

ABSTRACT

MCP TO DPP: DEMOCRATISING FROM AUTOCRACY OR AUTOCRATISING DEMOCRACY?

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Malawi was a one-party state until Dr Banda's Malawi Congress Party (MCP) lost a referendum to those favouring a multiparty dispensation in 1993. In the 1994 general elections, though the choice was essentially between the 'autocratic despot' (Banda) and the '*wakuba*' (thief) (Bakili Muluzi),* the voting pattern, which favoured the latter, revealed an ethnic bias. After a five year period characterized by 'conspicuous consumption' by the ruling elite and a failure to 'de-autocratise' Malawi by Muluzi and his United Democratic Front (UDF), the UDF used its monetary advantage to win a second term. The voting pattern again showed an ethnic basis. In 2003, the UDF failed to change the constitution to enable a third term for Muluzi, but managed, with Bingu wa Mutharika, Muluzi's chosen successor, as the presidential candidate, to win a closely contested election in 2004. Again, there was a noticeable ethnic pattern to the voting. In power, Mutharika distanced himself from the UDF and formed his own Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Between 2004 and 2009, despite the opposition harassing Mutharika's government and blocking some essential legislation, Mutharika managed to deliver an impressive economic performance. He also astutely exploited Banda's legacy and memory to appeal to Malawi Congress Party members. The choice for voters in 2009 then was between JZU Tembo's centre-based MCP and Mutharika's southern-based DPP. In the event Mutharika achieved a popular nation-wide landslide win, with no discernible ethnic pattern to the voting. This paper examines the contextual economic, political, social, ethnic and other factors and processes that contributed to Mutharika's landslide win and speculates on whether Mutharika's 2009 win is a process of consolidating democracy or democratising autocracy.

* Bakili Muluzi had a conviction for theft by a public servant in 1968