

ABSTRACT

STATE FORMATION, TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP AND MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY IN MALAWI

Henry Chingaibe, DPhil candidate

University of York & Lecturer at University of Malawi

Since the abortive attempt to scrap off presidential term limits in 2002, the role of traditional leaders in multi-party democracy in Malawi has been on the spotlight. Popular debate has been concerned with whether traditional leadership is compatible with the aspirations associated with the current political dispensation. While there have been numerous calls for traditional leaders to disengage from overt partisan politics, the practice has continued virtually unabated in favour of the party in government. The question regarding how and why chiefs are at the centre of the often confused partisan politicking has not received sufficient scholarly attention to inform institutional reforms necessary for the democracy consolidation project in Malawi.

This paper deploys the approach of historical institutionalism and invokes the concept of 'path dependence' to attempt an explanation of the mechanisms and political imperatives that undergird the controversial partisan role of traditional leadership in a multi-party setting. The argument is mainly three-fold. First, that the politics of state formation during colonialism and state-building during the post-independence period mainstreamed the role of traditional leaders in state politics, initially as administrative agents of the colonial government and later as media for broadcasting and cementing political power of the nationalist party that dominated government. Secondly, that the continuous inter-play of formal and informal institutions governing the roles of traditional leaders in governance and politics across the two political epochs, right up to the current dispensation reflects continuity of an institutional path that has escaped or resisted reform yet does not auger well for democracy consolidation. Third, that traditional leadership and a democratic dispensation are not and need not be mutually exclusive but there is need for spirited, evidence-based institutional and policy initiatives aimed at reforming the roles of traditional leaders *vis-a-vis* state politics in a multi-party democracy.

Key words: *state formation, state politics, traditional leaders, multi-party democracy.*