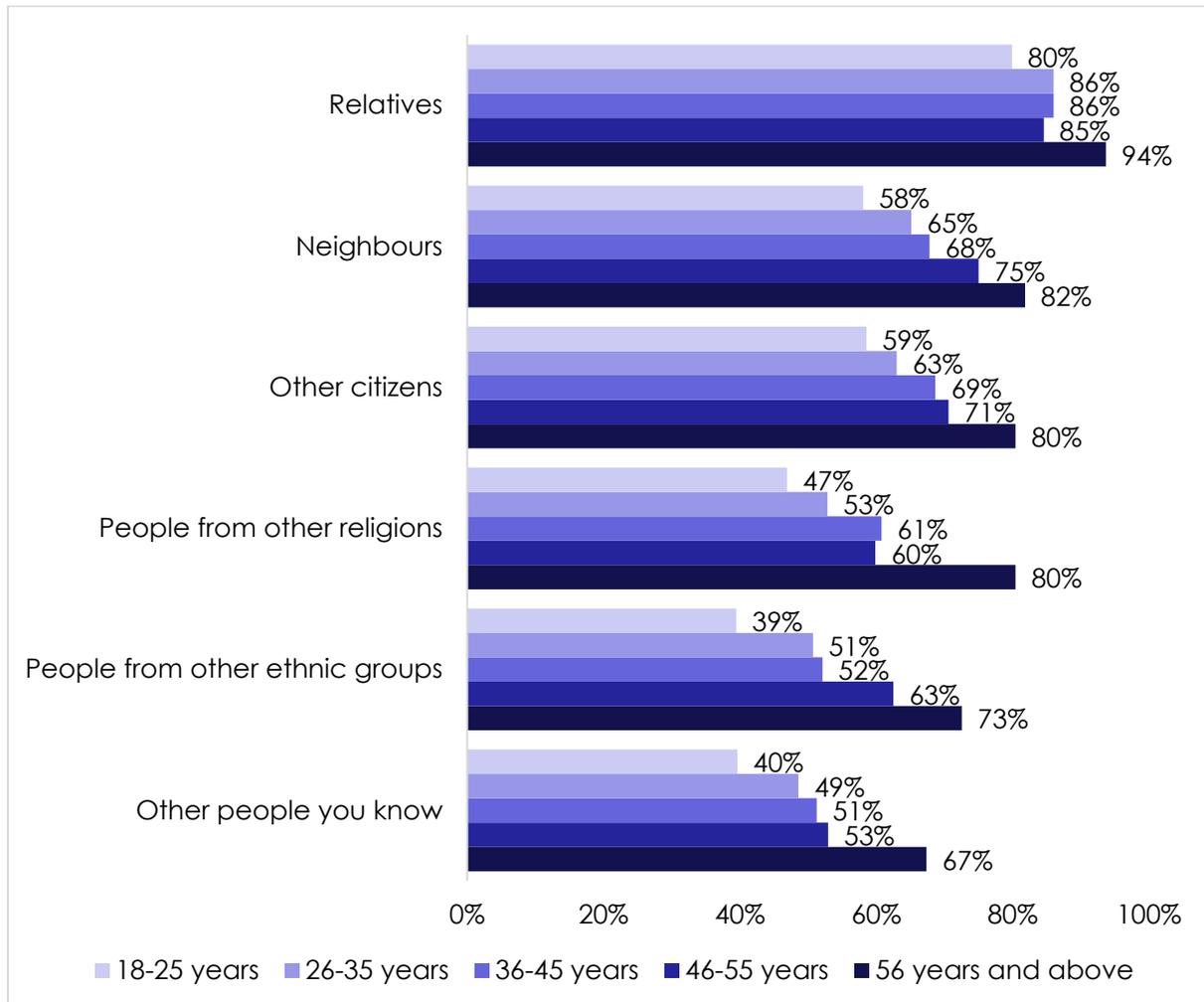
Figure 2: Trust 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | by gender | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people: Other Malawians? Your relatives? Your neighbours? Other people you know? People from other religions? People from other ethnic groups? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Younger Malawians are considerably less trusting than their elders (Figure 3). For example, only 39% of respondents aged 18-25 say they trust people from other ethnic groups “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to about half of those aged 26-45 and almost three-fourths (73%) of those over age 55. The pattern is the same with regard to all the types of people the survey asked about.

Figure 3: Trust ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’ | by age | Malawi | 2022



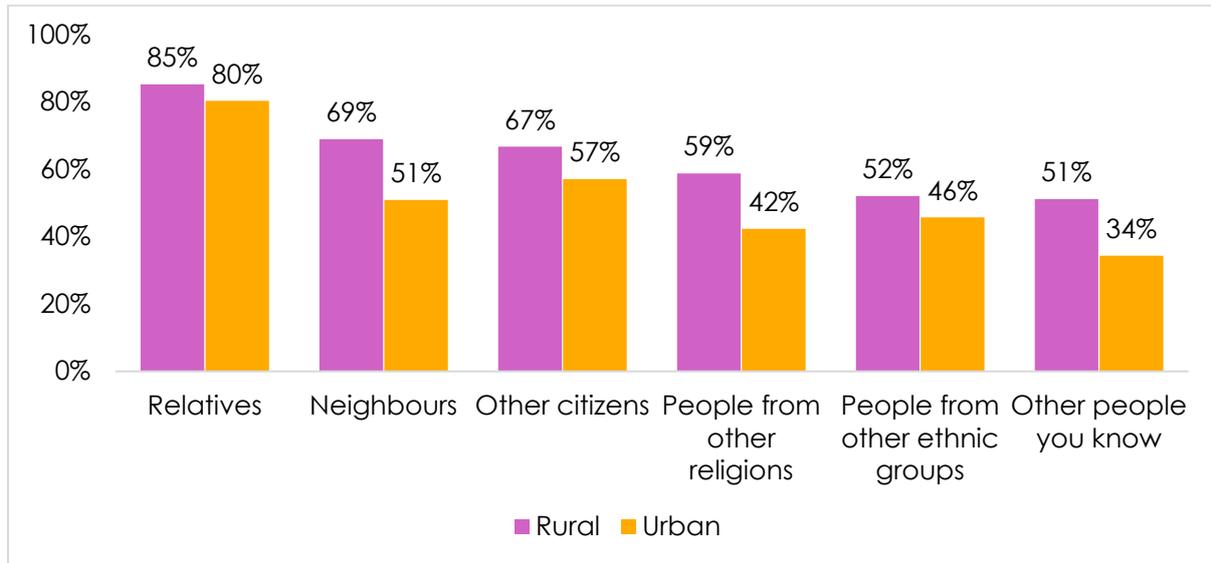
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people: Other Malawians? Your relatives? Your neighbours? Other people you know? People from other religions? People from other ethnic groups? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Rural residents are far more likely than their urban counterparts to express trust in other people (Figure 4). Differences are particularly large when it comes to trusting neighbours (69% of rural respondents vs. 51% of urbanites, an 18-percentage-point gap) and people from other religions (59% vs. 42%, a 17-point gap). The pattern holds with regard to the other types of people, too.

Trust appears to diminish with education (Figure 5). Malawians with no formal education are most likely to express trust in all the types of people the survey asked about, while those with secondary or post-secondary qualifications are least likely to do so.

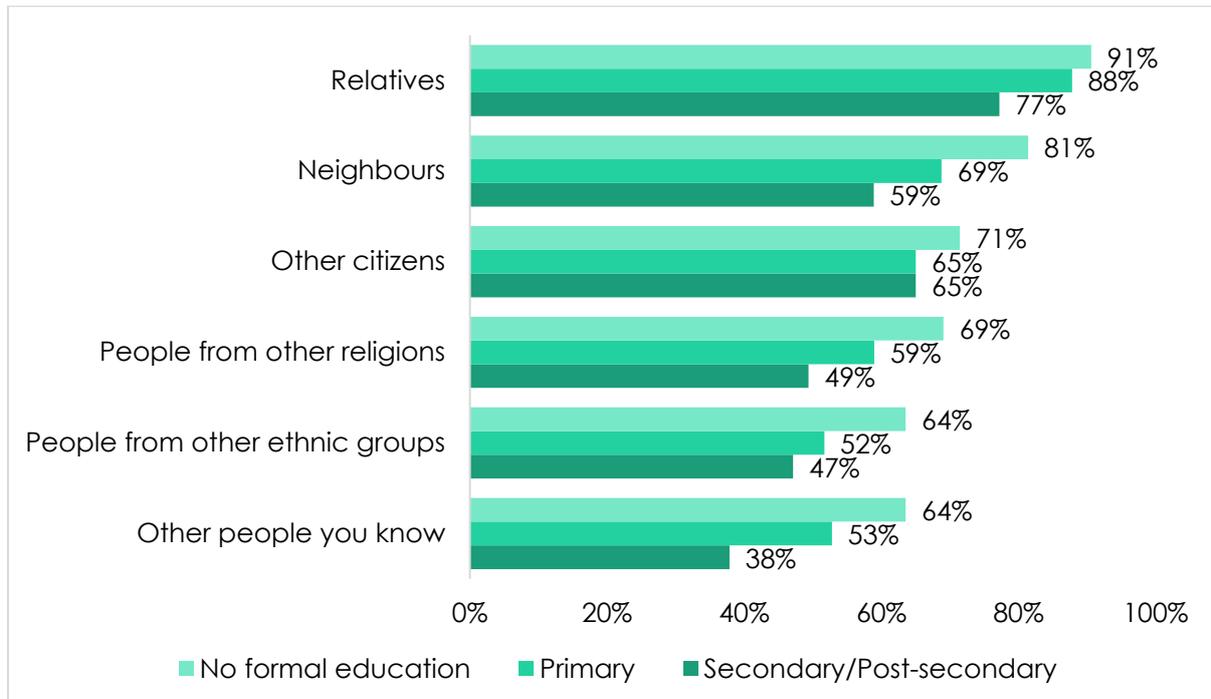
For example, while 64% of citizens without formal schooling say they trust people from other ethnic groups, only 47% of those with higher education say the same thing. Even when it comes to relatives, the unschooled (91%) are far more trusting than those with secondary or post-secondary education (77%).

Figure 4: Trust 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | by location | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people: Other Malawians? Your relatives? Your neighbours? Other people you know? People from other religions? People from other ethnic groups? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 5: Trust 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | by education | Malawi | 2022



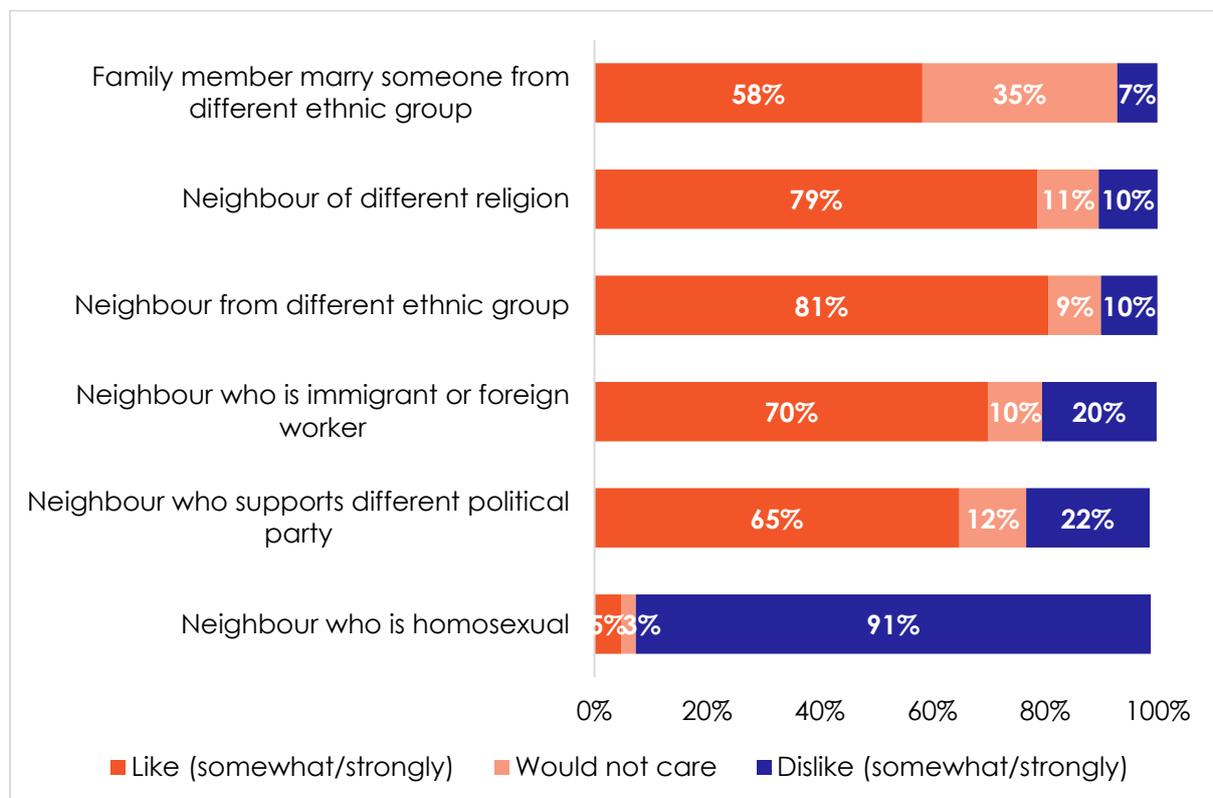
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people: Other Malawians? Your relatives? Your neighbours? Other people you know? People from other religions? People from other ethnic groups? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Tolerance

Malawians generally express high levels of tolerance for diversity (Figure 6). Nine out of 10 respondents say they “would strongly like,” “would somewhat like,” or “would not care” if they had neighbours of a different religion (90%) or from a different ethnic group (90%), and about eight in 10 say the same about neighbours who are immigrants or foreign workers (80%) or who support a different political party (77%). Fully 93% say they would like or would not mind if a family member married someone from a different ethnic group.

However, Malawian society is clearly hostile to people who are homosexual. Nine out of 10 citizens (91%) say they would dislike having neighbours in a same-sex relationship, while only 7% express tolerant attitudes toward sexual difference.¹

Figure 6: Social tolerance | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked:

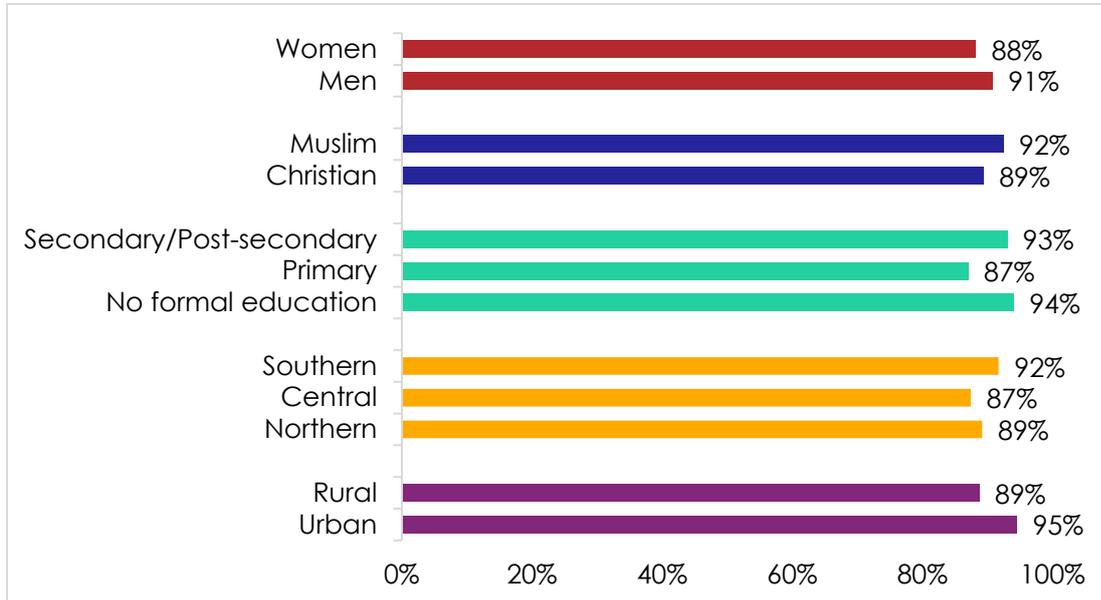
For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People of a different religion? People from other ethnic groups? Homosexuals? Immigrants or foreign workers? People who support a different political party?

Please tell me whether you would like having a family member marry a person from a different ethnic group, dislike it, or not care?

Tolerance of religious diversity is higher in cities (95%) than in rural areas (89%), but in general, differences between key demographic groups are small (Figure 7).

¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 5% “like (somewhat/a lot)” and 3% “would not care” sum to 7% “express tolerant attitudes”).

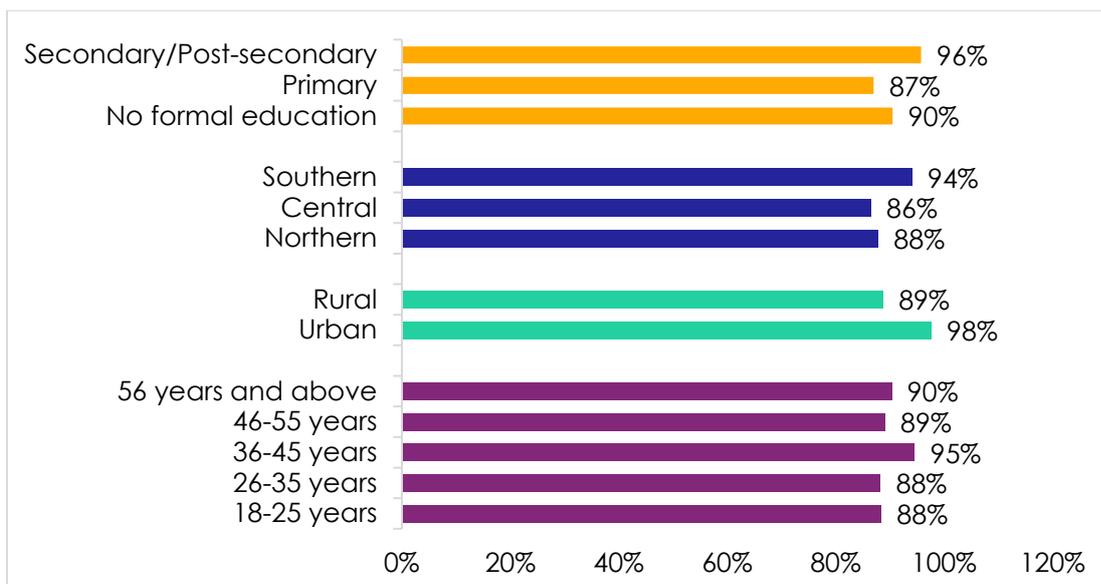
Figure 7: Tolerance for different religions | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People of a different religion? (% who say “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “would not care”)

Tolerance of ethnic diversity is also higher in cities than in rural areas (98% vs. 89%) and in the South (94%) compared to other regions (86%-88%) (Figure 8). Citizens with secondary or post-secondary education (96%) are more likely than their less educated counterparts (87%-90%) to express tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnic backgrounds.

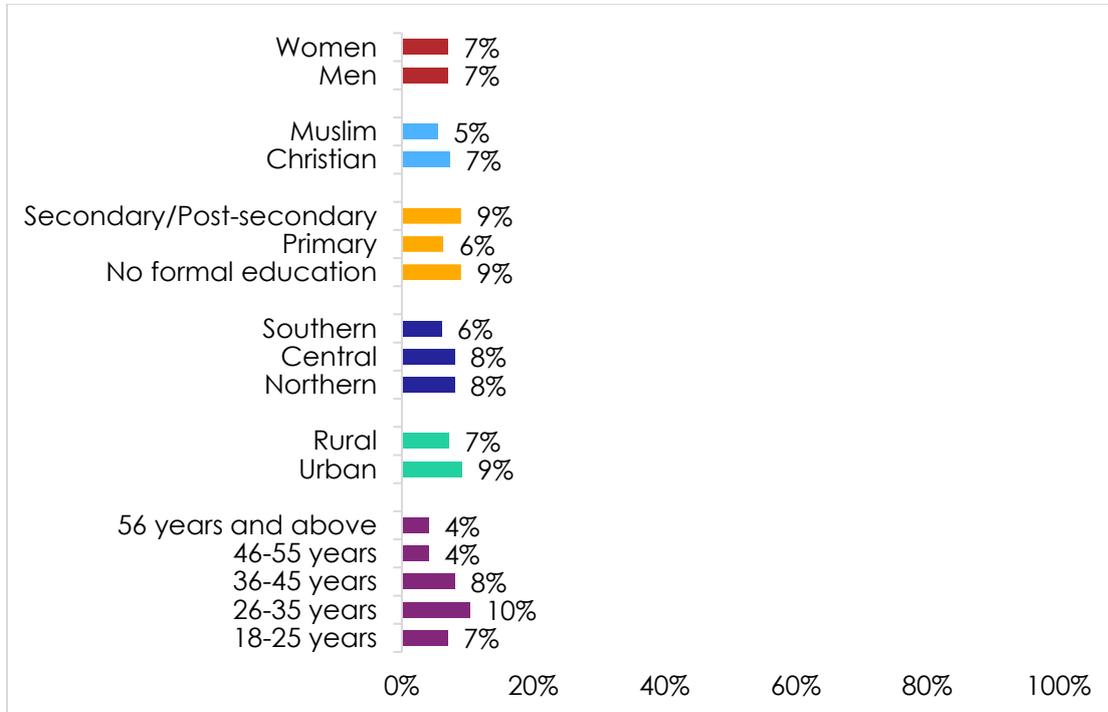
Figure 8: Tolerance for different ethnic groups | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People from other ethnic groups? (% who say “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “would not care”)

Tolerant attitudes toward people in same-sex relationships are rare across all demographic groups (Figure 9). Citizens under age 46 (7%-10%) are somewhat more likely to express tolerance than their elders (4%).

Figure 9: Tolerance for homosexuals | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

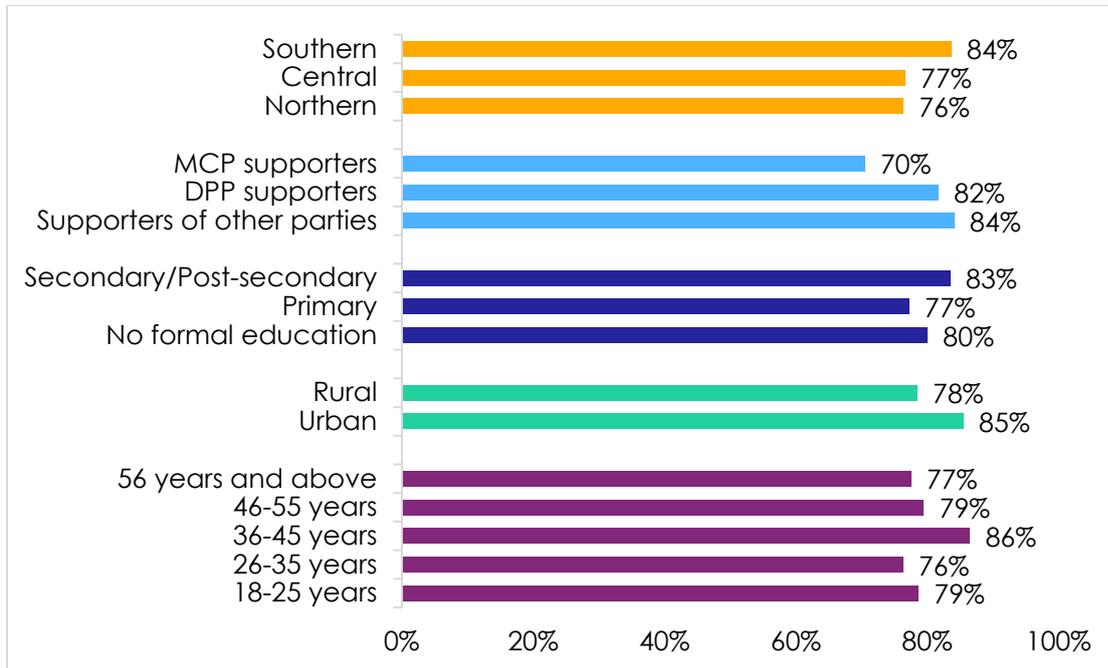
A majority of citizens from all walks of life express tolerant views toward immigrants and foreign workers. Foreigners are particularly welcome in urban areas (85%), in the Southern Region (84%), and among citizens with secondary or post-secondary education (83%). Supporters of the main opposition DPP (82%) and other parties (84%) are more likely than MCP supporters (70%) to express tolerance for immigrants and foreign workers (Figure 10).²

Tolerance of different political views, though widely shared, varies across key demographic groups (Figure 11). The youngest respondents (68% among 18- to 25-year-olds) are less likely than their elders (80%-85%) to say they would like or would not care if their neighbours supported different political parties.

Political tolerance is also less strong among women (71%, compared to 82% of men), less educated citizens (70%-72%, vs. 86% of those with secondary or post-secondary qualifications), and rural residents (75%, vs. 86% of urbanites).

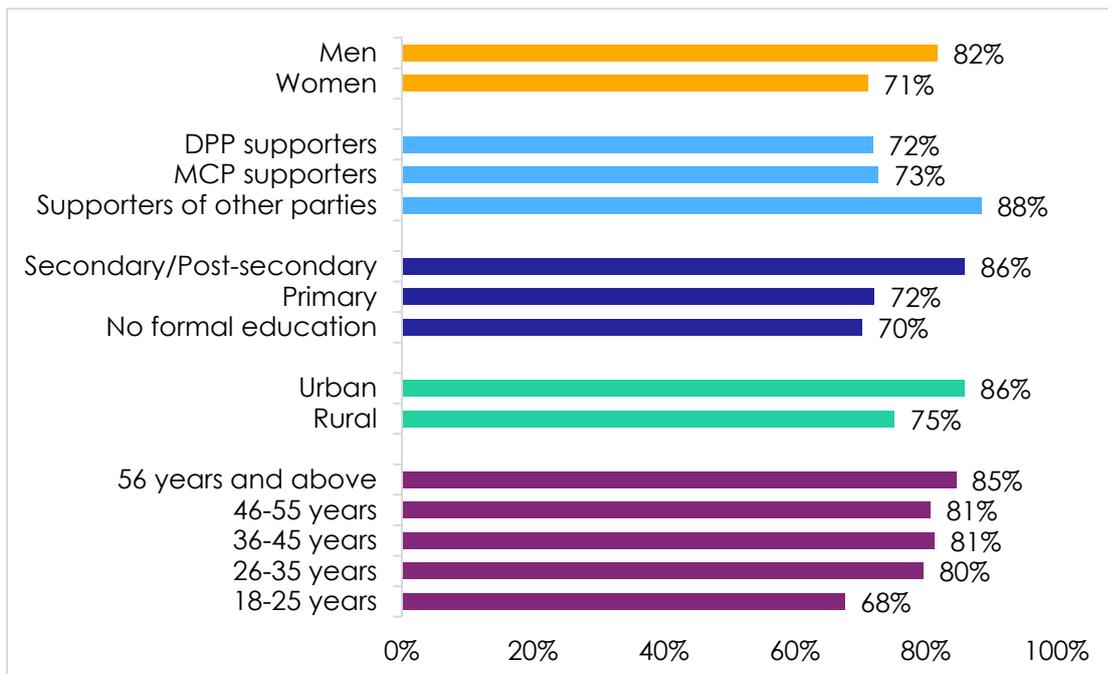
² Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Figure 10: Tolerance for other nationalities | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

Figure 11: Tolerance for other political views | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People who support a different political party? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

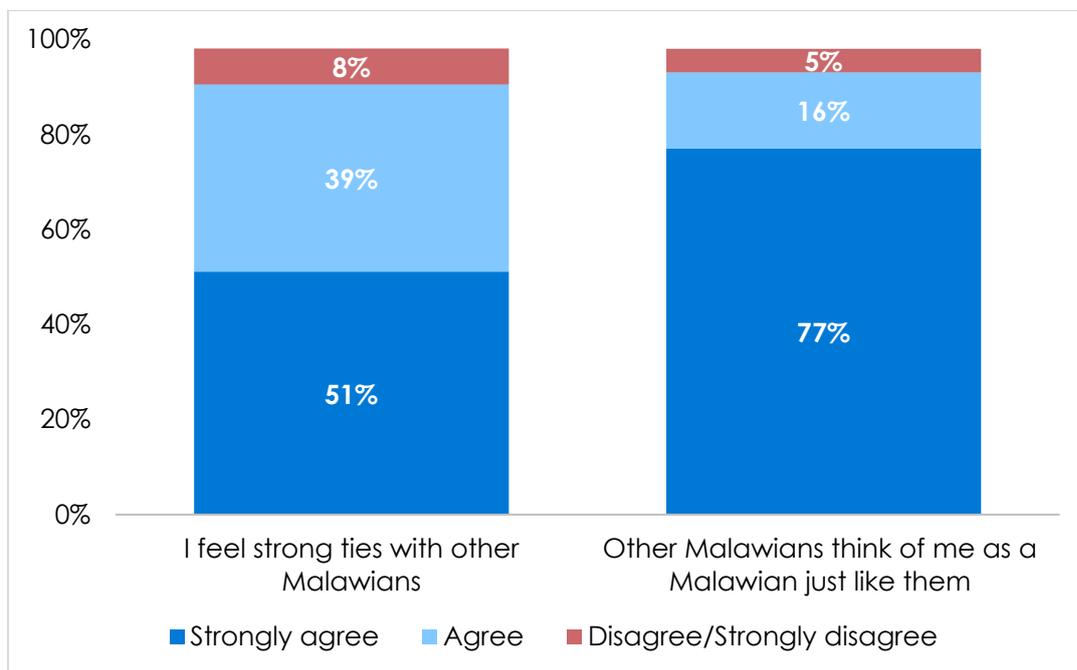
National vs. ethnic identities

Malawians overwhelmingly feel part of a national whole. Nine out of 10 (90%) say they “feel strong ties” with other Malawians, including more than half (51%) who “strongly” affirm these ties (Figure 12).

Even more (93%) express the belief that other citizens see them as “Malawians just like them,” including 77% who “strongly agree.”

The feeling of having strong ties to other Malawians is strong across key demographic groups, including political-party affiliation.

Figure 12: Strong citizenship ties and equal standing | Malawi | 2022



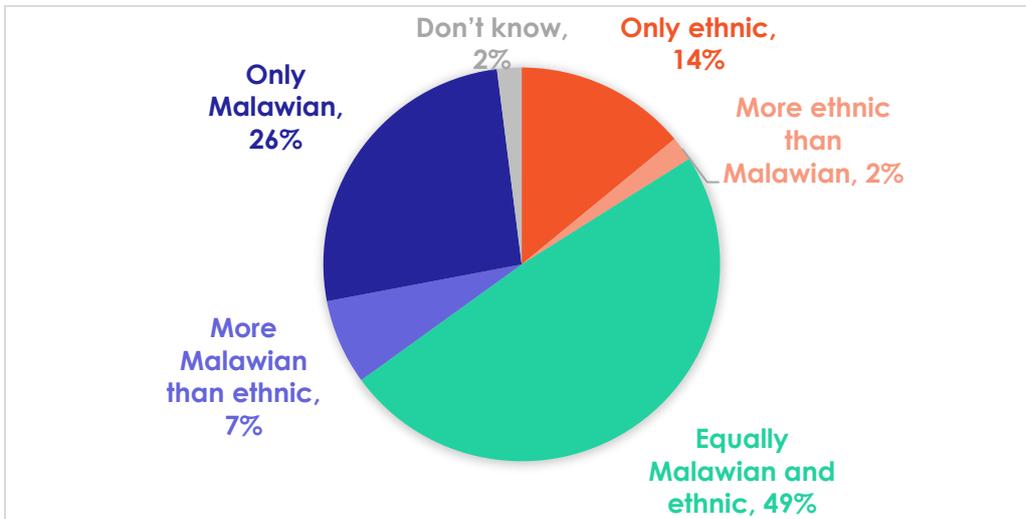
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

When asked whether they feel more attached to their national identity or their ethnic identity, about half (49%) of respondents say they feel equally attached to both. One-third (33%) say they feel “only Malawian” (26%) or more Malawian than ethnic (7%), while only 16% of respondents feel more or only part of their ethnic group (Figure 13).

Feeling only or more Malawian is more common in the Southern Region (36%) than in the Centre (32%) and North (25%) (Figure 14). It is about equally prevalent in urban and rural areas, although the opposite – feeling only or more ethnic – is more widespread in rural areas than in cities (17% vs. 10%). MCP supporters are less likely to prefer their Malawian identity (24%) than citizens who align with the DPP (33%) or other parties (36%).

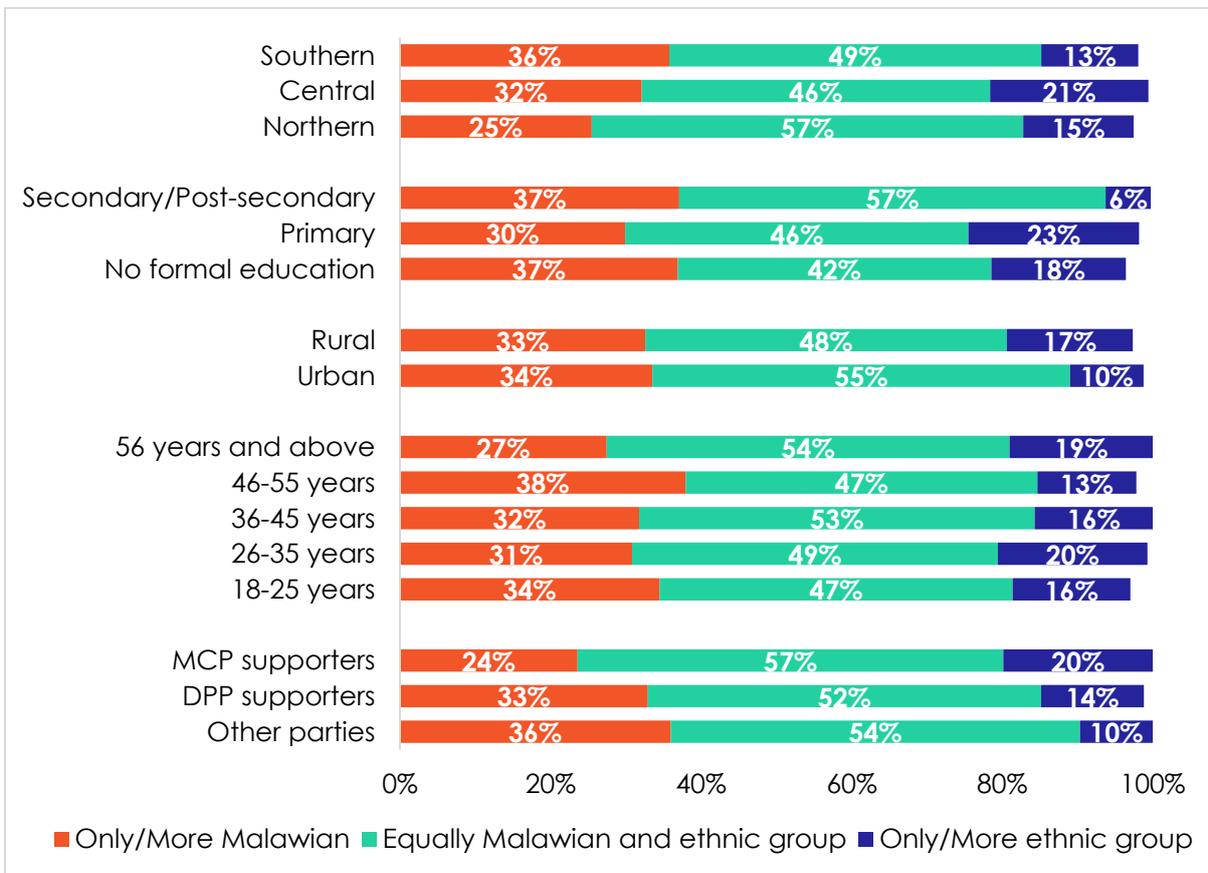
Citizens with higher education are far less likely to identify exclusively or predominantly with their ethnic group (5%) than those with less schooling (18%-23%).

Figure 13: National vs. ethnic identities | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Malawian and being a [member of the respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings: I feel only [ethnic group]? I feel more [ethnic group] than Malawian? I feel equally Malawian and [ethnic group]? I feel more Malawian than [ethnic group]? I feel only Malawian?

Figure 14: National vs. ethnic identities | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



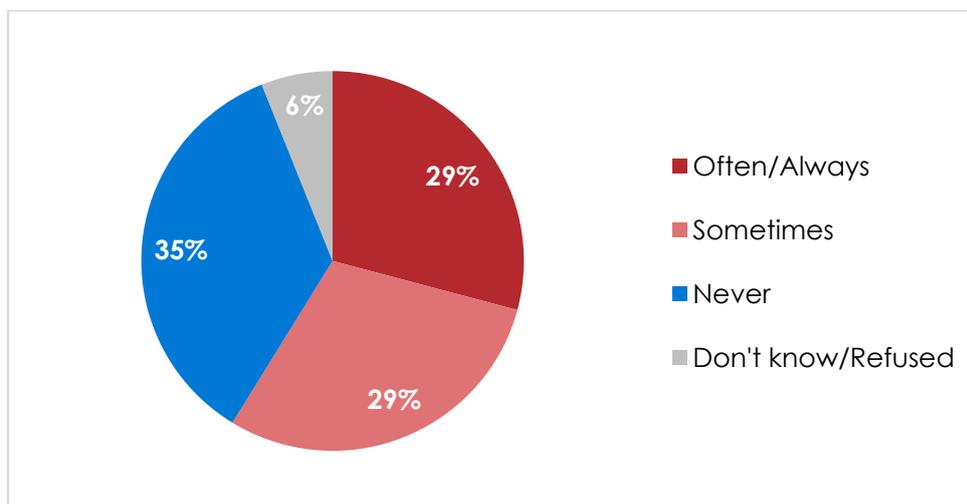
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings: I feel only [ethnic group]? I feel more [ethnic group] than Malawian? I feel equally Malawian and [ethnic group]? I feel more Malawian than [ethnic group]? I feel only Malawian?

Government treatment of ethnic groups

One factor that might threaten the nation-building agenda is the perception of unfair treatment of some ethnic groups by the government. About three in 10 citizens (29%) say their ethnic group is “often” or “always” treated unfairly by the government, and the same proportion (29%) say this happens “sometimes.” Only about one-third (35%) say members of their ethnic group are “never” treated unfairly (Figure 15).

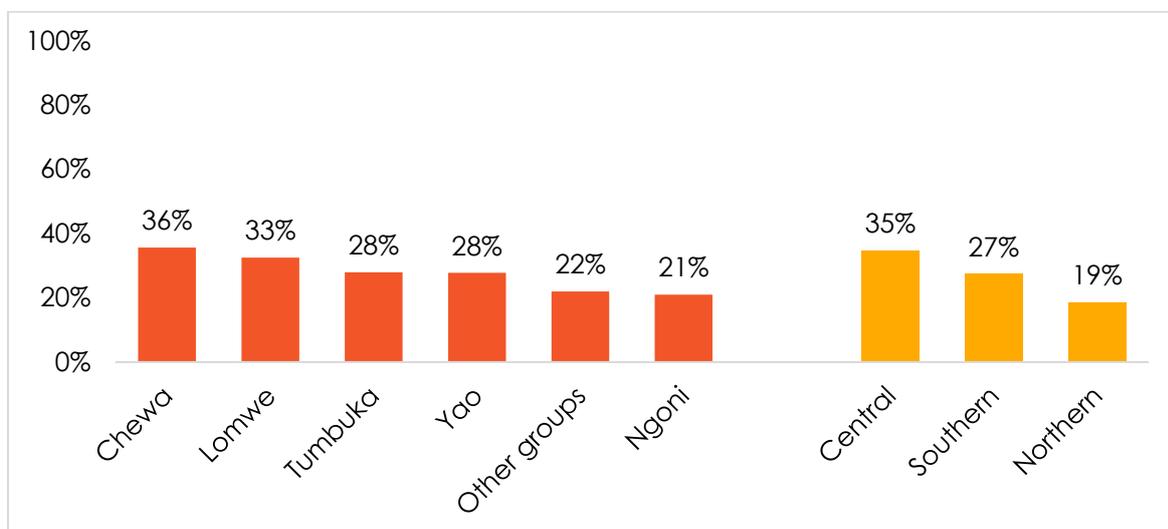
Respondents who identify as Chewa (36%) or Lomwe (33%) are more likely to say the government “often” or “always” treats their ethnic group unfairly than are members of the Tumbuka (28%), Yao (28%), Ngoni (21%), or other groups (22%) (Figure 16). This view is more common in the Central Region (35%) than in the South (27%) and North (19%).

Figure 15: Discrimination against ethnic groups by the government | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

Figure 16: Discrimination against ethnic groups by the government | by ethnic group and region | Malawi | 2022



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government? (% who say “often” or “always”)

Conclusion

Afrobarometer survey results show that Malawi has a good foundation for building the nation. Respondents' strong citizenship ties and positive feelings of tolerance for different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities are important elements.

However, the findings also point to several areas that need attention from the newly established Ministry of Civic Education and National Unity and the nation as a whole. It is particularly concerning that younger Malawians express less trust than their elders. This calls for focused formal and informal socialisation activities. Greater engagement between religious groups can also strengthen trust between members of different faiths.

Lastly, there is a need for greater engagement between ethnic/cultural groups to build greater trust, as well as for government engagement with these groups to deal with concerns about discrimination. Despite their strong sense of national identity, Malawians still have work to do as they build on displays of the inaugural National Day of Unity and Dialogue.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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