

Centre for Multiparty Democracy - Malawi

**VOTER APATHY IN MALAWI: A CRITICAL
APPRAISAL**

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADMARC	Agricultural Development and Marketing Cooperation of Malawi
AFORD	Alliance for Democracy
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
ESCOM	Electricity Supply Commission of Malawi
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FTPT	First Past The Post
MACRA	Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
MEC	Malawi Electoral Commission
MP	Member of Parliament
MTL	Malawi Telcomms Limited
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NICE	National Initiative for Civic Education
PPEA	Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Act
PR	Proportional Representation
UDF	United Democratic Front
VAP	Voting Age Population

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The problem of voter apathy has steadily become a major issue of concern since the May 1994 founding democratic elections. While between May 1994 and June 1999, the worry about voter apathy largely pertained to by-elections, the trend has changed altogether following the November 2000 local government elections and the May 2004 general elections. From a record 93% voter turn out in the June 1999 general elections, voter turn out tumbled to 59% in May 2004. The voter turnout for the 2000 local government elections was as low as 14%. These recent trends are a cause of concern because voter turnout is one of the telling indicators of the democratic robustness of a country as it reflects the work of several processes that have occurred over a long period of time and at different levels of society. Consequently this study was commissioned for two main reasons:

- To systematically investigate the factors behind the increasing trends in voter apathy since the 2000 local government elections; and
- To propose remedial measures that would reverse the current worrisome trends in voter apathy in close consultation with the relevant stakeholders in the electoral process.

Methodology

The study was predominantly based on secondary sources. These included studies on elections in Malawi as well as from various countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The secondary sources further included government officially gazetted results. The secondary sources were complemented with fieldwork in Blantyre urban and rural using the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) technique. The FGDs were carried out with groups of 8-10 men, women and youth (boys and girls mixed). The rationale for the field work was to capture the perceptions of the voters about the electoral process as they would be key to unraveling the factors that have triggered widespread voter apathy as well as thinking about potential remedies.

The study distinguished two forms of voter turnout. These are Voter Registration % (Vote/Reg%) and Voting Age Population (VAP%). Vote/Reg% refers to the percentage of voters that actually turnout on an election day to cast their ballots whereas VAP % refers to the percentage of voters who are eligible to vote, whether they registered or not. The analysis carried out in this study was based on the Vote/Reg% dimension of voter turn out for which data is readily available from the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC).

Findings of the Study

The increasing trends in voter apathy are attributed to the following factors, namely: 1) the role of the MEC in electoral administration and management; 2) failure of successful candidates to deliver; 3) intra and inter-party politics; and 3) the electoral legal framework.

The role of the MEC in electoral administration and management

Three different areas were identified in this regard. These include voter registration, handling electoral complaints and disputes and making dubious decisions as well as activities.

Voter registration

- Insufficient voter registration materials at registration centres which often results in potential voters being turned away more than once.
- Allegations of partisanship in the distribution of materials for the voter registration exercise.
- Non-functional registration centres hence excluding potential voters from exercising their inalienable right.
- Timing of the registration period which coincides with the peak of the farming calendar.
- Low caliber and poorly motivated registration staff who do not know how to handle even very trivial issues by themselves.

Handling of electoral complaints and disputes

- Unwillingness to follow up and take decisive actions on complaints brought to its attention.
- Failure to enforce impartial access to, and unbiased reporting by public broadcasters.
- Failure to ensure equity in the access and use of public resources especially vehicles from parastatal bodies such as ESCOM, ADMARC and MTL. The ruling parties are at liberty to use these resources as they please.

Dubious decisions and activities

- Questionable proposal to increase the number of constituencies from 177 to 242 in 1998 particularly the attendant distribution of the seats across the regions.
- The president's announcement of the decision of the MEC on the issue of running mate for the MCP-AFORD Alliance for the June 1999 general elections prior to the MEC officially making the decision public.
- The apparent exaggeration of the number of registered voters for the May 2004 general elections to about 6.7 million which after a cleaning exercise shrank to 5.1%.

Failure of successful candidates to deliver

- Candidates do not keep campaign promises let alone bother to make follow ups. Consequently voters feel cheated and betrayed.
- Candidates often move out of rural areas to urban areas upon election and rarely visit their constituents to consult on issues to be tabled in parliament.
- Parliamentary debate is largely dictated by partisan interests at the expense of genuine national priorities. Voters were, for instance, concerned with the primacy of the third term and impeachment debates at the expense of pressing issues such as hunger crisis. Parliament has therefore failed to transform itself into a true forum of dialogue, generation of common national agenda and a platform of elimination of fear, mistrust and marginalization.
- Tendencies of MPs to cross the floor at their own volition make voters to feel cheated. Voters are wary of '*cheque book politics*' or '*politics of scones*' since they are virtually powerless to do something about it.

Intra and inter party politics

- Nomination of candidates to stand or represent parties in elections is not democratic. Patronage and personal followership with regard to party leadership appear to be more important for the nomination of candidates than the preference of grassroots.
- Electoral violence is on the increase and has created an atmosphere of fear in the voters. The intra-party violence is particularly pronounced during primary elections since parties do not have in place credible and effective mechanisms to regulate the nomination process. Inter party violence peaks up during electoral campaign activities.
- Campaigns are uninspiring because they centre largely on personalities. This is the case because parties in Malawi lack distinct ideological platforms in which case there are no significant policy differences to excite their electoral campaigns.

The electoral legal framework

- The First Past the Post (FPTP) makes the electoral process very susceptible to violence. This is the case because it reduces elections to a matter of life and death as the winner takes it all.
- The FPTP gives the impression that votes do not have an equal weighting in determining the final result. This makes it difficult for voters to take it that in a democracy there no permanent winners just as there are no permanent losers.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the findings of this study:

- There is need to steadfastly defend, maintain and support the integrity of the electoral management body especially in terms of its composition, mandate, scope of powers and budget.
- There is need to support stakeholder involvement and provide constant training to political parties and civil society groups on electoral law and management issues including the role of civil society in civic and voter education and election observation.
- There is need to support a sustainable approach to electoral administration through capacity programmes and career paths, permanent structures, long-term planning horizon, affordable and credible processes.
- There is need to promote party assistance programmes that pay attention to intra-party democracy. Parties are not likely to function democratically when in power if they are not internally democratic.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Setting the Context

The international political system has radically changed in the last two decades. During this period, the global political system has witnessed the enfranchisement of more voters across geographical, racial and socio-economic divides more than ever before. This dramatic development is credited to the end of the Cold War in 1989, which paved the way for popularizing democracy in the greater part of the developing world (cf. Molutsi and Singh, 2003). The resultant transformation has been quite unprecedented. It is currently estimated that some 140 out of the world's 189 states have multiparty elections and approximately two-thirds of the world population lives in countries that have multiparty elections. According to Freedom House, the percentage of democratic states in the world surged from 27% in 1970 to 62% in 2000 (Tonchi, 2005).

Malawi became a liberalized polity in May 1994 as part of this democratic tide. From probably the most repressive government in the entire southern Africa, Malawi reinstated multiparty democracy following both relentless donor and domestic pressures. The momentous return to democracy saw the ouster of the Malawi Congress party (MCP) and the ascendancy of the United Democratic Party (UDF) at the helm of government until February 2005 when the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) became the governing party. The third consecutive general elections were held in May 2004. The number of elections held since the onset of the democratization process in the country stands at five if the June 1993 referendum and the 2000 local government elections are included.

There are, however, major concerns among stakeholders with the recent voter turnout trends especially after experiencing a steady increase in voter turnout between June 1993 and June 1999. Voter turnout in the June 1993 referendum was 69%, rose to 80% in May 1994, peaked to 93% in June 1999 and dramatically tumbled to 59% in the May 2004 general elections. The writing was on the wall for potential widespread voter apathy as early as 2000 when voter turnout in the local government elections was as low as 14%. The dramatic slump in voter turnout in the 2000 local government elections as well as in the May 2004 general elections is a great cause of concern. This is mainly the case because voter turnout while constituting one of the many ways in which citizens participate in political life, it is often seen as a telling indicator of the democratic robustness of a country, affording citizens a stake in the political process (cf. Ballington, 2001 and Rukambe, 2005). The magnitude of voter participation in elections thus reflects the work of several processes that have occurred over a long period of time and at different levels of society in which case sharp declines as registered in the May 2004 general elections raise an alarm.

Malawi's recent electoral trends do not auger well with the popular theoretical postulation that countries in transition are expected to fully consolidate their democracies after at least holding two consecutive general elections (cf. Bratton and van de Walle, 1997). This is again contrary to the widely held conviction that the first elections under multiparty rule would be surrounded by controversies while later elections would be less

controversial as voters, candidates, and administrators gained experience with multiparty electoral contests. The decline of voter turn out from a record high of 93% in June 1999 to 59% in May 2004 general elections is a clear indication that there must be something fundamentally flawed with the overall electoral process which voters have expressed by staying away from the polls in large numbers.

This study was therefore commissioned to: 1) systematically investigate the factors behind the increasing trends in voter apathy since the 2000 local government elections; and 2) on the basis of the findings propose remedial measures that would reverse the current worrisome trends in voter apathy in close consultation with the relevant stakeholders in the electoral process. These are quite urgent concerns because, if left unchecked, the increasing trends in voter apathy threaten to jeopardize the processes of democratization and democracy consolidation altogether. These fears are further reinforced by recent observations by Rakner and Svasand (2005) who point out that the administration of elections in Malawi has since 1994 exhibited a declining quality trend in key dimensions of the electoral cycle. The declining quality of electoral administration surely presents a huge challenge for democratic institutionalization and consolidation in the country.

1.2 Methodology

The guiding principle for the study is that voter participation is very critical to the practice of democratic elections in order to ensure that elections do reflect the will of the majority. Voter apathy represents a huge challenge especially to democratizing countries because it undermines this very premise (cf. Masterson, 2005). For purposes of contextualizing this study, it is very important to note that there are two forms of voter turnout which may be the basis for determining whether there is voter apathy or not. These are Voter Registration % (Vote/Reg %) and Voting Age Population (VAP%). Vote/Reg% refers to the percentage of voters that actually turnout on an election day to cast their ballots whereas VAP% refers to the percentage of voters who are eligible to vote, whether they registered or not (cf. Schmidt, et al., 1998). More broadly, however, voter turnout refers the extent to which those who are legally enfranchised exercise their right to vote. The analysis carried out in this study was based on the Vote/Reg% dimension of voter turnout for which data is readily available.

The study was predominantly based on the analysis of existing secondary sources on elections in Malawi as well as relevant materials from elsewhere within sub-Saharan Africa. There are in fact several studies that have been done on elections in Malawi since the onset of the democratization process at the turn of the 1990s. These studies were very important for purposes of this study since they are mainly postmortem analyses of the major elections that have been held in the country since 1993. Government officially gazetted election results were used to assess voter turnout trends at national, regional and district levels. The insights from the secondary sources were complemented with fieldwork in Blantyre district. It was decided to carry out the fieldwork in Blantyre because it is one of the districts that have registered the lowest average voter turnout in the three general elections at 73.9%. The fieldwork was carried out in two sites: one in

Blantyre urban and the other in Blantyre rural. In Blantyre urban, the fieldwork was carried out in Zingwangwa Township and in Matindi Village in Blantyre rural.

Using the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) technique, the fieldwork was carried out with groups of 8-10 men, women and youths (boys and girls mixed) in each site separately. The rationale for categorizing the FGDs as such was to assess whether there would be differentiated experiences, knowledge and perceptions among these groups about voting in general and voter apathy in particular. The strength of the FGD technique is that if properly executed, it generates nuanced, open minded and sometimes unexpected responses underlying what participants think but also why they think the way they do. The main objective of the fieldwork, even though with a very limited coverage, was to capture the perceptions of the voters about the electoral process because their sentiments may potentially be instructive in unraveling the factors that have triggered widespread voter apathy as well as thinking about potential remedial measures.

1.3 Organization of the Report

While this chapter introduces the scope and focus of the study, chapter two discusses the role of elections in democracy. Chapter three presents electoral trends in terms of voter turnout at national, regional and district levels since the June 1993 referendum. Chapter four discusses factors behind the apparent rise in voter apathy and chapter five provides potential remedies to the declining voter turnout trends. Chapter six offers concluding remarks and reflects on the possible way forward.

2. ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY IN PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the role of elections in democracy as well as the essential prerequisites that have to be satisfied for elections to promote a functioning democracy. The main purpose of this chapter is to set the context of the rest of this report.

2.2 Elections and Democracy

Elections are described as the hallmark of democratic politics (cf. Dulani, 2005a). This is because democracy is a system of government based on the assumption that all citizens have the right to participate in shaping the face of the society in which they live. For this reason, elections are characterized as the cornerstone of representative democracy because they provide a unique opportunity for the electorate to indicate their priorities, interests and concerns by exercising the right to vote.

Elections are considered extremely vital to the processes of democratization and democracy consolidation because they are widely recognized as the only legitimate form of transfer and exercise of power in modern democratic states. They have thus become the main theatre of political participation whereby voters actively exercise their right to participate democratically by electing representatives in periodic, free and fair elections (cf. Ballington, 2001 and English, 2005). Put differently, elections are a key mechanism through which the public can influence the political process and keep the public office holders in regular and periodic check. The elections provide opportunities for the electorate to make retrospective assessment of government's (as well as the opposition's) performance and exercise some degree of control over their representatives.

It is argued that there can be no democracy without free and fair elections, which allow citizens to choose their rulers. Elections are thus clearly the first necessary step towards democracy, the only way in which people can choose their rulers (cf. Molutsi and Singh, 2003). While a viable democratic system include such elements as respect for human rights, the rule of law, separation of powers, and the existence of a transparent, responsive and accountable governance to create and promote social and economic opportunities and growth, democracy is virtually inconceivable without legitimate, transparent, free and fair elections even though elections *per se* do not equal democracy (cf. Rakner and Svasand, 2005). It is therefore very important that elections must always meet the criteria for being transparent, free, fair and credible.

2.3 Free and Fair Elections

Kadzamira (2000) argues that free and fair elections is an expression that now fully qualifies to be in the dictionary of political clichés. The legitimacy of an electoral process is hugely dependent on whether it is certified as free and fair by both international and local observers (Kadzamira, 2000 and Patel, 2000). Elections are considered as free and fair when citizen's fundamental rights and freedoms are respected, including the right to

vote freely in secret balloting and without coercion; have access to information and polling sites; and enjoy freedom of speech and assembly, among others. Magolowondo (2003) provides a more elaborate catalogue of benchmarks for declaring an election free and fair as follows:

- Freedom of campaign throughout the country without obstruction.
- Free and equal access to the public media.
- Independent electoral commission whereby it is not taken as a government body.
- Impartial exercise of duty by public bodies such as the police.
- A clear code of conduct to guide political parties and that all contesting parties will have to adhere to the code of conduct.
- Transparent management of the entire electoral process, especially the handling of the electoral related data and other information.

Free and fair elections are thus essential to confer legitimacy on governments, translate the will of the people into viable, accountable parliaments and governments that broaden consensus, facilitate participation in political processes and promote confidence between communities (Patel, 2000 and English, 2005). The notion of free and fair elections has greatly contributed to the understanding that elections cannot be judged on the basis of the quality of the election day alone, nor on the mere absence or presence of fraudulent activity during the vote, but rather on the basis of a series of critical, interdependent variables which are present well before, during and after polling.

2.4 Management of Elections

Many scholars contend that the way in which elections are managed is key to the outcome of the elections, and thereby to democratic consolidation (Rakner and Svasand, 2005). This is to say that the legitimacy of the electoral process is very much dependent on the perceptions of all stakeholders that it has not been conducted in a way that ensures a certain outcome. This is particularly important because elections widely perceived as genuinely competitive tend to increase interest and voter turnout (Ballington, 2001 and Masterson, 2005). Thus the quality of electoral administration has a direct impact on the way elections are perceived and how the outcome is regarded. It is, for this reason, extremely important to ensure that elections are properly organized and managed so that losing candidates and parties can accept that they lost fairly and according to the will of the people.

The main thrust of elections management is securing firm public trust and confidence in all processes throughout the electoral cycle. Electoral processes are admittedly complex but public trust and confidence can be gained when the public can be assured of the following:

- An independent, well-mandated and equipped electoral office or commission.
- Timely execution of election activities from the start of the process through the end.
- Clear deadlines for defined activities have been established and kept.
- Thoroughly trained electoral workers.
- An ongoing process of public education and public outreach programmes.
- A credible voters' list
- A secure environment in which voters can exercise their franchise without fear of intimidation or retribution.
- An environment that facilitates dialogue and trust among all stakeholders in all aspects of elections, including officials, voter registration, voters roll, observers etc.
- Credible mechanisms for addressing and resolving electoral related disputes in a constructive manner.

2.5 Conclusion

Elections provide a link between democratic politics and public interest by ensuring that politicians who claim to represent and speak for the public are judged by the same public. Voter turnout in an election is very important since while high voter turnout is a desirable indicator of participatory democracy low voter turnout is an expression of dissatisfaction on the part of the voting public with the status quo or an indication of political apathy. The declining trend of voter turnout in a polity may signal the progressive weakening of the democratic culture of a political system. This possibility makes the idea of free and fair elections quite central in the electoral management processes and cycles. This, in turn, makes running efficiently managed elections a hugely challenging task in itself. It becomes therefore important to ensure that: 1) all stakeholders are involved in the electoral process on a level playing field and; 2) concerted efforts are taken to invest massively in the overall credibility of the electoral process.

3. ELECTORAL TRENDS IN MALAWI SINCE 1993

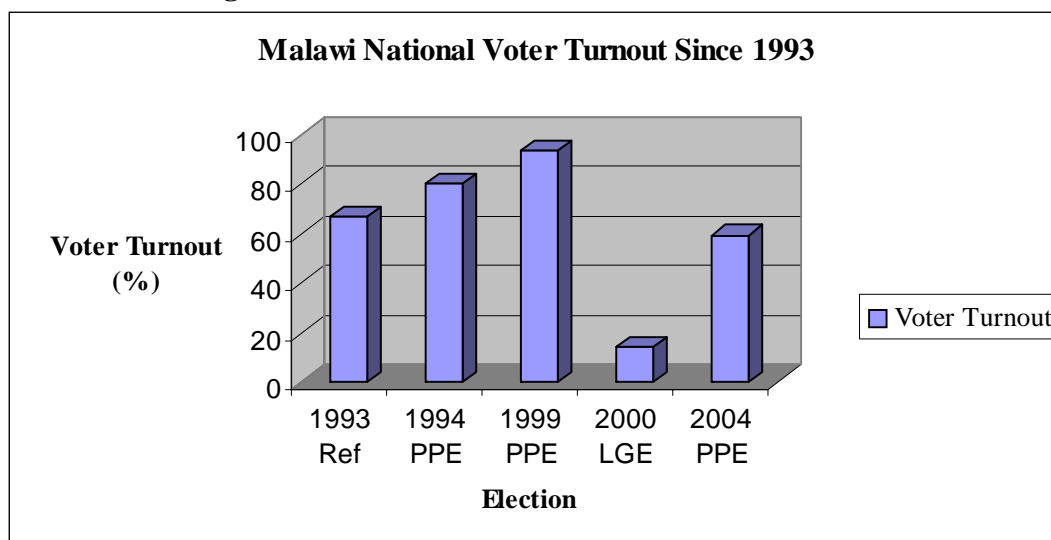
3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a disaggregated analysis of electoral trends in the country since 1993 at three levels, namely: national, regional and district. The purpose of this analysis is to put into proper perspective the declining trends of voter turnout experienced in recent elections.

3.2 National Level

The two graphs below present electoral trends at the national level. Figure 3.1 includes all the five elections that have been held in the country since June 1993. Figure 3.2 excludes the 2000 local government elections.

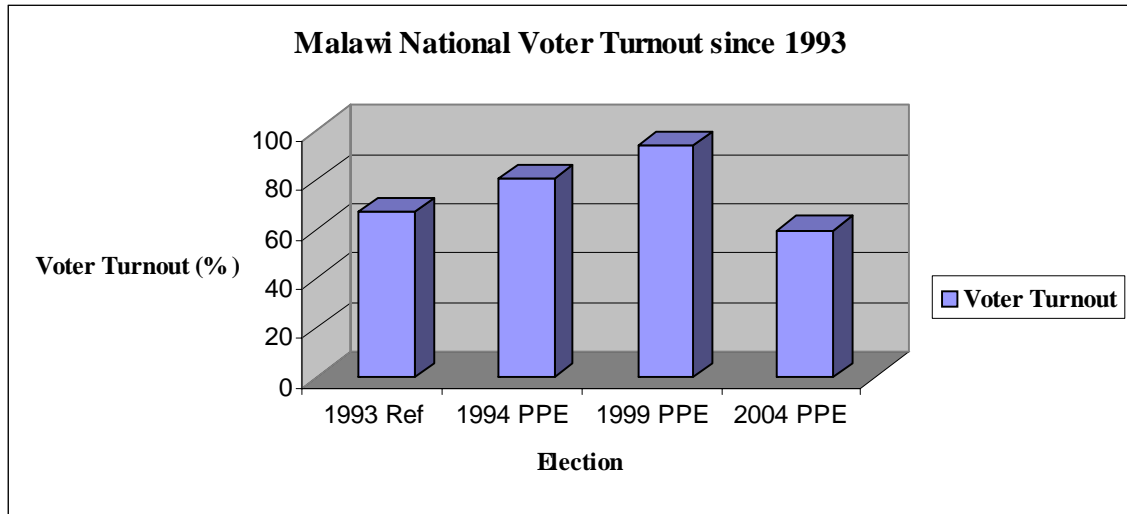
Figure 3.1: Malawi National Voter Turnout Since 1993



Source: Calculated from Government Election Results Gazettes

The exclusion of the 2000 local government elections as demonstrated in Figure 3.2 below does not change the situation much. Both graphs clearly indicate that voter turnout had been steadily rising since the June 1993 referendum reaching the peak in the June 1999 general elections. Voter turnout in the June 1993 referendum stood at 67%, rose to 80% in the May 1994 general elections, reached record high at 93% in the June 1999 general elections and dramatically slumped to 59% in the May 2004 general elections. With a voter turnout of as low as 14%, the 2000 local government elections signaled potential widespread voter apathy especially coming fast on the heels of the peak voter turnout in the June 1999 general elections.

Figure 3.2: Malawi National Voter Turnout since 1993



Source: Calculated from Government Election Results Gazettes

It is not possible to say much about the 2000 local government elections since it is the only election of its kind that has been held since the country's return to multipartyism in May 1994. Moreover, many observers assumed that the 14% turnout in the local government elections was a merely a blip that would be normalized in the next general elections since local government elections a totally different exercise with its own dynamics. It is, however, important to note as, demonstrated in section 3.3 below, that the problem of voter apathy had been looming large for a very long period of time. Voter turnout in by-elections held between May 1994 and June 1999 was substantially lower compared to the voter turnout in the general elections.

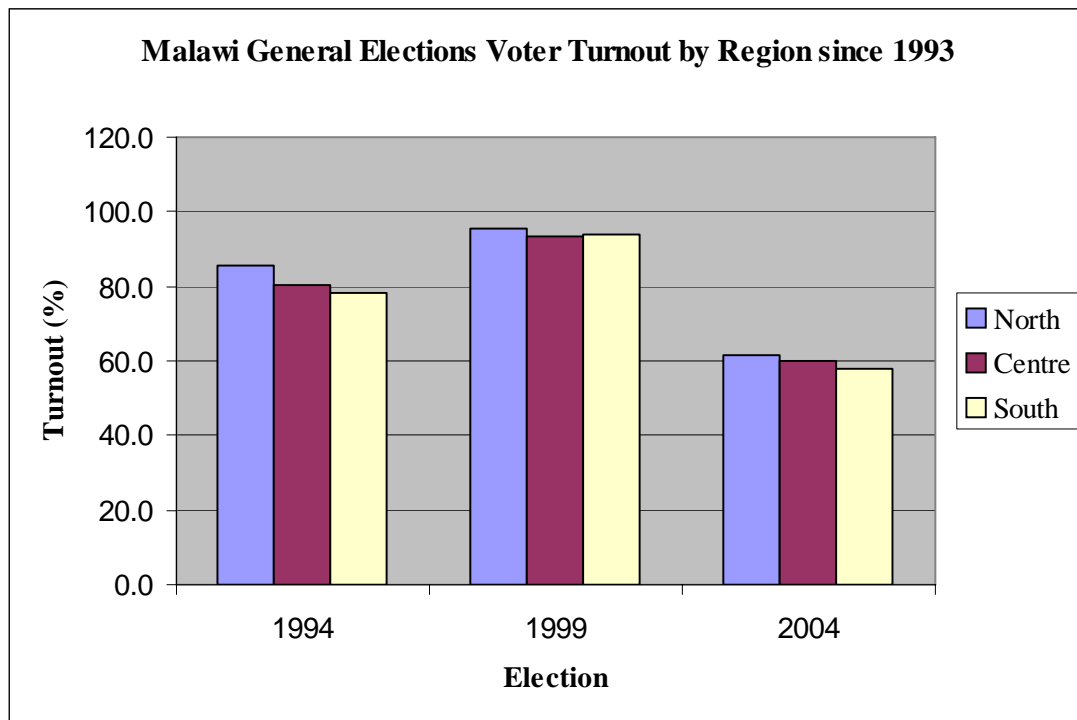
3.3 Regional Level

Two versions of analysis were carried out at this level. The first version looks at voter turnout in the three general elections that the country has held since May 1994. The second version includes voter turnout in by-elections that were held between May 1994 and June 1999. Voter turnout in the by-elections held between June 1999 and May 2004 was not included because data for this period was not available at the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC). The by-elections data used in the second version of the analysis is an average computed from the by election results held in 1995 and 1997 in the three regions of the country.

Figure 3.3 below indicates that there has been a similar pattern of voter turnout across all the three regions. The voter turnout pattern at the regional level is in fact a mirror image of the national level pattern. Figure 3.3 below also indicates that voter turnout across the three regions ranged from 78% to 85% in May 1994; from 94% to 95% in June 1999; and from 58% to 62% in May 2004. The graph further shows that the northern region has consistently registered higher voter turnout in all the three general elections while the

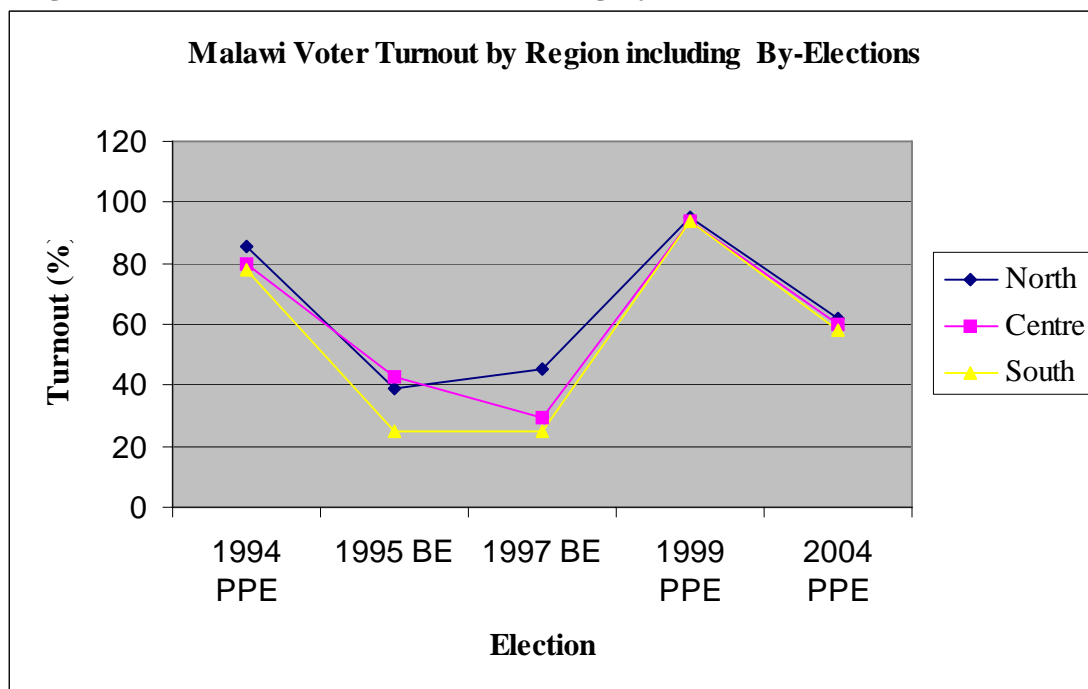
southern region comes last even though it recorded a slightly higher voter turnout in the 1999 general elections.

Figure 3.3: Malawi General Elections Voter Turnout since 1993



Source: Calculated from Government Election Results Gazettes

Figure 3.4: Malawi Voter Turnout including By-Elections between 1994 and 1999



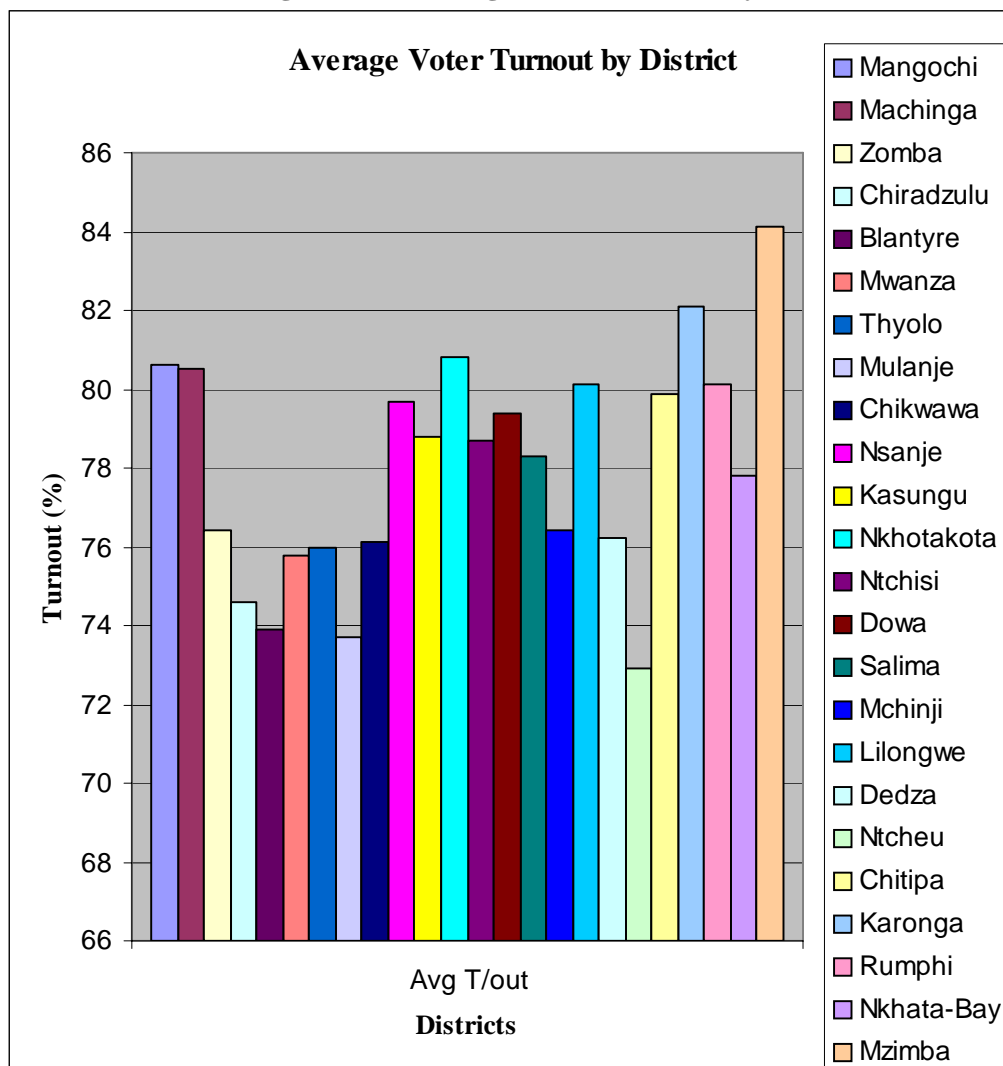
Source: Calculated from Government Election Results Gazettes

The inclusion of by-elections in the analysis tells a slightly different story. Figure 3.4 shows that many voters stay away from the polls during by-elections than during general elections. The voter turnout in by-elections has been consistently below 45% across all the regions compared to voter turnout in all the three general elections which currently stand at above 59%. It is striking to note again that voter turnout in by-elections in the southern has equally been consistently lower compared to the central and northern regions. This suggests that voters are more apathetic during by-elections than during general elections.

3.4 District Level

Voter turnout trends at district level were computed as an average of voter turnout in all the three general elections. Figure 3.5 presents the results of this analysis.

Figure 3.5: Average Voter Turnout by District



Source: Calculated from Government Election Results Gazettes

This graph shows that voter turnout has on average been fairly high throughout all the districts across the country. Over the May 1994-May 2004 period Mzimba registered the highest average voter turnout at 84.1% and Ntheu registered the lowest average voter turnout at 72.9%. The pattern of voter turnout at the district level in all the three general elections equally mirrors the pattern at the national level.

3.5 Implications of the Electoral Trends

The main question to be asked is what do these trends tell us? By comparison, voter turnout in Malawi is relatively higher the sharp decline registered in the May 2000 general elections notwithstanding. Botswana's voter turnout, for instance, has been consistently below 50% of the total eligible voters since 1989 and Kenya's 68% voter turnout in the 1997 general elections is celebrated as the highest (Maundeni, 2005). But having registered voter turnout as high as 93% in the June 1999 elections, the decline to 59% prefaced by a paltry 14% voter turnout in the 2000 local government elections should be a great cause of concern even though the former compares favourably to the experiences of other countries to date.

The dramatic decline in voter turnout in the May 2004 general elections is a clear indication that there is something fundamentally wrong with the overall electoral process that has disenchanted and disoriented voters forcing them stay away from the polls in large numbers. This should be a cause of great concern mainly because elections reflect the work of processes that have occurred over a period of time and at different levels of society. The decline in voter turnout may thus, among other things, signal a dramatic weakening of democratic culture of a political system. This is a huge threat to the prospects of consolidating the country's transitional phase into a functioning democracy if the current declining trends in voter turnout persist without concerted efforts from all relevant stakeholders to reverse them.

4. CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF VOTER APATHY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the factors that have led to dramatic decline in voter turnout in recent elections in the country. The sharp decline in voter turnout notwithstanding, it is worth pointing out that the public generally appreciates the value of voting in a democracy. It is striking to note that men, women and youth Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) championed voting as fundamental citizenship right. They pointed out that voting is vital because it affords them the opportunity to exercise their right to choose leaders who can serve them better observing that bad leaders are elected by good citizens who do not vote. Yet voter turnout in recent elections has plummeted sharply. This could be attributed to four main causes, namely: 1) the role of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) in electoral management and administration; 2) failure of successful candidates to deliver; 3) intra and inter-party politics; and 4) the electoral legal framework. These observations have been made in various accounts of elections in Malawi and were further validated by the complementary fieldwork carried out for this study in Blantyre district. The views of men, women and youths about the causes of widespread voter apathy were strikingly similar.

4.2 Voter Apathy in Perspective

4.2.1 The Role of MEC in Electoral Administration and Management

The main concern with MEC is that it has failed to function as a competent, autonomous and impartial arbiter of the electoral processes (cf. Rakner and Svasand, 2005). The verdict of the majority of the stakeholders is that the credibility of MEC has been greatly undermined as it has presided over two consecutive general elections whose outcomes are alleged to have been influenced in advance of the formal campaign. This is to say that MEC's capacity to manage and administer elections has not improved at all despite being in charge of three consecutive general elections. In administering and managing the elections, MEC has consistently encountered almost a similar set of problems. The paradox is that instead of getting better these problems have actually worsened. This suggests not only poor planning on the part of MEC but also an inability to learn from past mistakes and rectify them. The lack of learning from experience has increasingly rendered questionable the legitimacy of the electoral processes overseen by MEC to nearly all stakeholders (cf. Patel, 2000; Kadzamira, 2000; Dulani, 2005a).

According to the FGDs, the net effect of the erosion of the public's trust and confidence in MEC as an impartial and honest broker of the electoral process has been the alienation of voters from the political process. The unfortunate impression that the image of MEC has created in the minds of the voters is that voting does not really make any difference since MEC's conduct amounts to systematic rigging of the elections. This has promoted and entrenched among voters the belief that a single vote is not important as elections are somehow rigged to manipulate the outcome. Most voters consequently opt to, or are forced to stay away from the polls. Several specific areas have been isolated in which MEC, as an electoral management body has greatly failed (cf. Kadzamira, 2000; Patel,

2000; NICE, 2005; Dulani, 2005b). These failures have deeply compromised the overall integrity of the electoral process to the extent that the value of voting to voters has decreased to the point where most of them no longer view casting a ballot as a legitimate way of changing the government.

Voter Registration

Voter registration has often been overwhelmed by serious logistical challenges, which have ended up disenfranchising huge numbers of eligible voters. While the logistical problems are generally acknowledged, the perception of most stakeholders that these problems tend to be disproportionately pronounced in areas dominated by the opposition parties has greatly dented the credibility of MEC as well as the competitive tone of the elections. The main challenges have included the following:

- Insufficient voter registration materials at the registration centres which has often resulted in voters being turned away more than once. Many registration centres experienced rampant shortages of films, camera batteries and registration forms especially duplicate and transfer forms. In 1999, for instance, only 1000 out of 3,687 registration centres were operational on the first day of voter registration exercise because only 1000 cameras had arrived.
- Allegations of partisanship in the distribution of materials for the voter registration exercise. This problem has always arisen because MEC does not put in place a consistent implementation plan for the distribution of the materials. For instance, Patel (2000) estimates that as many as 168,000 voters in the opposition strongholds were excluded from the voters' roll because of logistical problems. The registration exercise has therefore not been able to secure equal participation of all eligible voters.
- Non-functional registration centres excluding potential voters from exercising their inalienable right. Up to 123 registration centres were, for instance, non-functional six days before the scheduled closure of the registration exercise for the June 1999 general elections. A survey carried out by the Church-NGO consortium covering 1709 registration centres found out that up 550 (representing 32%) centres were not operational resulting in a free but not fair registration exercise.
- The timing of the registration period has been widely criticized as being problematic. The concern is that the exercise coincides with the peak period of farming activities, which is the major source of livelihood for a great bulk of the voters. This makes it difficult for prospective voters to find time to register for the elections.
- Low calibre and poorly motivated registration staff who often do not know how to handle even very trivial issues by themselves. This slows down the registration process as almost every other issue that crops up in the course of the exercise has to be referred back to MEC and even lead to prospective voters to be turned away.

Moreover, the neutrality of most of the staff is highly questionable (cf. NICE, 2005).

Handling of Electoral Complaints and Disputes

The main issue with regard to handling of electoral complaints and disputes is that MEC has consistently demonstrated unwillingness to follow up and take decisive actions on the complaints brought to its attention. This has been the case despite the fact that MEC is statutorily empowered to handle and deal with electoral complaints and disputes. The key failures of MEC in this regard have been its inability to regulate the electoral process in terms of: 1) ensuring unbiased media coverage to all contesting parties; and 2) guaranteeing equal access to public resources for campaigning (Rakner & Svasand, 2005; NICE, 2005; Dulani, 2005a). Electoral campaigns should be neutral so as to supply voters with information that enables them to make an informed choice between alternatives. The ruling party has often abused public resources mainly vehicles from parastatal bodies such as ESCOM, ADMARC and Malawi Telcoms Limited (MTL) for use in campaigns without attracting any reprisals from MEC.

The extent of media bias in the electoral process for the May 2004 polls was exposed in a special media-monitoring project, which run for a period of 15 weeks to the election day. It was established that during this period, the Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC) gave 92.9 % of positive elections news in the main news bulletins to the governing UDF/AFORD/Alliance leaving 7.1% to be shared between all opposition parties and candidates. When both the problems of biased media coverage and the use of public resources by the ruling party for campaign purposes were brought to the attention of MEC, it declined to act. While of course acknowledging bias in media coverage it referred the complaints to the Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA) which likewise did not take any action at all yet section 63 of the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Act (PPEA) explicitly states that every political party is entitled to have the substance of its campaign reported on MBC and any other newspaper in circulation.

In the final analysis, MEC abdicated its role, which is legally entrenched to the courts. The courts were drawn into the electoral process to resolve disputes that should have been acted upon by MEC. The courts have been called upon to adjudicate on cases involving electoral rules, the voter registration process, candidate selection campaign, the polling process, the counting of ballots, and the integrity of results. The failure of MEC to act decisively on election complaints and disputes brought before it and consequent abdication of this role to the courts has greatly undermined its credibility. The public does not have trust and confidence in MEC. The public ranked MEC 13 out of 18 institutions in a survey conducted to gauge the trustworthiness and integrity of public institutions (cf. Rakner and Svasand, 2005). The inability of MEC to act decisively or follow acceptable processes for handling complaints has led to the widespread non-acceptance of especially by election results by losing candidates. The reasons for partial or non-acceptance of by-elections have included the existence of gross irregularities at the by-elections including violence, buying of votes, and open bribery and allegations of fraud or rigging (cf. Kadzamira, 2000).

MEC's Dubious Decisions and Activities

MEC has apparently undermined its own credibility by making dubious decisions and undertaking exercises with questionable motives. Three issues feature prominently in the postmortem elections' analyses of June 1999 and May 2004. These are:

- The proposal to increase the number of constituencies in 1998 from 177 to 247. This translated to 70 additional constituencies but the proposed distribution of these seats across the three regions raised more questions than answers. The north would get 11, the centre 17 and the south 42. The feeling of many observers was that this proposal to increase the number of constituencies was strategically designed to increase the ruling party's seats in parliament (cf. Kadzamira, 2000 and Chinsinga, 2005). This was sheer gerrymandering.
- The president's announcement of the decision of MEC on the issue of running mate for the MCP-AFORD Alliance in the June 1999 elections. The president revealed at a rally that MEC had decided against the Alliance's proposal to feature Chakuamba and Chihana as a presidential candidate and running mate respectively. The position of MEC was that it was not possible for a presidential candidate to appoint a running mate from outside his party. The president announced this when MEC had not yet officially communicated its stand on the issue. The commission's decision was, however, overruled by the courts pointing out that no such constitutional requirement existed. This seriously called into question MEC's independence and neutrality.
- The apparent exaggeration of the number of registered voters for the May 2004 elections. MEC stated that up to 6.7 million people had registered to vote, which represented an increase of about 2.7 million voters from the figure of 5.1 million for the June 1999 elections. The clean up exercise of the voters' roll prompted by resistance from opposition political parties aided by civil society organizations resulted in the reduction of registered voters to 5.7 million.

4.2.2 Failure of Successful Candidates to Deliver

The failure of candidates to deliver is triggering voter apathy mainly because the people expected the democratic government to improve economic performance and the standard of living of the masses. It was very clear from the FGDs that voters anticipated an immediate change from the old politics of dictatorship to new politics based on democracy. This has not happened in many respects. There is lack of socio-economic improvement of the daily lives of voters despite the sustained existence of democracy and regular elections. This is creating serious doubts in the minds of the electorate to the extent that so many have begun to question the value of the ballot. The belief among voters discerned in the FGDs is that their personal circumstances will not be affected as a result of the electoral outcome regardless of the winning party so why vote. The FGD participants isolated several issues in this regard, which included the following;

Failure of Candidates to Keep Campaign Promises

The concern of the voters is that successful candidates do not either keep at all or bother to follow up on their campaign promises. They usually promise a lot of development projects with the potential of changing the livelihood circumstances of their constituents such as schools, bridges, clinics, credit schemes etc. The main issue is that these promises are forgotten immediately after the candidates are declared victorious. The observations of youth FGD at Matindi are instructive in this regard:

[These] leaders are very clever. They only come to us when they need something from us, especially votes. In the period pending elections, they come to us almost on a daily basis and promise quite a lot. However, everything changes when we give them our votes. They disappear completely and they, in fact, feel greatly bothered when approached for whatever cause. They never come when we need but only when they need us.

There is thus a great deal of public disenchantment with the conduct of their representatives, which has changed people's perceptions of public office. Public office is viewed as a platform for self-enrichment given the apparent discrepancy between the livelihoods of the people and their representatives. The point is that the political elites are amassing wealth at a faster rate while the mass of the population remains poverty stricken. This tallies very well with Kamchedzera's characterization of the country's politics as quoted in Dulani (2005a: 8) that "political power and influence in Malawi are...merely a means of access to comfort, wealth, self-aggrandizement and other egoistic pursuits. Any benefits from politics that may accrue to the majority of Malawians are [therefore] merely incidental". It is therefore not surprising that most FGD participants contended that people are increasingly staying away from the polls because they see voting to be of little value beyond putting people into positions where they can pursue their own personal interests.

Nature of Representation

Most FGD participants were concerned with the fact that usually successful candidates relocate to urban areas immediately after the elections and often do not bother to visit their constituencies almost until on the eve of the next general elections. The main concern for the voters is not that the MPs do not reside in their constituencies but rather that they do not often consult with their constituents about priority issues to be tabled in parliament. Consequently, MPs have tended to prioritize issues, which are not deemed as such in the eyes of their constituents. The people are therefore questioning the rationale of voting when leaders do not represent their wishes and priorities. This raises questions about representation in the Malawian context. Do MPs represent their constituents, their parties or are they independent delegates altogether?

Nature and Quality of Parliamentary Debate

Voters are concerned with priorities set in parliament. Most of the issues that are prioritized for debate are in the view of the voters not priorities at all. For instance, particular references in the FGDs were made to the debates about the impeachment procedures and Third Term constitutional amendment proposal. The feeling is that these

issues are debated at the expense of pressing priorities that would bring about immediate impact on the rapidly deteriorating livelihood circumstances of the people.

This is not the only concern. The FGD participants observed that even when parliament debates issues of national significance, the parliamentarians are overwhelmed with partisan interests. Most MPs are preoccupied with promoting, defending and advancing parochial partisan interests instead of debating the issues purely on the basis of their merits and demerits. What is further annoying for voters is the fact that MPs are only able to rise above party difference when it comes to dealing with their conditions of service. Thus while the majority of Malawians continue to languish in a life of poverty and misery, the MPs have consistently voted for increases in their remuneration packages (cf. Chinsinga, 2003 and Dulani, 2005b).

The verdict of the voters is that parliament has failed to transform itself into a true forum of dialogue, generation of common national agenda and a platform of elimination of fear, mistrust and marginalization which are often rife in a newly democratizing society like ours. The response of the voters is therefore to stay away from the polls.

Tendencies of MPs to Cross the Floor

The fieldwork further revealed that voter apathy has been accelerated by the tendencies of MPs to cross the floor from one party to another without any consultation with their constituents. Yet the hallmark of democratic politics is that representatives must be directly accountable to the people that elected them (cf. Molutsi and Singh, 2003). The effect of floor crossing is that voters feel cheated because they feel their greatest expression of democratic practice has been violated. The FGD participants consistently emphasized that this is tantamount to betrayal of their freedom of choice.

The disenchantment with the floor crossing tendencies of MPs is particularly pronounced among those who vote for the opposition. They particularly feel cheated because no matter how they vote their representative can be stolen away from them by '*cheque book politics*' or '*politics of scones*'. For voters, floor crossing emphasizes the fact that the majority of politicians are predominantly self-seeking. To underscore this point, most FGD participants observed that a number of opposition leaders have at various times been enticed with monetary incentives or ministerial positions to support the ruling party. This was particularly manifest during the Third Term debate (cf. Chinsinga, 2003 and Dulani, 2005b).

The major concern of the people is that they are virtually powerless to do something about the floor crossing. The only means available to them is staying away from the polls. The recall provision included in the 1995 constitution empowering constituents to hold their representatives accountable was repealed during the very first sitting of the multiparty parliament in 1994. Perhaps the recent court ruling on the validity of section 65 holds promise for ensuring that MPs are at least accountable to their constituents since if they cross the floor they will have to seek a fresh mandate.

4.2.3 Intra and Inter-party Politics

Osei-Hwedie (1998) describes political parties as the most important institution in a democracy because they recruit people to government and party positions, formulate policies for the implementation of socioeconomic programmes, and act as unifying forces of the various groups of the electorate. Parties in Malawi have, however, failed to deliver on these basic functions. The main reasons for this are that parties in the country: 1) lack internal democracy; and 2) are hardly founded on the basis of clearly articulated values and principles. Parties have consequently degenerated into platforms for intra and inter-party violence. Ballington's observations can be said to be equally true for Malawian parties:

People don't see the connection between the agendas of political parties and their own problems. This distance between and where decisions are being made and the real life of average citizens is growing and this is the problem. [Yet] political parties are the ones that [should] connect up and down politicians with citizens. This is no longer the case. Now we have NGOs and other groups that serve this function better (Ballington, 2001: 12).

This is inevitable because parties in Malawi are not an ongoing affair. It is only at general elections that there is a spark of revival for political parties, which is extinguished immediately thereafter. It is therefore not surprising that the feeling of most FGD participants was that politicians only appeal to them during general elections. This gap between those who govern and those being governed seems to be getting wider and appears to be one of the fundamental reasons for low electoral participation. Intra and inter-party politics has specifically affected the following areas:

Nomination of Candidates

Most FGD participants indicated that some voters are forced to stay away from the polls because parties are increasingly imposing candidates on them to contest in the elections. This practice was quite pronounced in the May 2004 elections. The selection of candidates to represent parties is done through primary elections, which is a generally acceptable democratic procedure but the concern of voters is that primary elections have failed to produce acceptable results in many cases (cf. Kadzamira, 2000; Magolowonado, 2003; Dulani, 2005a). The primary elections are thus often marred by a lot of irregularities that include violence, allowing ineligible people to vote, intimidation and threats, as well as forcing people to vote in fear. Patronage and personal followership with regard to party leadership appear to be more important for the nomination of candidates than the preferences of the grassroots.

The UDF had much more problematic primary elections compared to the rest of the parties that contested the May 2004 elections. The UDF had to re-run primary elections in over 20 constituencies following complaints from some disgruntled losers and their supporters. The UDF leadership was probably inclined to manipulate the primaries on the basis of their experience with primaries leading to the June 1999 elections. During these primaries new candidates beat 13 sitting MPs including two Cabinet Ministers and two deputies. The UDF's decision to bow down to AFORD's demands not to field parliamentary candidates in the northern region without consultation also irked the

party's aspiring MPs most of whom resolved to stand as independents (cf. Centre for Social Concern, 2004).

The way in which the primary elections are generally conducted has progressively result in the general loss of acceptance of the candidates selected and nominated by the various parties. The conduct of primary elections has had two major effects on the electoral process: 1) several defeated candidates standing as independent candidates; and 2) frustrated voters staying away from the polls since a number of more popular candidates are not allowed to contest. The results of the May 2004 general elections are quite revealing in this regard. First, the elections produced a record number of successful independents predominantly in the southern region considered then as the UDF's stronghold. Of the 38 MPs elected as independents, 28 came from the southern region. Second, voter turnout was the lowest in the southern region at 58% compared to 64% and 61% for the northern and central regions yet the southern region had the highest number of registered voters. This illustrates the fact that when people are upset with their party, they don't tend to leave the party. They simply fold their arms and do not vote. By not voting they feel that they are making a positive statement of resistance, which is as effective as voting for another party (cf. van der Merve, 2006).

Electoral Violence

Most FGD participants observed that voter apathy is also on the increase due to the fact that violence associated with the electoral processes has created an atmosphere of fear in the electorate. Consequently many voters now either vote on the basis of fear and coercion or stay away from the polls altogether. This violence is either intra or inter-party. The intra-party violence is particularly pronounced during primary elections because nearly all political parties do not have in place credible and effective mechanism to regulate the nomination process. Inter-party violence peaks up during the electoral campaign activities. The youth wings of political parties (eg. The Young Democrats and The Youth Morale) predominantly perpetrate this violence. The violence, however, does not only take place between party supporters and members but it is also perpetrated against members of the general public and prospective voters.

The magnitude of violence that characterized the 2004 May general elections was, however, unprecedented. The inter-party violence was aggravated by the controversies surrounding the proposal for constitutional amendment to allow President Muluzi contest for a third consecutive term of office. Popularized as the Third Term debate, the UDF youth wing-*the Young Democrats*-unleashed a wave of terror against the critics of this initiative (cf. Chinsinga, 2003 and Dulani, 2005b). This wave of violence was directed at MPs, journalists from independent media houses, civil society, university students, church leaders, opposition party leaders and followers, and members of the general public. The impression of voters discernible in the FGDs is that elections are violent contests to the extent that they would no longer want to be associated with political activity of any kind in particular elections. This fear is reinforced by the apparent indifference of the law enforcers to deal with the perpetrators of electoral violence despite having an enabling legislative framework in place. Electoral violence is punishable by a fine of MK 50000 and imprisonment.

Nature of Campaigning

According to most FGD participants, voters are less inclined to participate in the elections because of uninspiring nature of the electoral campaigns. This observation echoes the sentiments consistently expressed by several political analysts in the country (cf. Phiri, 2000; Patel, 2005; Dulani, 2005a). The analysts essentially argue that the real reason for voter apathy is not just a sense of voters feeling that their vote can't make a difference but also the fact there is often so little to choose between political parties. The main reason for this is that political parties in Malawi are highly deficient in articulating distinctive and inspiring ideological platforms. The result is that there are no significant policy differences between them to excite their electoral campaigns. Thus parties lack the ability to clearly articulate the reasons for their very existence in order to appeal to voters.

The failure of parties to clearly express distinctive directions where they want Malawi to take in various policy spheres has resulted in a situation where political debates centre almost exclusively on the moral integrity of candidates (cf. van Donge, 1995 and NICE, 2005). A contender who is seen as superior in this regard stands a better chance of emerging as a winner. In fact, NICE's assessment of the May 2004 elections revealed that voters were hugely disappointed by the topics addressed at campaign meetings as hardly any politicians focused on the socio-economic problems the voters were facing but concentrated on personality issues and handouts. The men FGD in Zingwangwa Township expressed this disillusionment very well:

The candidates in the May 2004 general elections focused their energies on decampaigning each other to the extent that all candidates were 'bad' in our eyes. For instance, Gwanda and Tembo were characterized as cruel; Mpinganjira as a womanizer; Bingu as a handpicked COMESA thief; and Malewezi as a pro-UDF candidate who was sick. The politicians were preoccupied with decampaigning each other instead of putting forward to us their policies. This discouraged a large number of people from voting, as there appeared to be no real choice-they were all bad and not to be trusted.

The marginal emphasis on policy issues in the electoral campaigns provides a fertile ground for inter-party violence. This is the case because the exclusive focus on the moral integrity of candidates prompts contenders to use indecent, intimidating and insulting language, which often provokes violent reactions from the other parties. The resultant spiral of violence sees more and more potential voters withdrawing from active political engagement.

4.2.4 The Legal Framework

The legal framework is deemed critical because the resultant electoral systems shape the nature of political competition. Electoral systems can assure specific outcomes, restricting certain kinds of behaviour and rewarding others (cf. Molutsi and Singh, 2003).

Malawi uses the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system. The gist of this electoral system is that a winner in an election is declared on the basis of simple majority. One of the most critical observations about this electoral system is that it reduces elections to "a

matter of life and death as the winner takes it all” (Magolowondo, 2003: 9). This system does not only breed electoral violence but also gives the impression that votes do not have an equal weighting in determining the final result. This makes it difficult for voters to take it that in a democracy there are no permanent winners just as there are no permanent losers. The combined effect of these factors is manifested in the steady decline in voter turnout over time.

The shortfalls of the FPTP electoral system make the proportional representation (PR) electoral system quite an attractive alternative. The reason for the tremendous appeal of the PR electoral system is that it may mitigate the extent of violence since representation is calculated on the basis of the number of the votes that each of the contesting parties accumulates in addition to making each vote important in its own right.

4.3 Voter Turnout: General versus By-Elections

The analysis carried out in section 3.3 revealed that voter turnout in by-elections is dramatically lower than in the general elections. The voter turnout has been lower than the average turnout of 59% in the May 2004 general elections deemed the lowest since May 1994. By-elections’ voter turnout for which data is available has been consistently below 45%. The FGDs provided some useful insights into the reasons for the lower voter turnout. These included the following:

- The by-elections are not usually adequately publicized to the extent that sometimes people are not aware that there are elections taking place in their constituencies.
- Voters are already disillusioned with the performance of the MPs who were elected in the general elections. They do not therefore expect that their successors elected in by-elections are going to be any different especially because they are more likely to come from the same party as their predecessors.
- General elections provide a real prospect for change compared to by-elections since they involve the entire country. Voters are consequently excited by the fact that their vote may possibly play a vital role in overhauling the entire political system.
- General elections create much more excitement than by-elections because of the opportunity to elect a President. The view of the grassroots is that election of the country’s president is much more important than MPs arguing that the stature of his leadership alone can have a decisive impact on the country’s political, social and economic prosperity.

4.4 Conclusion

The factors behind the apparent voter apathy are numerous and complex. They touch on various aspects of the entire electoral cycle emphasizing the fact that elections are merely an endpoint of a very long process. The management and administration of elections, track record of successful candidates, the rules and regulations governing the organization of political parties, the nomination of candidates, the nature and rules of conducting campaign greatly impact on voter turnout. These factors are important in determining the participation of voters in an election on the actual voting day.

From the discussions in this chapter, voters are more likely to turnout in large numbers if they generally perceive the entire electoral process as being fairly competitive. Elections are considered to be fairly competitive when the state and relevant institutions provide conditions for a reasonably level playing field for candidates, parties and citizens in the electoral exercise, the existence of an independent and impartial electoral authority, equitable rules of the game governing issues such as campaign, access to media, polling sites and other key electoral installations, among others.

5. POTENTIAL STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH DECLINING VOTER TURNOUT

5.1 Introduction

It needs not be emphasized that the declining voter turnout trends in Malawi is a cause of great concern that requires urgent and concerted action. The fact that nearly half of the registered voters did not participate in the May 2004 general elections has grave implications for the sustainability of democracy in the country. This is further reinforced by the observations that the quality of management of the electoral process has progressively declined since May 1994 (cf. Magolowondo, 2003 and Rakner & Svasand, 2005). The problem of voter apathy as revealed in this study is a complex one and to effectively deal with it requires a multifaceted solution from multiple stakeholders. These include government, political parties, the electoral commission, the media, civil society and even the voters themselves. The tentative proposals for combating voter apathy presented below are a combination of insights drawn from FGDs and various studies on elections in Malawi. These proposals are tentative because they need to be debated in order to come up viable interventions that can deal with the problem once and for all since voter apathy undermines the premise that the practice of democratic elections ensures that the will of the majority is reflected.

5.2 Fighting Voter Apathy

5.2.1 Restructuring and Revitalizing the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC)

There is no doubt that there is need to restructure MEC in order to improve the administration of the electoral process so as to ensure the legitimacy and integrity of election results. Evidence abound that the quality of management of the elections by MEC has steadily declined since the founding multiparty elections in May 1994. By its own admission as quoted in Rakner and Svasand (2005), MEC has failed to preside over the electoral processes in a manner that inspires confidence in all stakeholders and renders credibility and legitimacy to the electoral outcomes:

It is true that we do not have the capacity to conduct free and fair elections, we did indeed have better elections in [May] 1994 than in 2004, we are not moving in the right direction. This is due to lack of capacity and poor planning. The election date is set in the constitution, we have a good five years to plan, but nonetheless elections are characterized by chaos (Rakner and Svasand, 2005: 10).

The need for MEC to be commanding public confidence and enjoying unquestionable integrity needs no emphasis. What we need is a MEC, which is truly an independent and impartial body that is capable of running a successful election. Some of the areas for possible reform include the following:

- The composition of MEC. There is need for broad-based membership, which should possibly extend beyond political parties represented in parliament.

- The presidential powers to appoint and dissolve MEC. This enhances the likelihood of the commissioners owing their allegiance to the President, which may greatly compromise the way in which they discharge their duties. There is thus a very huge risk of MEC capture by the President.
- The reporting structure of MEC. MEC reports through its chair directly to the President. Perhaps MEC should report to the President through parliament in order to create some kind of a system of checks and balances.
- Possible reprisal mechanisms for MEC's failure to enforce electoral law in blatant cases of violation. MEC has consistently failed to enforce electoral law despite the enabling legislative framework for it to do so being in place under very questionable and suspicious circumstances.
- Clarification of the responsibilities between MACRA, MEC and MBC in terms of enforcing electoral guidelines. The current lack of clarity suggests that the rules and regulations guiding the electoral process are ambiguous.
- Professionalization of electoral management and administration by providing opportunities for regular training for both commissioners and secretariat staff. The latter should thus see elections management and administration as a career with opportunities for growth and advancement. This should also include well-planned and comprehensive training programmes for temporary staff hired for voter registration exercises.

5.2.2 Political Party Reforms

Political parties are a key player in any democratic political system. To reiterate, political parties recruit people to government and party positions, formulate policies for the implementation of socio-economic programmes and act as unifying forces of the various groups of the electorate (cf. Osei-Hwedie, 1998 and Maundeni, 2005). This study has shown that parties in Malawi have failed to deliver on these noble functions. They lack well-articulated policy programmes and platforms; intra-party democracy is virtually non-existent; and they have degenerated into instruments of terror and violence. It is therefore not surprising that voters express huge distrust in both opposition and governing parties. This thus demonstrates a clear lack of viable alternatives to the ruling party should a voter be dissatisfied with the service delivery of that party. Possible areas of reform include the following:

- Parties should clearly articulate the reasons for their existence in form of distinctive policies and programmes—that is—the ideological basis for their existence. Parties should thus through their policies and programmes clearly express the direction in which they Malawi to take at least in the short to medium term. This would, among other things, help to facilitate electoral campaigns that are not based exclusively on personalities; minimize use of provocative language hence curb the prevalence of electoral violence; and improve the quality of debate in the National Assembly.

- Political parties need to develop policies that address the everyday needs of the populace so as not to be seen remote. Currently most people don't see the connection between agendas of political parties and their own problems. This is the case because in most cases parties are not an ongoing affair. Party activity only peaks up during elections in which case people do not see the value of parties beyond elections. A viable local government system offers an opportunity for institutionalizing political parties as an ongoing affair. This would in turn narrow down the distance between how and where decisions having a direct impact on real life of average citizens are made.

- Political parties should embrace and promote intra-party democracy as a guiding principle for their existence. Intra-party democracy is very key for the development and growth of a political party as it allows for various shades of opinion from different segments of society to shape the values, beliefs and norms of governance, which eventually promotes consensus and stability. Most parties in Malawi lack intra-party democracy because they do not hold regular elections. This usually creates enormous problems with primary elections resulting in rampant intra-party violence and disorientation of party followers. It is therefore extremely important that political parties do not only champion intra-party democracy but consider putting in place transparent and accountable mechanisms for selecting candidates to avoid a situation whereby the electorate feel parties are imposing candidates on them.

- Political parties should explore intra and inter-party strategies that can help curb electoral violence and instability. Similar efforts can be taken at parliamentary level. It appears there is urgent need for the recognition that the opposition is a necessary part of government and need for the opposition to become a credible alternative to government. The rights and obligations of opposition parties need to be defined and traditions of mutual respect between opposition and ruling parties established. This would require special training programmes for the legislators that should, *inter alia*, highlight the value of a parliamentary opposition and the role of opposition parties in managing and carrying out programmes. Such training could contribute to dialogue between parties and consensus critical to the successful consolidation of the transitional phase into a functioning democracy.

5.2.3 Civic and Voter Education

Lack of adequate civic and voter education has also contributed to the sharp decline in voter turnout (cf. Magolowondo, 2003 and NICE, 2005). Yet civic and voter education is very critical in promoting greater voter awareness of the importance of voter participation in elections. Civic and voter education is imperative because the existence of a framework for public participation *per se* does not mean that people will engage with it in a meaningful way especially for societies like ours reeling from many years of autocratic rule.

The main problem with civic and voter education that has been carried out in Malawi is that it is almost exclusively election oriented. There is very little if any civic and voter

education in between elections yet continuous civic and voter education is vital in the concerted efforts to promote active citizenship necessary for the people to meaningfully engage with the political process. The inter-elections civic and voter education is almost left to NGOs which often do not have the expertise let alone capacity to do it. The major set back for these NGOs is that they tend to adopt partisan approaches in the conduct of civic and voter education which voters say puts them off. Political parties should have a particular interest in voter and civic education because it ensures that as many eligible voters as possible participate in elections and that voters use their votes properly increasing their chances of success. Areas of possible reform include the following:

- There is need to provide civic and voter education on a continuous basis. Civic and voter education should not be elections focused, as is currently the case. In addition, it should engage with all elements of society including the disenfranchised groups such as women, youth and people with disabilities.
- Designing civic and voter education programmes in ways that they should reflect democratic content and approach. The programmes should, among other things, include citizen participation; how people relate to one another and their environment; cooperation and tolerance; and helping citizens to see themselves as agents of change.
- MEC should assume a leading role in civic and voter education of course in partnership with civil society organizations which should conduct themselves in a non-partisan manner. MEC could possibly borrow a leaf from Namibia's Electoral Commission initiative to roll out more permanent civic and voter education programmes.
- Civil society organizations should actively undertake a brokerage role in addition to conducting civic and voter education *vis a vis* the administration of elections so as to ensure that elections are free and fair and conducted on a level playing field. They must, among other things, ensure that logistics are reasonable to the extent that they do not necessarily disadvantage other parties, and that all electoral procedures are dully followed. This is very critical because MEC is very weak and there is always a huge possibility of the governing party manipulating the electoral process.

The success of civic and voter education largely depends on reform efforts regarding the way in which most CSOs portray themselves and discharge their functions. While CSOs are generally considered as virtuous agents of political, social, economic and even cultural change, they have their own shortfalls that ought to be addressed if they are to be effective as vehicles of civic and voter education. These shortfalls in the Malawian context on the basis of this study include the following:

- Most CSOs lack adequate capacity to carry out credible civic and voter education programmes in which case they are unable to come up professionally designed and sustainable programmes. This is the case because of the deeply rooted

opportunistic tendencies among them. They often spread their expertise thinly including to those areas in which they are not competent enough.

- Most CSOs are characterized by lack of transparency and accountability. Put differently, they lack internal democracy which substantially weakens their credibility as agents of social, economic, cultural and political change.
- There is lack of coordination among CSOs and often this translates into lack of clear focus in their activities. Instead of working as partners, CSOs tend to act as competitors and adversaries which in the end confuse the electorate. This is the case because in a bid to outsmart each other they end up providing the electorate with conflicting messages on the very same issues.
- There is lack of a culture of self criticism and self reflection among CSOs particularly about their capacities to deliver. This largely borders on the lack of appreciation by most CSOs of the concept of civic duty as the basis for CSO work, that is: having the sense of duty to champion the common good.

5.2.4 Other Areas of Reform

Other areas for consideration for possible reform include the following:

- Reviewing the legislative framework for elections especially since the nature of an electoral system has important implications on outcomes and voter behaviour. The ultimate objective should be to embrace an appropriate electoral system and structure that has broad based support and considered legitimate by all stakeholders.
- Promoting and implementing policies aimed at readdressing the adverse effects of chronic diseases such as HIV/AIDS on citizen's participation in the electoral process.
- Institutionalization of constitutionalism and the rule of law in the conduct of government's activities and programmes.
- Promoting electoral media reporting in a manner that encourages interest in the electorate. This is currently not the case. For instance, the May 2004 electoral media reporting focused much attention on the process of choosing the President and little attention placed on examining how the manifestos of various political parties would work to improve poor people's lives.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The question of voter turnout was not a major issue of concern at least until the 2000 local government elections, which registered a mere 14% turnout. Until this time, voter turnout had enjoyed a steady increase since the June 1993 referendum. Many observers assumed that the 14% turnout in the local government elections was merely a blip that would be normalized in the next general elections since local government elections are a totally different exercise. But with a voter turnout estimated at 59% in the May 2004 general elections from a record high of 93% in June 1999, it is now very clear that the experience with the local government elections was not just a blip. It was an indication that there is something fundamentally wrong with the electoral processes.

The message from this study is that voter apathy is an urgent challenge that has to be dealt with otherwise there is a huge risk that the country's democratic transition may not be fully consolidated. The findings of this study shows that the sharp decline in voter turnout can be attributed to the following factors: 1) the role of the Malawi Electoral Commission in electoral management and administration; 2) failure of successful candidates to deliver; 3) intra-party politics; and 4) the electoral legal framework. The study offers, on the basis of its findings, some tentative proposals on how the problem of voter apathy can be dealt with. These proposals are tentative until they are debated, refined and ratified by stakeholders for possible implementation.

The findings of this study show, *inter alia*, that democracy is a challenging process that takes time and considered effort on the part of various stakeholders. In addition, electoral processes are dynamic in which case government in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders must undertake constant review of the electoral processes to ensure that they promote equity in terms of voter participation and representation, closer relations between votes and seats obtained by parties in parliament and that the cost of elections is kept to levels affordable by the country and political contenders (cf. Molutsi and Singh, 2003). The tentative proposals put up as possible strategies for combating voter apathy can be summed up as follows:

- Steadfastly defend, maintain and support the integrity of the electoral management body especially in terms of its composition, mandate, scope of powers or budget.
- Support domestic discussion, research and consultations toward appropriate electoral systems and structures that have broad based support.
- Support stakeholder involvement and provide constant training to political parties and civil society groups on electoral law and management issues including the role of civil society groups in civic and voter education and election observation.

- Support sustainable approach to electoral administration through capacity building programmes and career paths, permanent structures, long planning horizon, affordable and credible processes.
- Promote party assistance programmes that pay attention to intra-party democracy. Parties are not likely to function democratically when in power if they are not internally democratic. Rules on party funding should be based on the strengthening of accountability, transparency, practicality and the possibility of sanctions to deter violations.

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