



*November 2009*

**A COUNTRY TURNING BLUE?: POLITICAL PARTY SUPPORT  
AND THE END OF REGIONALISM IN MALAWI**

**Introduction**

After Malawi's seminal 1994 elections in which the country made the transition back to multiparty politics, commentators were alarmed at how regionalistic the voting pattern appeared to be. Northerners had voted overwhelmingly (88%) for Chakufwa Chihana, the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) candidate. A large majority (64%) of those in Central Region had thrown their support behind the country's long-standing president, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). And Southerners were largely responsible for selecting the ultimate winner, Bakili Muluzi of the UDF, with a resounding 78% casting their vote his way (along with 28% of those in Central Region). These patterns raised the concern that democracy could destroy the sense of national unity that had been so much cherished under one-party rule.

However, time has shown that neither Malawi's political parties themselves, nor the solidly regional voting patterns that originally sustained them, were as enduring as once feared. New parties have been born, while others have fragmented, wilted away, or been absorbed by the newcomers. Some parties have increasingly solidified their credentials as truly national parties, often by making in-roads in regions once considered the strongholds of their competitors. But this has at the same time pushed others farther into the regional periphery, or even near extinction.

In Malawi, each party is symbolized by a colour. The party that succeeds in best representing the nation by achieving *some* support in *all* regions is said to have turned the country in its colour. This was popularised by the United Democratic Party (UDF) during its ten-year rule with its platform slogan: 'yellow everywhere'. It was not uncommon to hear former President Muluzi and his 'choir' yell '*Ku mpoto, yelo! pakati yelo! kumwera yelo! yelo! yelo!*'; meaning 'UDF in the North, the Centre and especially the South.' Using colour symbolism, we might describe Malawi as having been *green* during the 30 years of Malawi Congress Party (MCP) rule, albeit not by popular choice. More recently, though, with the birth of the 'blue' Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the question is whether or not 'blue' is in the process of replacing 'yellow' as the national colour.

This bulletin draws on data collected in four Afrobarometer surveys of public attitudes to examine trends in party support in Malawi over the course of the last decade, looking especially at the extent of regionalism in Malawian party politics. How regionally diverse are the support bases of each of Malawi's leading political parties? Can the country's dominant parties in fact call themselves "national parties" that draw support from throughout the country, or are they instead a mere collection of regional parties that reflect local parochial interests, rather than the nation as a whole?

Our findings show that early concerns about the possible entrenchment of regionalism were overblown. In fact, the gravest danger to Malawi politics now may have profoundly shifted.

Rather than regionalism and an excess of disunity, the country may now be more at risk of evolving into a one-party dominant system, reflecting perhaps an *excess of unity*. It is, however, far too soon to tell whether the current popularity and possible dominance of the newest major party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – which has not even been demonstrated in an election yet – will evolve into a lasting political phenomenon. We may instead continue to witness high volatility in the Malawian party system. But the near-term projection based on the findings here must certainly be that Malawi is indeed, at least for now, turning blue.

### **Background: A Shifting Party Landscape**

As noted, the strongly regional voting patterns that were evident after Malawi's first multiparty election in 1994 raised immediate concerns about the possible effects of multipartyism in a country long subjected to an enforced unity under the strict rule of the MCP. How deep and lasting were the country's regional divisions? Were the 1994 results an indicator of trouble ahead for the country if regional divisions remained, or deepened?

In actual fact, however, it was not long before the party landscape started to shift. The change began, perhaps, with demographics. The South is the country's most populous region (46%), followed closely by the Centre (39%). The North, in contrast, is home to just 15% of the total population. These demographic realities appear to be an important factor when it comes to the birth, growth and death of political parties. The relative demographic balance between the South and the Centre means that a party that can only gain support in one of these regions is not assured of overall victory. Rather, a party that can garner significant support in both stands a better chance. This reality is demonstrated by the UDF's victories in 1994 and 1999, when the UDF did a better job of attracting votes in the Centre – the MCP stronghold – than MCP could do in the South.

Meanwhile, a strictly Northern party such as AFORD could not gain much power on its own without winning support in either Central or Southern Regions, or forming an alliance with a larger party. As a result, the party first aligned unsuccessfully with the UDF after the 1994 election, but then joined with the MCP for the 1999 election. These alliances of convenience, shifts and splits ultimately cost AFORD much of its support base.

Between 1999 and 2004, the landscape changed even more, with several splits and re-alignments occurring. The MCP split, resulting in the party losing its national character, since MCP representatives from Northern and Southern regions sided with the breakaway faction that formed, the Republican Party (RP). The UDF also lost support to several offshoots, including the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and People's Progressive Movement (PPM), cutting into the party's support in the South. AFORD also split in the run-up to the 2004 elections.

These shifts in party structure and support are clearly demonstrated by the changing fortunes of each shown in Table 1. It shows a transition from a system with three major parties, to one in which small parties and independents won a substantial share of the vote, and the seats, in the National Assembly. And in another major shake up to the system, the 2004 elections produced a president from one party – Bingu wa Mutharika of the UDF – and a National Assembly dominated by another – the MCP. The MCP did not, however, control a majority in the Assembly. Smaller parties – including the Mgwirizano Coalition representing seven small parties – and independents actually controlled significantly more seats than the MCP.

**Table 1: Number of National Assembly Seats Held by Each Major Party**

PARTY	1994 Election	1999 Election	2004 Election
UDF	84	93	49
MCP	55	66	59
AFORD	36	29	1
Others			46
Independents		4	38

Source: [http://africanelections.tripod.com/mw\\_detail.html#1993\\_Referendum](http://africanelections.tripod.com/mw_detail.html#1993_Referendum)

Following this split election, UDF sought to re-establish its control of the National Assembly by forming alliances with opposition parties. It succeeded in attracting back much of the breakaway NDA, as well as some of the MPs who had left the party to stand as independents. It also succeeded in breaking up the Mgwirizano Coalition by attracting two of its component parties, the RP and MCODE, to its side. Although this did not give UDF a two-thirds majority, it bolstered its position in the national assembly, and helped it to regain some of its national character (by association).

The honeymoon was short-lived, however, because within a year, the President quit UDF and later formed a political party together with his cabinet colleagues called the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The rump UDF thus found itself joining the MCP in opposition. The DPP took a diverse enough collection of MPs with it to give a sense of national coverage. This sense was strengthened when DPP won all six contested seats during by-elections.

Where then, do these developments leave the country as it approaches the 2009 elections? Do new parties have solid bases of support, or have the twists and turns of shifting alliances left the public too bewildered or disillusioned to align with a party? Are the party bases still primarily regional, as they appeared to be in 1994, or are truly nationally representative parties emerging? And are Malawi's regions operating in solidarity as regional voting blocks, or have new lines of cleavage and allegiance emerged that are replacing region as a guide to vote choice? Results from recent and past Afrobarometer surveys can help us to answer these questions.

#### **About the Malawi Round 4 Afrobarometer Survey**

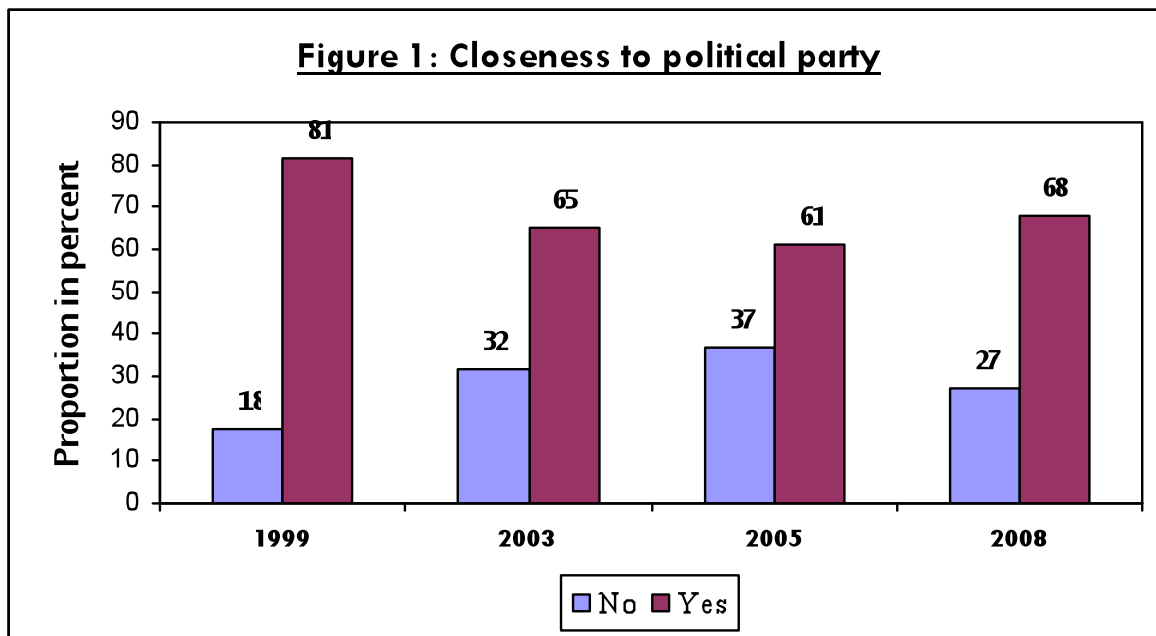
Afrobarometer surveys are conducted in 20 countries in Africa, using a common survey instrument and methodology. The recent survey in Malawi was the fourth in a series. The first three rounds were conducted in 1999, 2003 and 2005 respectively. The Round 4 survey in Malawi was conducted in October 2008. A randomly selected, nationally representative sample of 1,200 potential voters (persons aged 18 years and above) were interviewed, comprised of equal numbers of men and women. The survey covered all districts of the country, with each district sampled in proportion to its share of the national population. The results of this survey are therefore representative at the national, regional and urban/rural levels. At the national level, inferences can be made about all voting age citizens with a margin of sampling error of approximately  $\pm 3$  percent at a 95 percent confidence level.<sup>1</sup> The sampling strategy employed ensured that every adult Malawian had an equal and known chance of being selected.

#### **Political Party Affiliation**

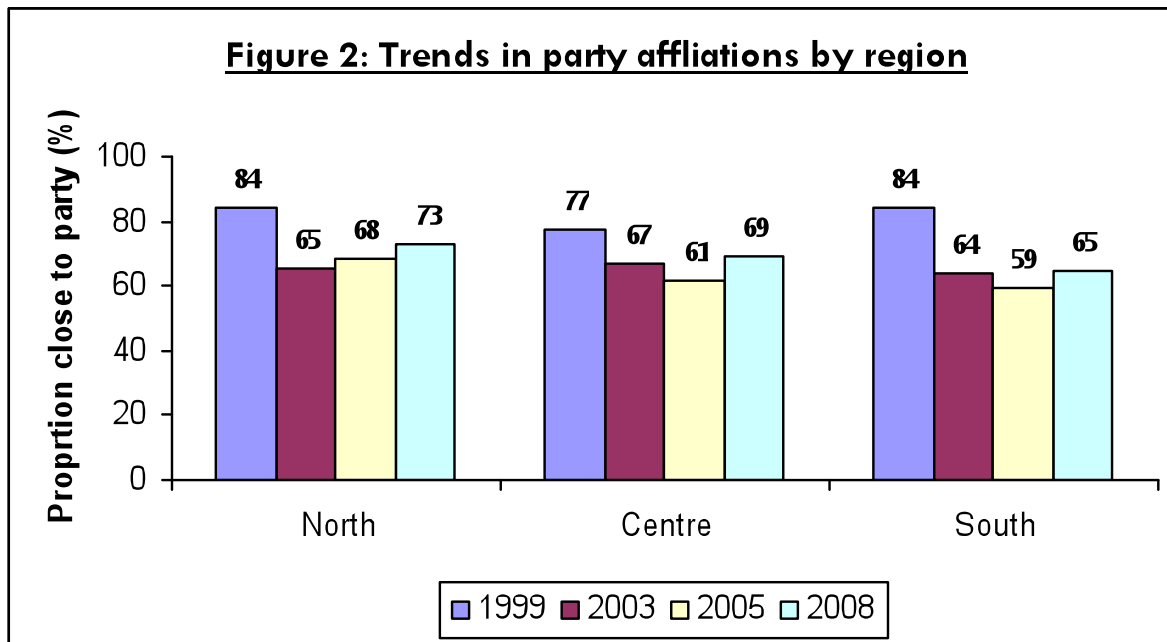
Much of this analysis is based on responses to a pair of questions about political affiliation. We ask first: 'Do you feel close to any particular political party?' For those who answer in the affirmative, a follow up question then asks: 'Which party is that?' Responses to the second question were open ended – respondents were not prompted with party lists.

<sup>1</sup> Thus, for an estimate of 50 percent holding a particular view, we can have a high level of confidence that the true percentage would lie within  $\pm 3$  percent, i.e., between 47 and 53 percent.

Starting with the first question about the frequency of affiliation, we see that there has been a decline in the proportion of people who feel close to a political party over time (Figure 1). From a high of 81% in 1999, affiliation declined to a low of 61% in 2005. Not surprisingly, the low point occurs not long after the turbulent 2004 elections, and shortly after President Mutharika and his colleagues had left UDF to form the DPP. The increasingly volatile party arena appears to have been leaving an increasing number of Malawians unsure of their allegiances. Affiliation has gone back up slightly to 68% in 2008, perhaps reflecting a stabilizing or settling in of the new party line-up. As shown in Figure 2, the differences across regions with respect to overall levels of party affiliation are relatively minor.



*Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

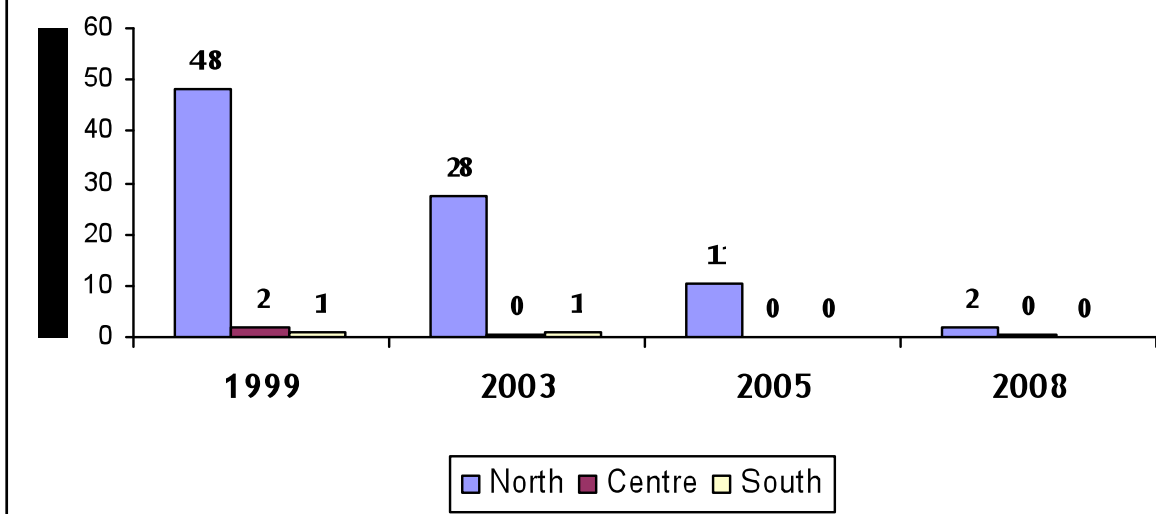


*Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

### **The Parties and the Regions: Changing Fortunes**

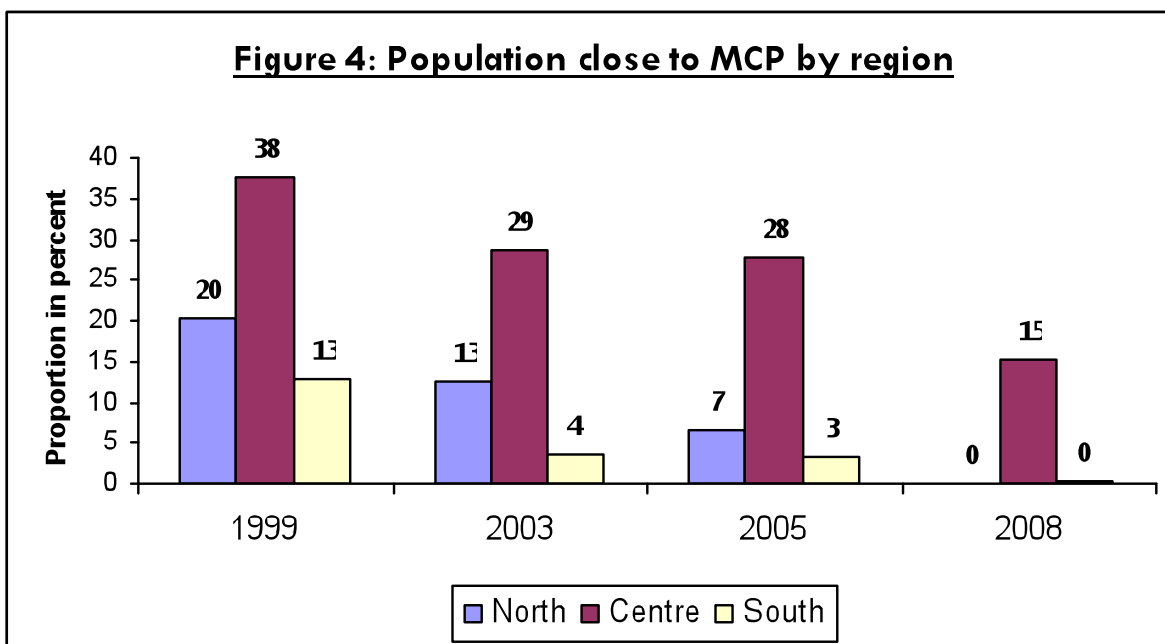
Figures 3 through 6 trace the fortunes, and the support bases, of the major parties over time. Let's begin with AFORD. It is clear that from the beginning, AFORD was never more than a regional party. Its support emanated virtually entirely from the North. As noted, it is perhaps not surprising that the party would have difficulty surviving under these circumstances, since its only route to power was through forming coalitions with other parties. It appears that even supporters in its northern stronghold came to realize, relatively quickly in fact, that their interests might be better served by a party that could compete in the national arena. By 2005, AFORD was at best a minor player, and it appears that by 2008, the party barely exists.

**Figure 3: Population close to AFORD by region**



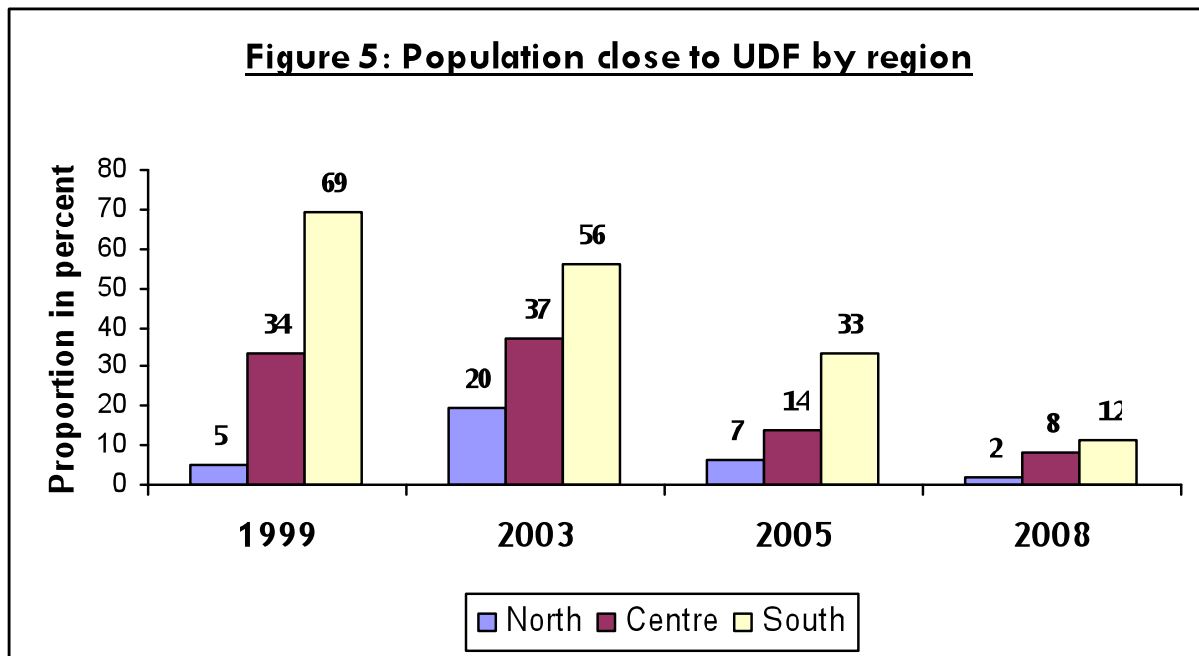
MCP, on the other hand, could lay at least some claim to being a national party in 1999 and 2003. Although its support was still rooted most strongly in Central Region, the bias was much less pronounced than it had been in the 1994 election (when 75% of the party's vote came from the Centre, compared to 54% of those affiliated with it in 1999). Since 2005, however, the changes in the political landscape seem to have chipped away at the MCP's support base. By 2008, not only can the party no longer claim a national following, it can barely even claim a significant following in Central Region, where just 15% of respondents now claim an affiliation with the party.

**Figure 4: Population close to MCP by region**

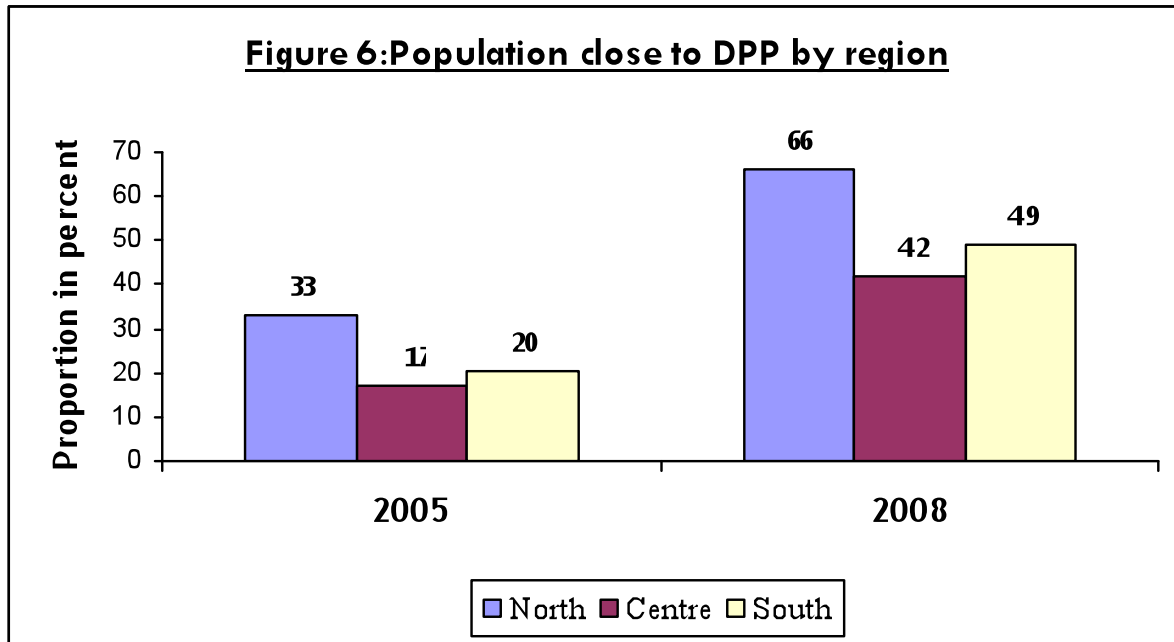


By 1999, UDF, too, had broadened its support base somewhat compared to the 1994 elections (when it won 28% of the vote in Central region). And it had expanded its base of support still further by 2003, becoming the country's clear dominant party, and the first that could claim the support of a plurality in more than one region. It could even claim to have made significant inroads in Northern region.

But Mutharika's departure and the formation of the DPP in early 2005 clearly had a devastating impact on UDF. Its overall support plummeted in 2005, and has dropped still further by 2008 – although at least through 2005 it could still claim to have some support in all three regions.

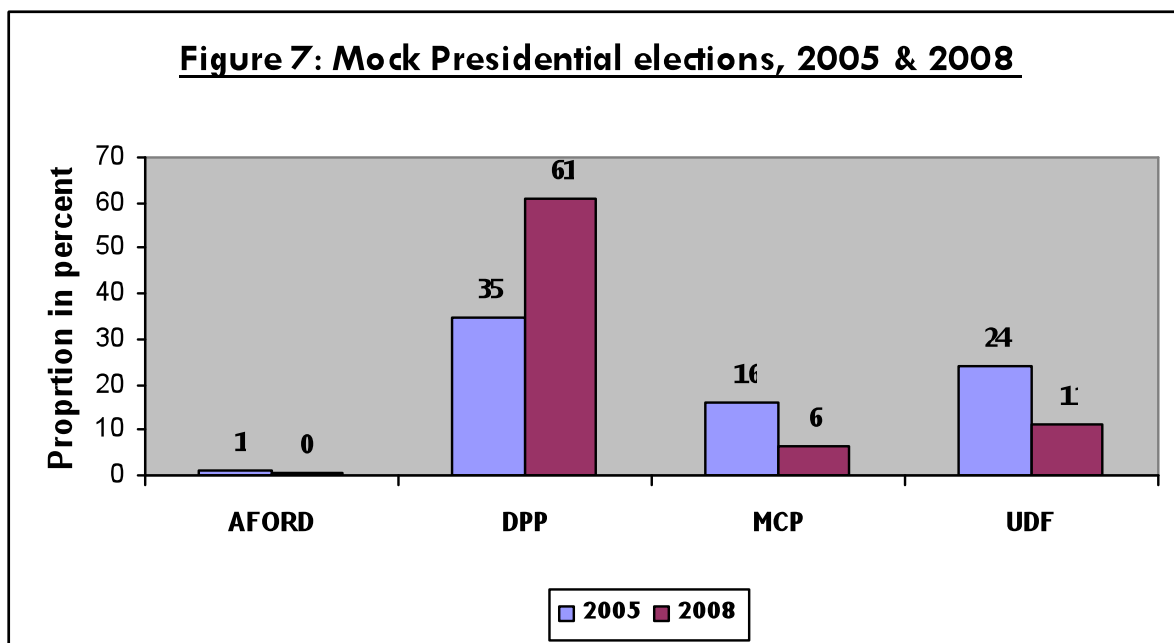


As the three parties that originally dominated the multiparty landscape all show marked signs of decline, in some cases to the point of near extinction, what has filled the gap? As shown in Figure 6, the clear answer is: the DPP. In fact the party could already claim remarkably high and diverse levels of support even in 2005, just months after it had formed. By 2008, it appears that the DPP's claim to popular *national* support has strengthened markedly. It captures a plurality of support in all three regions – something no party has been able to do previously. In fact, in 2008, an astonishing 74% of all respondents who said they were close to a political party named the DPP as that party, compared to just 14% for UDF and 10% for MCP. This increase in popularity can, arguably, be linked to the performance of the Mutharika Government, especially on the economic side. Since 2004 there has been national food self-sufficiency, deceleration of inflation to single-digits, health economic growth and reasonable tobacco prices at the auction floors.



### Mock Presidential Elections

What if a presidential election had been held in 2008? We asked respondents: “If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?” Reflecting the allegiances already revealed above, DPP comes out as the clear winner in 2008, with 61% of the hypothetical votes (Figure 7), including a majority in all three regions (Table 2). Of course, these results are only hypothetical, and were collected some eight months before the actual elections to be held in May 2009. A great deal can happen, and attitudes and allegiances can change, so this should not be taken as a precise prediction of the 2009 election outcomes. But it does suggest that as of the time of the survey, the election was DPP’s to lose.



*If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?*



**Table 2: Choice of Party of Presidential Candidate, by Region**

Region	AFORD		DPP		MCP		UDF	
	2005	2008	2005	2008	2005	2008	2005	2008
North	7	2	54	87	7	0	7	2
Centre	0	0	28	53	33	15	14	8
South	0	0	36	61	5	1	38	16

*If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

### Conclusions

In the early days of multipartyism in Malawi, voting trends raised deep concerns about emerging regionalism and national disunity: each of the three main parties was clearly aligned with one of the country's three regions. However, far from becoming entrenched, parties themselves, as well as popular party allegiances in Malawi, have proved quite volatile. And while some evidence of regional preferences remained even through 2005, by 2008 the landscape had shifted radically. Afrobarometer findings collected just eight months before the country's May 2009 election suggest that rather than deep regional divides, we are likely to see a strong expression of national consensus around a single party and candidate, the DPP.

So, is the country turning blue after enjoying the yellow glow that followed the green fire? The answer to that question will only be certain after the May 2009 election, following proper campaigns. However, there is strong evidence that the country is in fact turning DPP blue.

If there is a concern to be raised at this juncture, it is with regard not to an excess of disunity, but to an excess of unity. Malawians from all regions seem to be rallying behind a single party, which could leave the opposition weak and divided. Of course, in the short run this is not necessarily a cause for concern, and it is far too soon to see whether this trend reflects a lasting phenomenon. But dominance of the political system by a single party may not be any healthier than a system divided by deep regional cleavages. A lopsided system – a strong government that is unchallenged by a weak opposition – may be good for the economy, but it is not clear whether it would be good for the country in the long term. Some balance is required in the national assembly to avoid the exercise of unchecked presidential power.

In the meantime DPP is better off learning from the experiences of AFORD, MCP and UDF. Malawian voters have, over time, clearly demonstrated that popularity of a party is not necessarily dependent on which region the president comes from but largely on the extent of internal democracy. Voters prize internal democracy; the election of committee members from branch to national governing bodies, selection of candidates to stand for political offices and the general respect of the party's constitution. Failure to consult party supporters cost AFORD its strong position in the North. Internal fights between leaders in MCP cost the little support the party had in the North and South. Failure to follow laid down rules regarding the choice of candidates cost UDF the parliamentary majority and ultimately the government itself, despite winning the elections. DPP has benefited from these mistakes and if its leadership had a choir like the former UDF President, we would have been hearing '*blue everywhere*'. Euphoria is followed by disappointment if internal democracy is ignored.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Maxton Grant Tsoka

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