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Responsiveness and Accountability in Malawi

Under the auspices of the Afrobarometer¹, IfESOR conducted a nation-wide survey of political opinions and attitudes in Malawi between 15th June and 3rd July 2005. A nationally representative sample of 1200 respondents drawn from all the districts in the country was interviewed. In this paper, we use Afrobarometer data to investigate the Malawians' views on government responsiveness and accountability.

Citizens expect their leaders to make decisions and perform their duties according to the will and wishes of the people they serve. But to hold elected officials accountable, citizens must be aware of what is happening. They should follow what their leaders are doing and be willing to sanction those who are unresponsive. Without this, it is almost impossible to hold leaders accountable.

In this paper, we test whether this principle of democracy is practiced today in Malawi. How much responsiveness and accountability do Malawians want from their elected officials? And how much do they think they are getting?

We find that Malawians:

- Expect MPs to be responsive
- Want their MP's to visit their constituencies frequently, and
- Want their MP's to deliver development benefits.

At the same time, the results show that the majority of Malawians conclude that MP's provide low rates of responsiveness. They say that:

- MP's make infrequent visits to their constituencies, and
- Hardly listen to the views of their constituents.

On a positive note, the results also suggest that Malawians:

- Are aware that they can hold their elected officials accountable by exercising their right to vote.

¹ The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys conducted in many African countries. The first round of the Afrobarometer surveys in Malawi was conducted in November-December 1999 and the second round was carried out from April-May, 2003. Round 3 of the Afrobarometer covered 18 sub-Saharan African countries (9 in SADC: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe; 5 in West Africa: Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal; and 4 in East Africa: Kenya, Madagascar, Tanzania and Uganda).

These findings indicate that a *representation gap* exists in Malawi. To close this gap, elected officials should learn to listen, care and deliver development benefits. If not, unresponsive legislators and councillors will run the risk of being voted out by their constituents. Over time, regular elections should serve as a warning to incumbent and potential elected representatives. If voters eject unresponsive leaders, elected officials will become more responsive and accountable to the people they serve, thereby contributing to the consolidation of our young democracy.

Yet these findings also highlight the need for more civic education to help voters gain a clearer understanding of the functions of elected officials. Finally, the results demonstrate a need to enhance the role of local councillors to turn the decentralization programme into reality and improve development delivery.

What do Malawians want from their elected officials?

In order to tap Malawians’ preferences about responsiveness, the Afrobarometer asked people to indicate which of the following statements was closest to their view.

- A. Our elected officials should listen to constituents’ views and do what they demand.
- B. Our elected leaders should follow their own ideas in deciding what is best for the country.

The responses show clearly that eight in ten Malawians (83 percent) want their elected officials to listen to their views and respond to their demands. Just 17 percent want elected officials to follow their own ideas in deciding what is best for the country (see Figure 1).

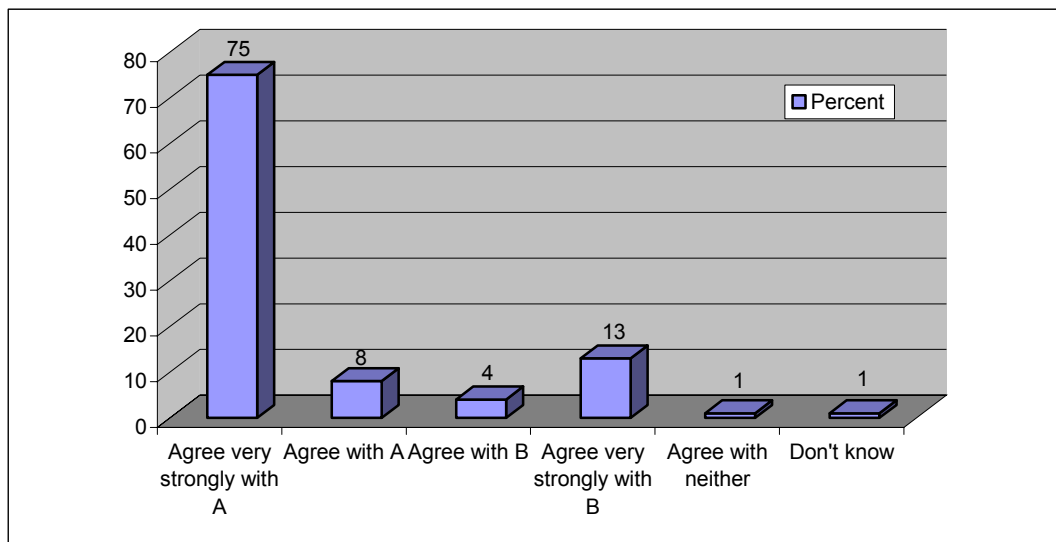


Figure 1: Whether elected leaders should listen to people’s views or follow their own ideas

To further assess Malawians’ views on responsiveness, we asked: “How much time should your Member of Parliament spend in this constituency to visit the community and its citizens?” The results show that Malawians expect frequent visits from MPs (Figure 2). About half of the citizens (53 percent) expect their MP to visit the constituency at least once a week (which includes 26 percent who want the MP to be there on a full time basis) while 41 percent said at least once a month.

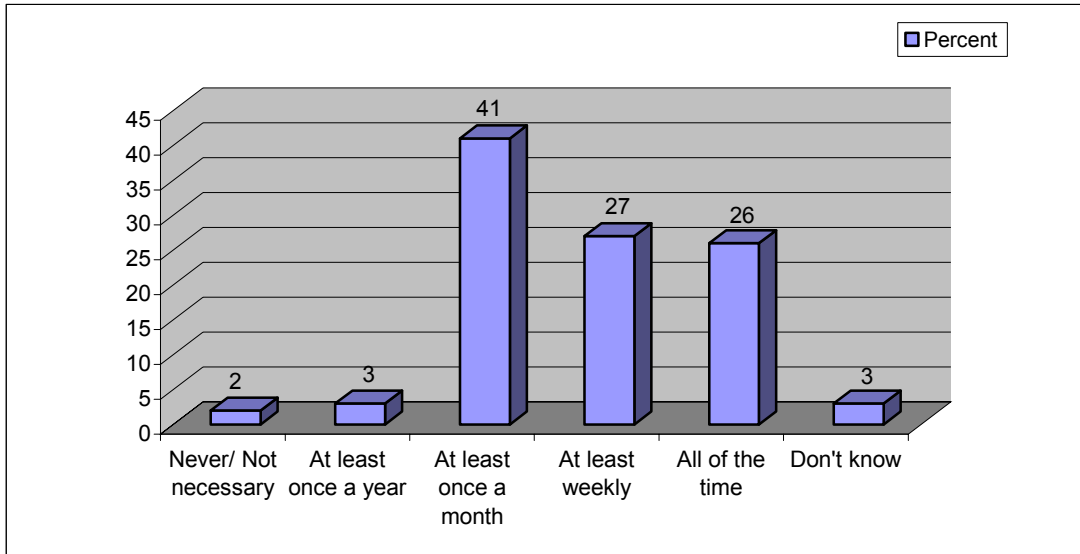


Figure 2: Amount of time MP should spend in a constituency

Besides where voters think MP's spend their time, what do they think is the function of the MP? This question was included in the 2003 Round 2 Afrobarometer survey in May 2003 and asked citizens: "In your opinion, what are the most important responsibilities of a Member of Parliament?" In general, the results shown in Figure 3 indicate that Malawians expect their MP to:

- Deliver development such as bridges, schools, health clinics and clean water (23 percent)
- Represent people in Parliament (20 percent)
- Improve infrastructure (11 percent)
- Implement health policies (10 percent).

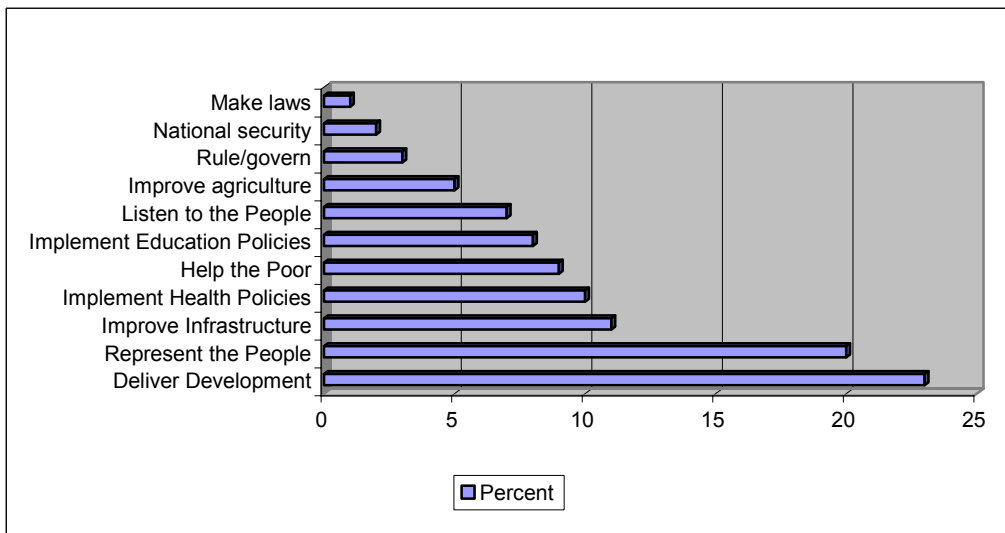


Figure 3: Important responsibilities of a Member of Parliament

These results suggest that there is a vacuum in the development system. Those who are responsible for development are not delivering and thus people turn to the MP. In fact, these results are consistent with the behaviour of MPs in Malawi. During election campaigns, often

MPs make empty development promises. And it is not uncommon to find MP's intervening with the work of local councillors and development agencies in their area.

Malawians' expectations of their MP's also indicate the impact of the 'big man' syndrome: the politics of patronage. They suggest that Malawians perceive MPs as 'big men' who distribute development and gifts such as funeral costs, fertilizer and food. The positive part of this is that MPs get familiar with their areas and the people they serve. However, whether MPs should stay on in the locality on a full time basis is debatable.

What are Malawians getting from their MPs?

To test whether MP's meet these popular expectations, we asked Malawians: 'How much time *does* your Member of Parliament spend in this constituency?' In general, the majority of Malawians gave the MP's very low scores on responsiveness: 56 percent of the citizens said their MP "never" visits the constituency, 12 percent said they visit only once a year and just 18 percent saying just once a month (Figure 4). Regardless of whether or not MP's actually do visit their constituencies frequently, these results suggest that their constituents do not think they do, which means MPs may not be in touch with the community. They also suggest that MP's should take a more active role in publicizing their visits, perhaps publishing a visiting schedule for their constituencies.

Yet this situation is not unique to Malawi. It is an instance of what Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi (2005) call a 'representation gap' defined as the dearth of formal connectedness between political officials and their constituents:

Thus voters in almost all countries [participating in the Afrobarometer] see a representation gap. They complain that parliamentary deputies do not visit the locality, fail to deliver development benefits, and return only when seeking re-election (p. 242).

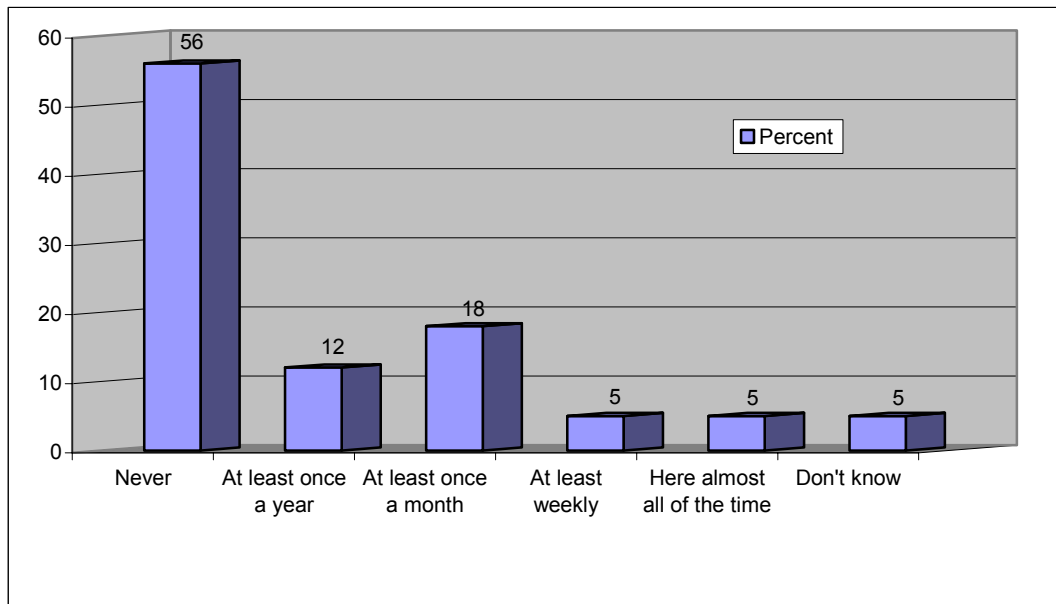


Figure 4: Amount of time MP does spend in the constituency

In another test of whether MP's were delivering the levels of responsiveness demanded by the voters, we asked people "how much of the time" MP's listen to ordinary citizens. Figure 5 shows that just over half of all Malawians (55 percent) said that the MP's "never" listen, while 17 percent said "only sometimes," 13 percent "often" and 11 percent "always." Thus, over half of

the citizens say MPs never visit their constituency and never listen to what community members have to say.

Citizens expressed similar evaluations of their local councillors: 48 percent say they “never” listen, 17 percent say “only sometimes”, 14 percent “often” and 13 percent “always” (Figure 5). This suggests that even though local government is closest to the people, local councillors are not as close to the people as expected. Yet the ideal of high levels of popular contact with local government and popular participation in decision-making presumes that local councillors should live within the community and play an active part in community life. Although the Afrobarometer did not explore this issue, we may speculate that either a considerable number of councillors do not reside in the communities they serve or that they reside in these communities but are not active.

This is important because local councillors are, in principle, development agents rather than politicians within a constituency. Councillors are expected to work hand in hand with the MP, chiefs and development organisations to push the development agenda for the local communities. In practice however, this division of labour is fluid: overlaps, conflicts and tensions are common. If development has to move forward in local communities, the voters, MPs and councillors must all clearly understand their roles and responsibilities.

These results also support the speedy implementation of Malawi’s decentralisation programme and the need for more regular elections of local councillors. They also support enhancing the role of councillors. One sticky issue in Malawi is that councillors operate with very few resources compared to MPs. This is not to say that MPs should be at par with local councillors. The issue is that councillors are not paid to represent their wards in the district assembly.

They receive allowances to pay for their transport and upkeep during assembly and committee meetings. Therefore councillors need to be very committed to serving their wards or communities in development work. They should not contest for the post because of financial interests. (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, p.25-6)

As such, councillors face difficult conditions of service and there is a need to empower them to do their jobs. Sources must be found for a remuneration package that would enhance the councillors’ mobility and upkeep within their communities.

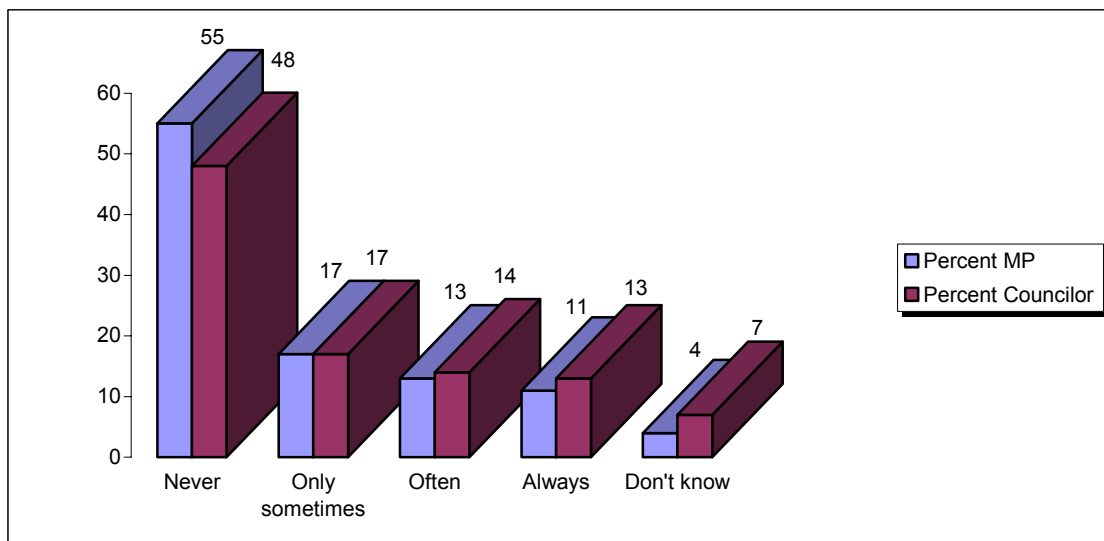


Figure 5: Whether or not MP and Councillor listen to what people say?

Are Malawians willing to hold their MPs accountable?

A democratic state is centred on people. That is, the government gets its mandate to govern from the majority, and is accountable to the very same electorate. But how willing are Malawians to hold their MP’s to account if they do not serve their interests? To test this, we asked respondents to tell us ‘who should be responsible for holding leadership accountable?’ Three quarters of the citizens think that it is the responsibility of the voters to make elected officials do their jobs (Figure 6). Just 11 percent think it is the duty of the President or executive. In Malawi, the only way voters would really hold their leaders accountable is through the next legislative elections. In other countries, they have a recall provision that allows citizens to remove elected officials who are not serving their interests. In Malawi, this provision was provided for in the constitution but the MPs removed it without seeking the opinions of the Malawi citizens.

These findings echo the results of the 2004 election in which 140 new Members of Parliament were elected, as well as recent by-elections where the new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) led by the State President won all 6 constituencies. Malawians want MP’s to listen to their views and respond to their demands, not to follow their own ideas. Commenting on the 2005 by-elections, the Rev. Boniface Tamani, Chairman of Public Affairs Committee (PAC) had this to say:

What has happened [December 2005 by-elections] clearly shows that even the ordinary people have a vision – they want things to change in terms of development. (Translated from Chichewa article in Weekend Nation, Vol. 9 no. 51, 17-18 December 2005, p.6).

Tamani therefore warned the new DPP party to be wary of the need to keep listening to the voters. People resented the practice of dominant political parties imposing candidates on them; as a result, we have seen an increase of independent MP’s and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and DPP gaining momentum in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

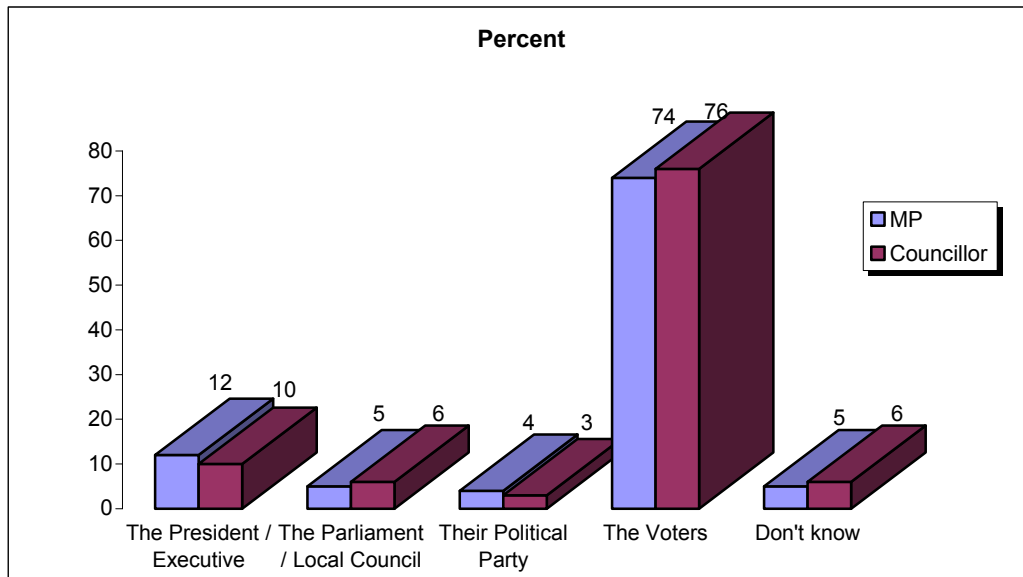


Figure 6: Responsibility for holding leadership accountable

Do Malawians know their local councillors and national leaders?

For citizens to hold their elected officials accountable, they must know them. To test popular knowledge, we asked citizens to name their Member of Parliament (MP), local councillor, and the Vice President. Responses in Figure 7 indicate that most Malawians know their MP (74 percent) compared to less than half who know their local councillor (43 percent) and Vice President (43

percent). We find that rural dwellers are more likely to know their MP's and councillors than urban people; men are more likely than women. However, urban people are far more likely than rural (64 percent compared to 39 percent) to know who the Vice President is, and men are twice as likely (60 percent compared to 26 percent).

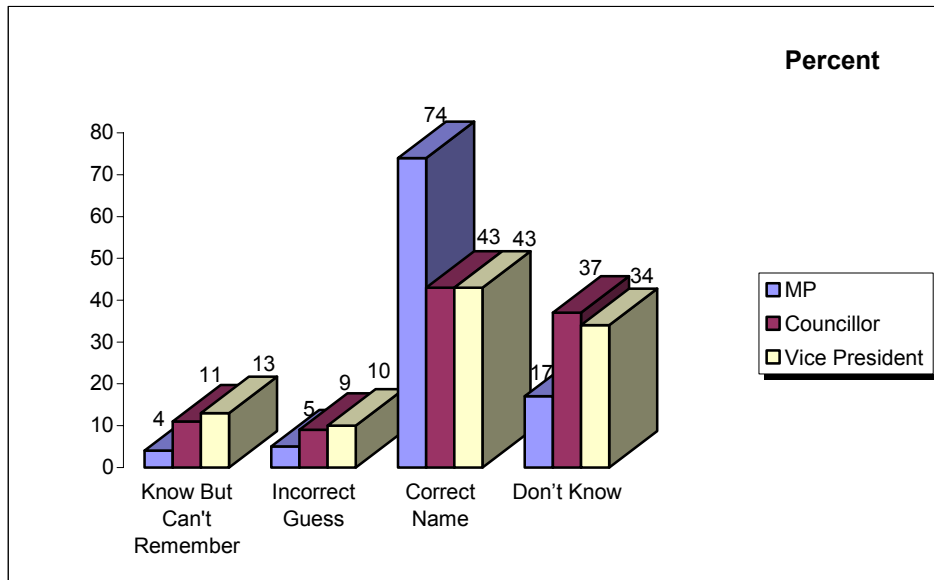


Figure 7: Do Malawians know who their local councillor and national leaders are?

Conclusion

The Afrobarometer results indicate that Malawians want MPs to be responsive. They want them to listen to their views and care about their interests. According to the survey respondents, MP's should visit their constituency frequently and also deliver development benefits.

The results also indicate that there is a representation gap. Citizens complain that MPs do not visit them and do not listen to their views. To close this gap, we suggest the following:

- Civil society should continue educating the MPs as well as the electorate so they understand clearly the functions of the national and local representatives.
- Elected officials should learn to listen to the views of the electorate and base their participation in Parliament and district assemblies on these. One strategy would be for the elected officials to develop a plan of action that would be the basis for their visits to the constituents and negotiations for support from government, civil society organisations and other stakeholders.
- Civil society and national government should empower the local councillors by enabling their mobility and upkeep within their communities so that they can effectively contribute to their development functions.

In addition, the results clearly show that Malawians know their elected officials. There is even beginning evidence that they intend to hold them accountable by voting them out of office. If voters continue this trend, with time and experience, there is hope that elected officials will become more responsive and accountable to the people they serve. This development is important to our quest for consolidating our young democracy.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Catherine Mthinda and Stanley Khaila of Ifesor.

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