



Desk study on aid and democracy

Malawi

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This study is part of a series of country-focused desk studies on aid and democracy prepared under the project [The state and statebuilding in the Global South](#). They are prepared under the guidance of Rachel M. Gisselquist as background to a broader research effort on aid, governance, and democracy promotion. The studies follow a common template and each draws on the research literature and selected cross-national sources to discuss regime type and timeline, findings from the literature on democracy/democratization, findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization, aid flows and sources, and specific aid examples. This study addresses the case of Malawi, from independence in 1964 and with focus on the post-Cold War period.

Key words: foreign aid, democratization, Malawi, statebuilding, development

Note: The datasets and codebook used and drawn upon are listed after the reference list at the end of the study.

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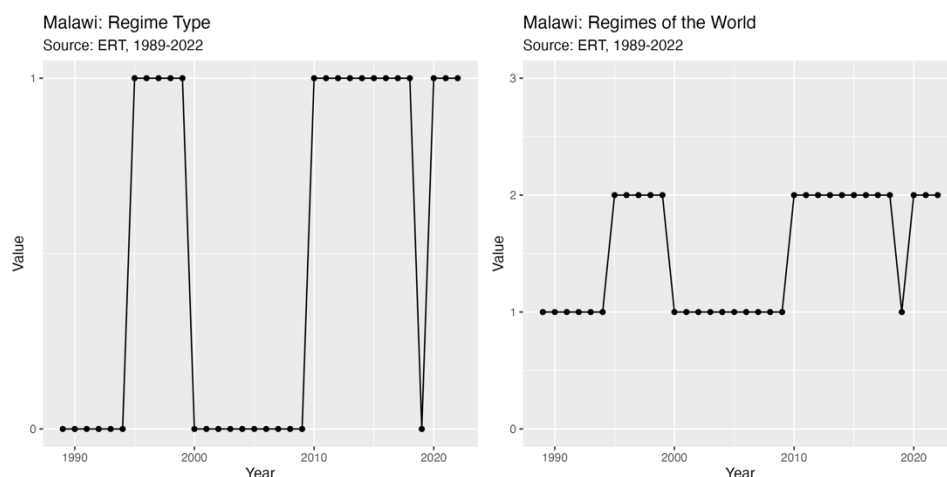
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1 Regime type and timeline

There is not a lot of consistency across datasets with regards to how Malawi's modern regime is classified. Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) Regime Type variable indicates that Malawi has fluctuated back and forth between autocracy and democracy since the 1990s. Regimes of the World (RoW) identifies the same fluctuations over these years but specifies that Malawi has oscillated between electoral autocracy and electoral democracy. Both these indices classify Malawi as a democracy (1) / electoral democracy (2) from 1995 to 1999, 2010 to 2018, and 2020 to 2022, and as an autocracy (0) / electoral autocracy (1) from 1989 to 1994, 2000 to 2009, and for one year in 2019.

Figure 1: Malawi's regime types

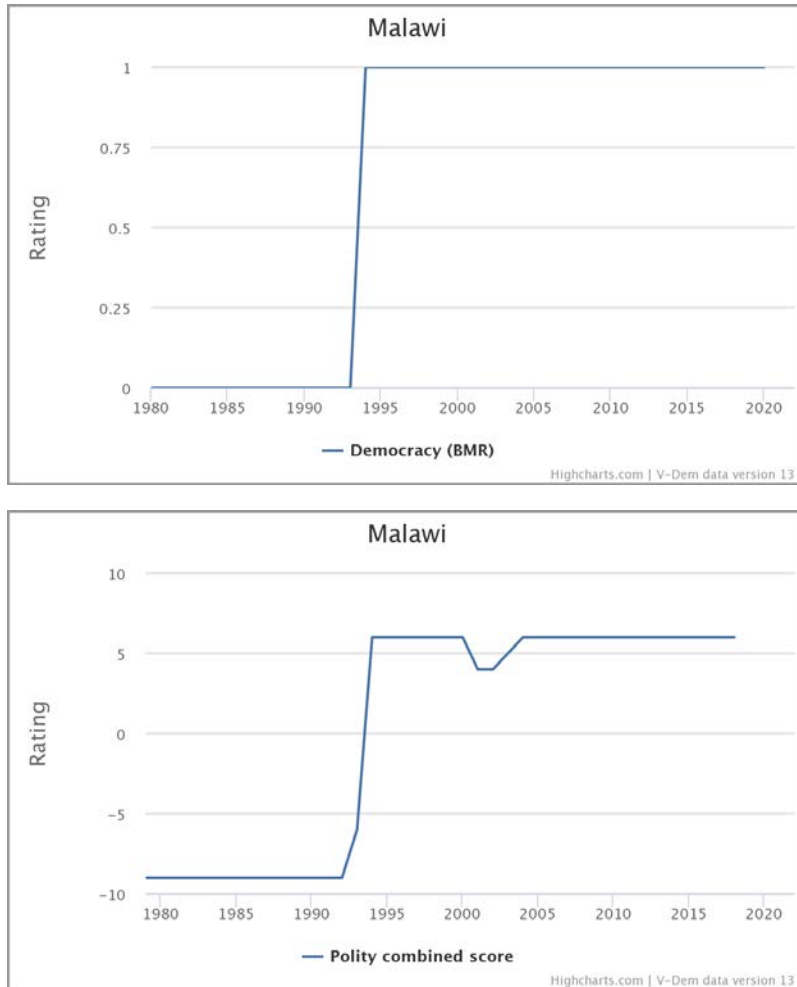


Source: author's construction based on V-Dem ERT data.

However, other datasets classify Malawi entirely differently. Some consider Malawi as having a fairly static regime after 1994. Across datasets, 1994/5 is universally viewed as a pivotal moment of democratic transition in the country; otherwise, there is discrepancy about the status of its regime after 1994. The Boix-Miller-Rosato (BMR) dichotomous coding of democracy has continuously classified Malawi as a democracy (1) since 1994. Combined Polity scores (ranging from -10 to 10) indicate a similar coding pattern. Except for three years, 2001–03, Malawi has been ranked as a 6 on the Polity scale, which is its threshold for considering a country a democracy.¹

¹ Malawi was ranked as a 4 and 5 from 2001 to 2003, which made it an open anocracy during that time.

Figure 2: Malawi's regime measures based on BMR and Polity5 datasets



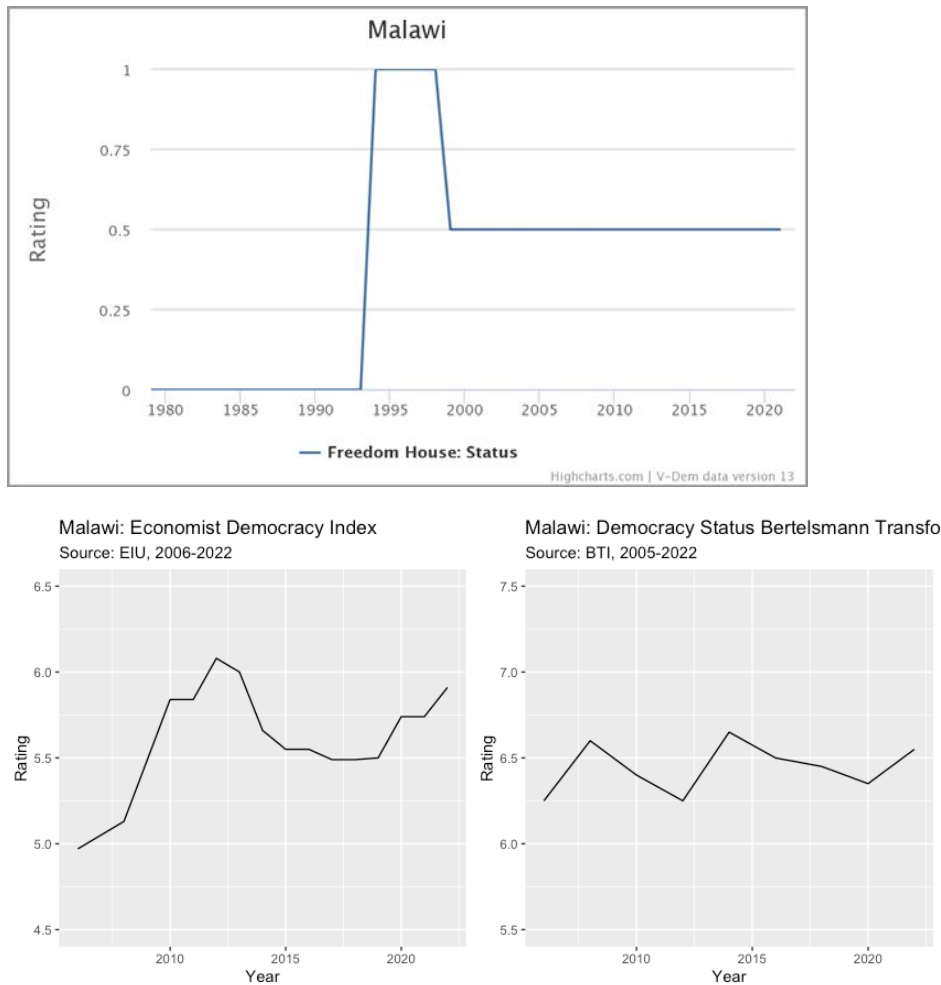
Source: author's construction based on Boix-Miller-Rosato (BMR) dichotomous coding of democracy and Combined Polity scores.

Other indices show greater variation in regime measures in Malawi, but they do not reflect the same regime transitions that the ERT and RoW indicators do. Freedom House data illustrate that Malawi went from being Not Free in 1993 to Free in 1994; it then dropped to Partly Free in 1999 and has remained a Partly Free state ever since. The Economist Democracy Index (EDI)² has consistently labelled Malawi as a 'hybrid regime', which is not an authoritarian regime, but is a step below a flawed democracy. According to EDI measures, Malawi has scored somewhere between 5 and 6 for all years measured, except for the year 2006 when it ranked 4.97 and 2012 when it ranked 6.08, the latter of which is its threshold for classification as a flawed democracy. Finally, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI)³ shows Malawi's democracy scores to have fluctuated around 6.5 since 2006, which categorizes it as a defective democracy, above highly defective democracies and autocracies.

² The EDI index classifies countries on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 and only has data as far back as 2006.

³ The BTI index also classifies countries on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 and has data as far back as 2005. Regime rankings on this index are: democracy, defective democracy, highly defective democracy, moderate autocracy, and hard autocracy.

Figure 3: Malawi's regime measures based on Freedom House, EDI, and BTI datasets



Source: author's construction based on Freedom House, Economist Democracy Index, and Bertelsmann Transformation Index.

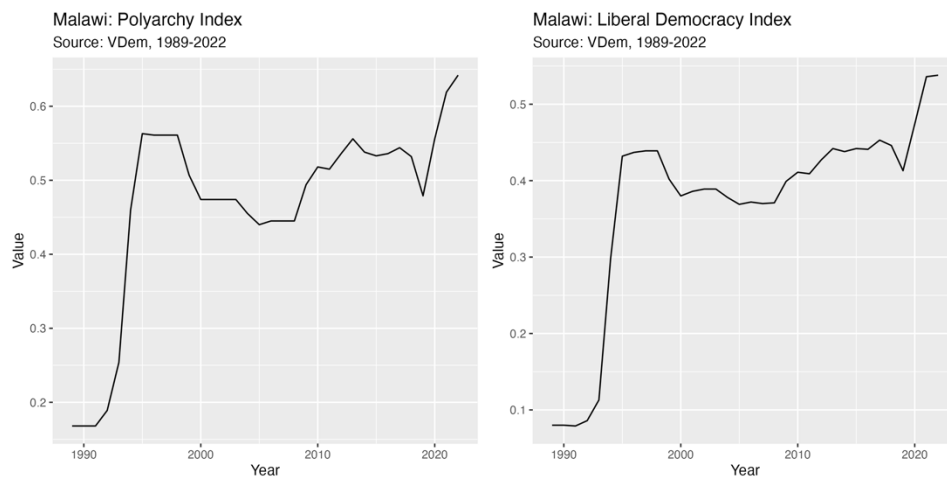
Democracy indices are imperfect, and there are bound to be discrepancies between one index and the next. However, the fact that Malawi is categorized so drastically differently across indices indicates a more complex story. Of all the democracy indices presented here, only the ERT and RoW (plus three years on the Polity scale) classify Malawi as an autocracy post-1994, and none of the other measures identify the same regime fluctuations as ERT and RoW data. The ERT and RoW coding of regime transitions are also inconsistent with the general trends in the literature, which tend to consider Malawi democratic. Therefore, taken altogether, what these measures indicate is that Malawi is on a threshold right in between an autocracy and a democracy. What the ERT and RoW may thus be picking up on is the fact that Malawi's regime is not consolidated and prone to shifts in either direction, toward democracy or toward autocracy.

The literature tends to either implicitly or explicitly refer to Malawi in democratic terms. It often examines Malawi's experience with authoritarian tendencies and analyses its weakly consolidated regime, but it approaches these phenomena with democracy as a starting point in the country. Perhaps one of the reasons that Malawi's regime is less identified with authoritarianism and more associated with democracy in the literature is that it has neither been the victim of a recent civil conflict, nor has it experienced extreme political violence (assassinations, coups, etc.), as so many other similar countries have. Its relative political stability may account for why it is generally viewed as more democratic than autocratic.

Looking more closely at Malawi's electoral and liberal democracy scores, they seem to reflect a slow, non-linear process of regime development or democratization. Both measures spiked from 1994 to

1995 after multiparty elections were held in March 1994. The country's scores on these two indices suggest a narrative, whereby the transition to democracy was followed by a struggle to consolidate it, as the late 1990s to mid-2000s saw declines on both measures. Since 2008, Malawi has made modest but steady gains on these regime indicators. In 1990, Malawi's polyarchy ranking was 0.168, which rose to 0.563 in 1995 after its transition to democracy. Although its polyarchy score dropped to 0.44 in 2005, it has since climbed and it continues to climb on this measure, attaining its highest ranking thus far of 0.642 in 2022. Liberal democracy scores offer a similar trajectory, with a starting point of 0.08 in 1990, but reaching 0.432 by 1995. Despite a low point of 0.369 in 2005, the country has also achieved its highest score of 0.538 in 2022. Malawi has struggled along democracy indicators, but it appears to generally be moving in the right direction.

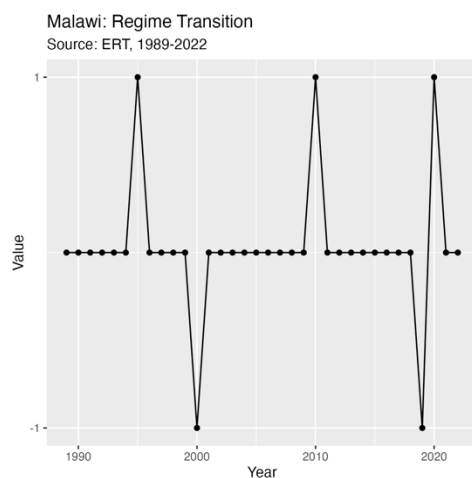
Figure 4: Malawi's electoral and liberal democracy index scores



Source: author's construction based on V-Dem data.

According to ERT data classifications, there have been five instances of regime transition in Malawi since 1990. Other datasets do not agree with these coding decisions and some of these years also do not appear to correspond to clear regime-changing political events or processes. What is universally accepted, however, is ERT's first regime transition episode that occurred in 1995. This year marks the year after Malawi's first multiparty democratic elections since its independence and the defeat of President Hastings Banda in that presidential election. These elections officially ended one-party rule in Malawi and ushered in democracy, making 1995 the country's first year of democratic transition (1).

Figure 5: Malawi's regime transition variable



Source: author's construction based on ERT data.

The second transition event in 2000 (-1) reflects growing non-democratic governance trends in Malawi that had emerged after transition. By 2000, the government had been chronically engaging in corrupt and poor governance practices. A more succinct year for a regime change coding might have been 2002, when President Muluzi sought to abolish term limits in the constitution to allow him to run for president again in 2004. This attempt was ultimately blocked by the courts but exposed the encroaching authoritarian tendencies that had been manifesting within the state. Either way, around 2000 there is a more widespread dip in democracy measures, as it is also around this year that Polity scores temporarily dropped from 6 to 4 (2001) and Freedom House measures dropped to Partly Free (1999). Around this time, democracy building in Malawi was under significant strain and its regime was backsliding.

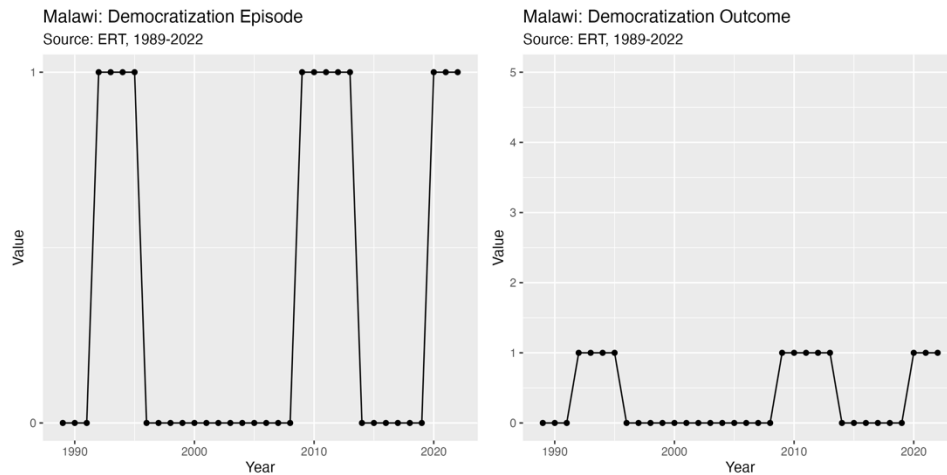
The transition in 2010 (1) corresponds to President Mutharika's re-election in 2009 and second term in office. President Muluzi attempted once more to run for president in 2009, but the courts again ruled against him, re-confirming the primacy of the constitution. Thereafter, President Mutharika emphasized better governance practices—anti-corruption, food security, healthcare, etc. His administration also presided over fractious politics and some politically motivated arrests, so whether his second term fully marks a transition back to democracy or merely a continuation of previous practices is up for debate. The BTI shows a downward trend of democracy in 2010, and the EIU reflects a downward slope after 2012, but the second Mutharika term did mark a shift in governance from the Muluzi administration.

The ERT regime transitions in 2019 (-1) and 2020 (1) surround the presidential election that first took place in 2019. In 2019, President Peter Mutharika, brother to the former president, was re-elected under circumspect conditions. The 2019 election results were deemed fraudulent and coincided with a reversal to autocracy that year. Although polyarchy and liberal democracy scores did drop in 2019, which is the basis for ERT regime transition coding, this coding decision seems heavy-handed, and no other dataset reflects such a sharp decline that year. The courts and Electoral Commission ordered a presidential election rerun in 2020, which was carried out cleanly. This election led to President Lazarus Chakwera's victory as president, nudging Malawi back on a path toward democracy.

Whether all these events constitute instances of regime transition is up for debate. Other datasets do not agree with all the ERT-identified instances of regime change and, in practice, the political events that coincide with these identified moments do not necessarily feel drastic enough to have initiated a shift in regime. Instead, these cases might be considered tests to or achievements of Malawi's democratization, depending on how they are viewed.

The ERT data also identify three democratization episodes, all of which have led to a democratic transition (1) according to the coding. The episode from 1992 to 1995 pre-empted Malawi's transition to democracy. In 1992, anti-Banda regime protests emerged and were fuelled by support from exiled activists, foreign governments, and the Catholic Church. Eventually, these political pressures brought President Banda to the negotiating table, where he agreed to issue a referendum regarding reintroducing multiparty elections. The referendum was held in 1993, voters overwhelmingly cast their ballots in favour of multiparty elections, which were then held in March of 1994. Although President Banda did run in those elections, he was defeated at the polls and Malawi transitioned to a multiparty democratic state.

Figure 6: Malawi's democratization episodes and outcome



Source: author's construction based on ERT data.

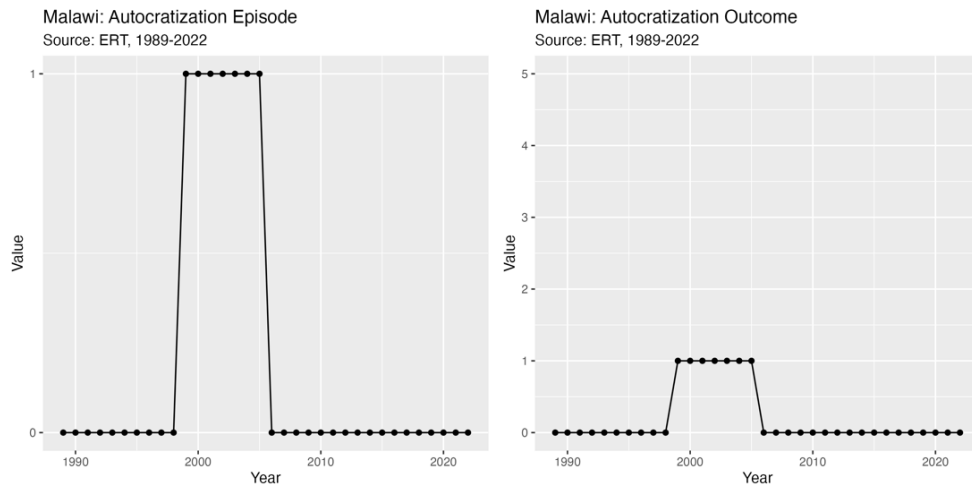
The second democratizing period from 2009 to 2013 coincides with President Bingu wa Mutharika's second term. The 2009 presidential election was another watershed moment for Malawi's democratic institutions as Muluzi, who had served two terms as president of Malawi from 1994 to 2004, attempted to run for a third time. He argued his campaign did not violate the constitution, as it was a non-consecutive bid for the presidency, and he was garnering support for his cause. However, it also led to widespread opposition, especially within civil society circles and eventually within the legislature. Ultimately, the Electoral Commission and Constitutional Court deemed him ineligible to run and also barred him from doing so in the future. Having passed this test to its democracy, Malawi then ran a free and fair election in 2009 and turned its attention toward more democratic governance practices, at least until 2013, just after Mutharika's unexpected death in 2012.

The last democratizing episode from 2020 to 2022 reflects the new government in power led by President Lazarus Chakwera. Malawi successfully passed another critical test of its democratic institutions, when it voided and reran what was a controversial presidential election in 2019. Although Chakwera's presidency has received some criticism, he has presided over an increasingly democratic administration seemingly more committed to democracy, human rights, and economic development.

Although these are all considered episodes of democratic transition, had the ERT made different coding decisions, the democratizing episodes in 2009–13 and 2020–22 might have been viewed differently. They might otherwise have been considered episodes of democratic deepening (5) based upon the role that civil society, public protest, and democratic institutions like the courts, the constitution, and opposition parties played in these outcomes.

Although it identifies two regime transitions to autocracy, the ERT identifies only one episode of autocratization from 1999 to 2005. This episode resulted in democratic breakdown (1), as it overlaps with the regime transition to autocracy in 2000 in the dataset. This episode starts in 1999, the same year that President Muluzi was re-elected, and ends just after the election of President Bingu wa Mutharika in 2004. During this period, President Muluzi exhibited greater corruption, financial and political mismanagement, and autocratic tendencies. He mismanaged state resources and foreign aid tried to curtail political rights and attempted to amend the constitution in his favour. These events all reflect non-democratic governance practices and comprise this autocratizing episode.

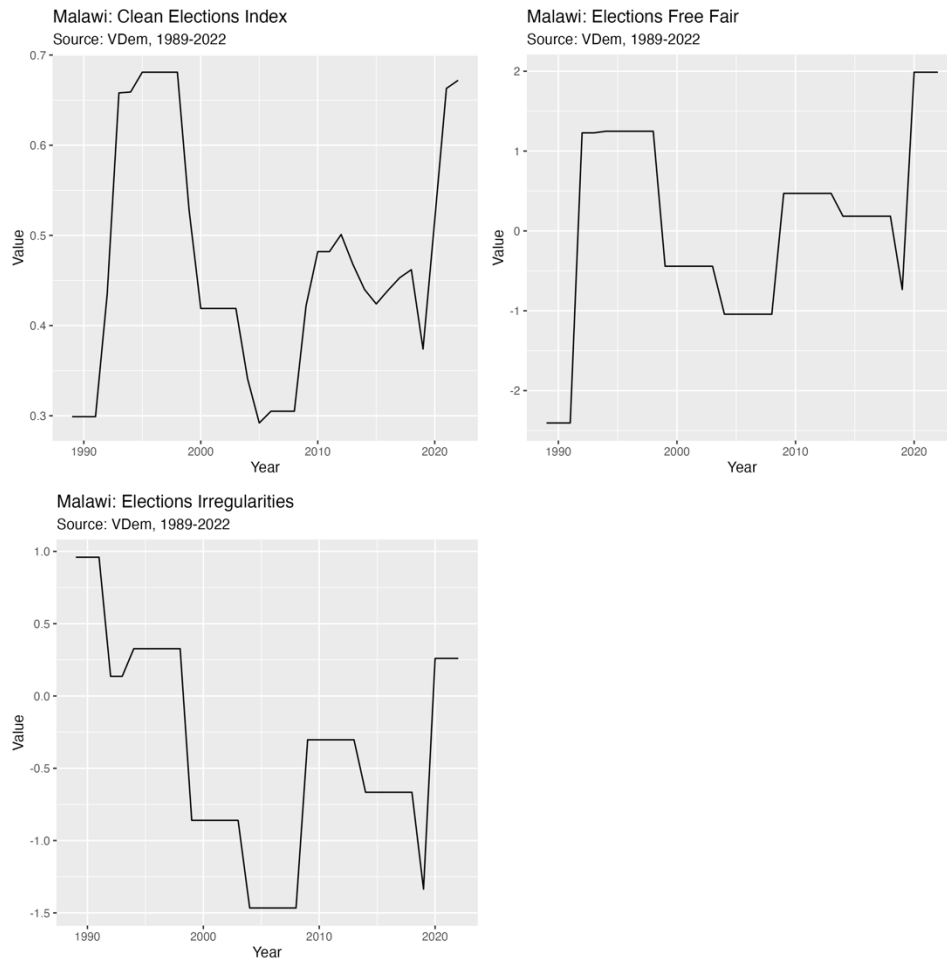
Figure 7: Malawi's autocratization episode and outcome



Source: author's construction based on ERT data.

That the ERT codes Malawi as autocratic at times most likely captures electoral quality, or lack thereof. In terms of Malawi's measures on civil society participation, constraints on the executive, equality and equal protection before the law, freedom of association, and freedom of expression, Malawi looks rather democratic. Where it suffers, however, is in its implementation of elections. Its status as a multiparty system is not under threat, but elections are prone to manipulation, are often deemed irregular, and have even been postponed. For instance, subnational elections were first held in 2000, although they should have taken place years before. Quantitative measures demonstrate Malawi's struggles with holding clean, free, and fair elections. Because elections are so fundamental to definitions and conceptions of democracy, these weaknesses in electoral quality greatly reduce its democratic status. However, because it also ranks relatively well on other measures similarly associated with democracy, for instance political rights and civil society participation, Malawi is a difficult regime to classify.

Figure 8: Malawi's scores on election implementation variables



Source: author's construction based on the V-Dem dataset.

2 Findings from the literature on democracy/democratization

Within the literature, Malawi has a decent track record on democracy. It is considered a poor, aid-dependent country, but one that is relatively democratic and politically stable. While the country experienced a successful democratic transition in 1994 with the onset of multiparty elections, it has struggled to consolidate its democracy since, battling corruption, mismanagement, power centralization, and weak institutional capacity. However, Malawi also upholds a free press, a multiparty system, an autonomous judiciary, and an active civil society. Ultimately, many countervailing trends coexist in Malawi—some reflective of democratic development, others not so much—making it a regime of ‘uncertain democratic survivability’ (Svåsand 2011).

Malawi's initial transition to democracy was the result of several favourable conditions and opportunities. Its democratization is typically understood either in terms of domestic movements or international forces, but the truth is that both were fundamental (Brown 2004). Hastings Banda, who had overhauled the country into a one-party state in the mid-1960s and eventually declared himself president for life, ruled over a rigid autocracy for almost 30 years. By the early 1990s, there were many fractures in his regime that cascaded into one another and led to its undoing. The post-Cold War era shifted political allegiances and was already less friendly to ‘one-party, one-person, and life-presidential arrangements’ (Ihonvbere 1997; Brown 2004). Additionally, the economy was weak, donors had withheld aid from the country, the church had become outspoken against the regime, and exiled political activists and pro-

democracy groups started interacting with local internal political activists (Ihonvbere 1997). As a result, domestic opposition groups grew more capable and confident against the Banda regime.

This confluence of forces put irreversible pressure upon President Banda for political reform. Substantial domestic opposition had sprung up from across sectors of society: student groups, political activists, and even the church began openly criticizing and protesting his regime. Internal opposition movements combined with growing external pressures for reform eventually forced President Banda, who was in his mid-90s at the time, into political liberalization. In fact, these two key elements—complementary civil society movements and external support—were integral in producing Malawi's successful shift to a democratic regime (Diamond 2000). Banda initiated a referendum in 1993 that introduced multiparty elections in 1994, which the literature universally accepts as a transition in the country from autocracy to democracy.

However, Malawi has not been as successful in consolidating its democracy (Svåsand 2011). It almost immediately faced issues of corruption and financial and political mismanagement in the wake of the 1994 election. Although political and civil rights were now recognized under the new regime, the transition benefited very few within the wider population (Brown 2004). As a least developed country with susceptibility to natural disasters like famine and drought, its government was put under even additional strain. However, flaws in Malawi's democracy appear to be less a product of coercion and violence and more so due to a lack of available resources (Rubin 2008). Viewed from an objective stance, Malawi is not a stellar democratic performer; however, subjectively, given its history of one-party rule and limited resources, it is perhaps more astounding that it has not drifted back into entrenched autocracy, and the imperfect commitments it makes to upholding democracy are even more impressive.

Malawi faces three major challenges in consolidating its democracy. First, it has routinely struggled with mismanagement, patronage, and corruption scandals (Wroe 2012; Emmanuel 2013). In 2000, President Muluzi irresponsibly sold off grain reserves, which left the country vulnerable when a famine struck two years later. He was later arrested under corruption charges in 2006 by President Mutharika for diverting donor funds for his own use during his tenure in office. The Cashgate scandal of 2013, whereby government officials were found hoarding cash from international aid distributions, represented an egregious exposé of Malawi's endemic corruption. Even the newest administration is not immune, as Vice President Chilima was arrested in 2022 on corruption charges. Although corruption is not an immediate disqualifier for being a democracy, transparency is a critical aspect of the democratic process, and the fact that Malawi has faced such protracted and blatant struggles with combatting corruption indicates the non-consolidated nature of its regime.

Secondly, the capacity of Malawi's democratic institutions remains weak. Weak institutional capacity is manifest in many of the shortcomings of Malawi's government, including patronage practices, tensions between government branches, and weakly-defined political positions (Patel et al. (2007). Political policies and developmental outcomes are often at the behest of executive and bureaucratic leadership (Hussein 2018). Multiparty elections exist, but they are frequently subject to manipulation. Political opposition has not been fully stifled in the country, but it is highly fragmented, which may have cost it several electoral victories (Dulani 2006). Although bolstered by foreign aid, Malawi's democratic institutions are often under-resourced, which has not allowed them to fully develop into consolidated channels for democracy building.

Thirdly, the state has struggled with consolidating and integrating national and regional power sources. The legacy of colonialism in Malawi means that in practice, dual governments exist throughout the country: one of direct rule by the state and the other of indirect rule by traditional leaders (Eggen 2011). These parallel structures are often in conflict with one another. The central government avoided holding local elections for several years and was instrumental in limiting the political power of local councillors (Patel and Wahman 2015). Although legislation exists to integrate the two, in practice, local institutions are often not recognized in mainstream political decision making and tensions continue between

national and regional level politicians, which has stymied community participation and weakened local democratic capacity (Hussein 2003, 2019). All three of these factors—corruption, weak institutions, and asymmetric centre-periphery relations—have prevented Malawi from completely democratizing and offer support for why many datasets do not always consider it a democracy since its 1994 transition.

Nonetheless, Malawi exhibits several other political characteristics that demonstrate its progress toward democratization. One of the most striking aspects is the extent to which its judiciary has remained relatively independent and willing to hand down decisions counter to the wishes of the executive. Malawi's neo-patrimonial political tendencies may have ironically produced a more independent and assertive judiciary (Vondoepp 2005), which often functions as a check on executive power. The judiciary has at times ruled in favour of executive request, but it has also halted executive attempts to modify the constitution, usurp presidential term limits, or reduce democratic electoral quality. Even if they sometimes act in a secondary role in upholding democratic norms (Nowack 2020), the courts are still a key factor in reinforcing Malawi's democracy and assuring democratic procedure.

Malawi's civil society has also remained active and is an instrumental factor in several political outcomes. Civil society actors were a major force in the country's transition to democracy in 1994. The success of the country's regime change tempered civil society activity following the transition, as resources again became limited for these groups, and many civil society leaders were co-opted or ended up joining the government (Chirwa 2000). However, since the 2000s, civil society groups have continued to maintain a large presence and exert a strong influence on political decision making. They have been instrumental in safeguarding executive term limits, eroding political support for authoritarian governance practices, and reinforcing democratic norms (Dulani 2011; Nowack 2020). Pro-democracy groups in Malawi are highly autonomous from the state and are largely cohesive, which has allowed them to effectively mobilize and sustain themselves (Dulani 2011). Public demonstrations have emerged in response to human rights abuses, economic issues, policies, and controversial elections, including the most recent in 2019 that led to an entirely new electoral result and president.

Malawians also continue to uphold a preference for democracy. They expressed overwhelming support for democracy and multiparty elections in the 1993 referendum. While some of that enthusiasm has waned, citizens still exhibit a preference for democracy, both in their willingness to vote⁴ and in their willingness to publicly vocalize themselves in response to political outcomes and policies. In practice, Malawians appear to value democratic transparency over other salient issues, as they did not elect Joyce Banda as president in 2014,⁵ despite her heavy emphasis upon social assistance programmes during the presidential campaign (Hamer and Seekings 2019). Citizens also appear to have a first-hand positive experience with democracy. The population remains generally supportive of democracy, which has been linked to higher levels of education, satisfaction with democracy, and continued investment in civic education (Evans and Rose 2007; Chasukwa 2019). Citizens in Malawi also appear to understand the benefit of democracy, democratic decision making, and how important social ties are in fostering cooperative and social outcomes (Nourani et al. (2021). As long as the population remains committed to democracy, it is likely that the country will also remain on this trajectory.

All of these reasons—the continual support of democratic norms via the judiciary, civil society, or public preference—lend support to why many datasets have considered Malawi a democracy since 1994. Despite some worrying trends, particularly at the national level, there are enough signs that the country is on the path toward democratization and that genuine democracy has taken hold in the country

⁴ Malawi has a relatively high voter turnout for both presidential and national assembly elections; there was an approximately 74% voter turnout in 2019 for both sets of national elections. Although these figures were in the 90% range in the 1999 elections, the country continues to have sustained high turnout.

⁵ President Banda was a central figure implicated in the Cashgate scandal.

(Meinhardt and Patel 2003; Dulani and Van Donge 2005). Malawi certainly still has much room to improve, but the literature in general seems to think it is at least on the right track.

3 Findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization

The literature overwhelmingly highlights the role of foreign assistance in Malawi's regime outcomes and donors appear to play a uniquely important role in the country's democratization. External actors were crucial in the country's initial transition to democracy in 1994, and they have continued to play an important part in shaping regime outcomes ever since. Based upon the integral role that external actors have played in Malawi's liberalization, democratization in the country can be understood as a process initiated 'from above' and 'from outside' (Brown 2004).

Malawi's initial transition to democracy occurred in large part thanks to external pressures on the Banda regime. The initial incident in 1992 that catalysed the entire movement against Banda was the distribution of a letter written by Catholic Bishops within Malawi condemning the Banda regime. That letter would inspire student movements and embolden political activists, as well as bring greater international attention to Malawian politics. That letter was also motivated by the Pope's visit to Malawi a few years before in 1989 (Brown 2004). For Malawian democracy movements, international connections have been important right from the beginning.

From that point, the anti-Banda regime movement began to receive support from several external sources, including exiled activists, pro-democracy groups, and even foreign governments. Foreign governments may have been at first reluctant to get involved, but increasingly donors began supporting domestic civil society groups and political parties (Brown 2004). International organizations and foreign diplomats also began condemning the Banda regime, citing its numerous human rights violations (Ihonvbere 1997; Resnick 2013). Eventually, in 1992, the World Bank and Western donor countries rescinded foreign aid to Malawi, in support of intensifying domestic opposition and pro-democracy movements. Therefore, when the Banda regime ended in 1994, direct and indirect external assistance—from the Catholic Church, from foreign social activists, from international organizations, and from foreign governments—had all played a major role in facilitating this regime change.

Since then, foreign donors have continued to play a tremendous role in shaping Malawi's regime outcomes. They do so through three primary channels. First, they support key political institutions in the country. Donors have funded elections, they have supported parliamentary and judicial initiatives, and have even directly established and funded Malawi's Electoral Commission during its first election in 1994. Donor funding toward these key democratic institutions has been critical in sustaining short-term democratic and institutional successes (Svåsand 2011). Foreign actors have directly contributed to building up democratic institutions in Malawi.

Donors have also been indirectly instrumental in maintaining democratic procedures in Malawi via its institutions. The best example of this is how pivotal external actors were in preventing violations of term limits in the country. External democracy assistance helped galvanize support for democratic practice and subsequently assisted domestic institutions in thwarting executive attempts to override the constitution (Nowack 2020; Leininger and Nowack 2022). International lenders have also sustained ties with democratically inclined domestic actors and often channel those relationships through institutions, which helps strengthen these same platforms. Donor emphasis upon democratic institutionalization may pay dividends, as sustained long-term support for democratic institutions and actors pre-emptively facilitates democracy building and fortifies the political system, even before a potential crisis to democracy emerges (Leininger and Nowack 2022).

Secondly, donors have impacted regime outcomes in Malawi through their sanctions and withdrawal of aid in response to anti-democratic behaviours. The first instance of this was in 1992 when donor withdrawal of aid contributed to a democratic transition. Since then, in response to abuse of resources or poor governance, individual donors have enacted aid sanctions or specifically withdrawn or

threatened to withdraw budget support numerous times (Resnick 2013; Banik and Chasukwa 2016; Strasser 2016). The IMF and European donors halted aid in 2002 in response to economic mismanagement (Resnick 2013). In 2009, the UK and EU withheld a large part of Malawi's annual budget in response to growing economic concerns and President Mutharika's purchase of a private jet (Wroe 2012). Donors also rescinded aid en masse in 2015 following the notorious Cashgate scandal. Foreign donors have often enacted an aid withholding strategy when seeking to correct governance practices in Malawi.

Indeed, this aid withholding is frequently tied with conditionalities for democratic reform. Ironically, the withdrawal of aid often cuts off the resources needed by domestic institutions to address mismanagement and mis-governance issues (Strasser 2016). Nonetheless, the Malawian state typically complies or attempts to comply with donor conditions in order to revive aid flows. Precisely how effective sanctions are and whether they have directly contributed to democratic stability is less clear and more research is needed on the short- and long-term impact of this strategy. If the goal of withholding aid is to have maintained democracy, in the long run this strategy seems to have worked, as Malawi has largely managed to avoid full-scale autocracy. However, the extent to which aid sanctions have elicited specific regime reforms is unclear and deserves greater attention.

Third, donors impact aid outcomes by supporting key programmes and pro-democracy groups within the country. Recipients of this type of support include civil society organizations, political activists, and projects aimed at good governance. For instance, USAID Democracy and Governance aid contributed to President Mutharika's focus on good governance agendas. Donors also work heavily to support civil society in Malawi, through direct contributions, technical assistance, and by offering reputational and ideological support. In fact, donors are one of the critical reasons that civil society organizations are able to function and remain operational in Malawi (Nowack 2020). A robust civil society goes hand in hand with democracy and indeed many of these groups have been instrumental in pushing for and reinforcing democratic norms in the country. In this way, donor support works indirectly to bolster democracy building.

Nonetheless, the heavy presence of foreign donors and influence in Malawi is at times a double-edged sword. Because of the large role they played in the country's transition to democracy, long-term democratization may have been undermined, as internal pro-democracy actors struggled without the same heavy donor influence in subsequent years (Brown 2004). One of the criticisms of donor aid is also its relationship to economic growth. Donors in general turned away from democracy efforts in favour of economic development agendas after Malawi's transition (Brown 2004; Resnick 2013), yet Malawi remains deeply economically underdeveloped. Some research suggests that external assistance has significantly resulted in greater widespread economic growth, especially right after its disbursement (Khomba and Trew 2022). Yet over the long term, foreign assistance does not appear as effective in eradicating poverty or sustaining long-term economic development in Malawi.⁶

One of the other negative consequences of a donor-heavy political arrangement in the country is that Malawi has been and continues to be a highly aid-dependent state. Aid dependency may have long-term negative effects upon democracy and ultimately undermine donors' ability to facilitate democratization (Emmanuel 2013; Chasukwa and Banik 2019).⁷ Because of Malawi's dependency on foreign aid flows, donors may have greater agency in conditioning democratic outcomes, but if they do not act responsibly in aid disbursements, they also have the potential to cause deeper political damage to Malawi's democratization. For instance, Brown (2004) argues that donors turned away from democratization objectives immediately after transition, which degraded Malawi's political governance

⁶ The exception to this may be aid from China, which targets infrastructure and development projects that may be bolstering economic growth.

⁷ For instance, aid dependency has had negative long-term consequences for democratization in Mali.

at the time. Additionally, aid dependency may cause Malawi's democracy to be more fragile, as it is unclear how sustainable its democratic political arrangements are without strong donor backing.

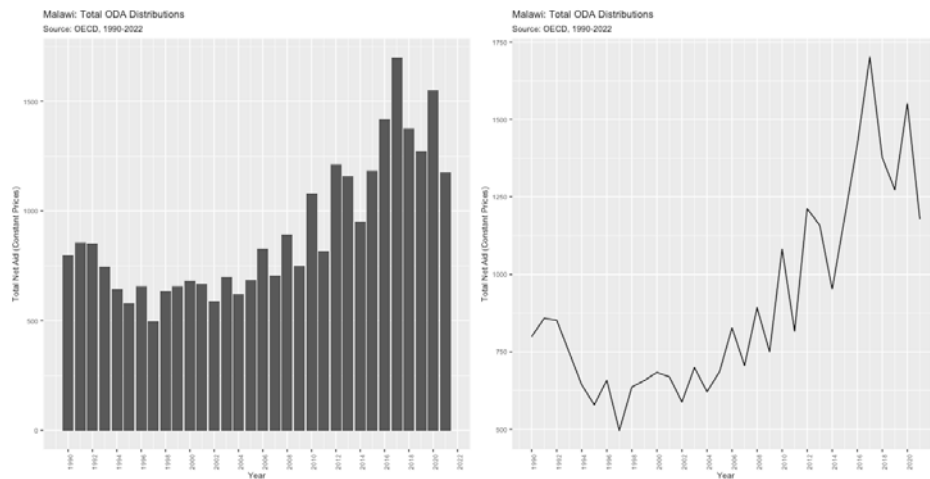
Nonetheless, the international community's efforts in Malawi have by and large been rather effective. Not only does the country receive a large volume of support, but these resources are often targeted at democratizing efforts. When donor objectives coincide with local attitudes, foreign assistance has proven to be particularly effective (Nowack 2018). Thus, in practice, the ability for foreign aid to work in Malawi is issue specific. Regardless, donors invoke both leverage and linkage mechanisms in cultivating democratic outcomes via aid in Malawi. They exert linkage by vocalizing support for democracy, condemning non-democratic practices, and maintaining ties with civil society and pro-democracy actors in the country; they also invoke leverage by placing strong aid conditionalities upon assistance and withholding aid in response to non-democratic behaviour (Nowack 2020; Leininger and Nowack 2022). Linkages have helped maintain the longevity of donor relations in Malawi. When donor partnerships are strained, Malawi has faced significant policy consequences (Rubin 2008; Nourani et al. (2021). Also, because Malawi is so aid dependent, its donors are so coordinated, and the population maintains such a strong preference for democracy, leverage and aid conditionality have proven especially effective (Emmanuel 2013). Through these dual mechanisms, foreign donors and their assistance have had a generally positive impact in buffering authoritarian tendencies and contributing to institutional strength within Malawi.

The literature addresses the many ways that aid has interacted with democratization outcomes in Malawi. It was important in the country's transition to democracy, and aid has continued to sustain many important democratic institutions and pro-democracy actors, either directly or indirectly. However, because of its inconsistency and its focus on short-term impact over longer term democratic development, donor aid has not resulted in democratic consolidation (Resnick 2013). Long-term democratization in the country is still ongoing, and aid may have merely helped sustain, rather than deepen, democracy in Malawi, a specific research question that deserves more attention.

4 Aid flows and sources

Malawi has been a major recipient of donor aid. Even in the 1990s, it received large aid flows, a pattern which has only increased over time. Through the years, Malawi has received extremely high levels of aid and is an aid-dependent state. In 1994, Official development assistance (ODA) reached 41% of the country's gross national income (GNI), and aid has consistently comprised about one fourth to one third of GNI ever since (Svåsand 2011). Its economy is highly aid dependent, and official donor aid flows account for nearly 40% of the national budget (Banik and Chasukwa 2016). Total donor aid flows peaked in 2017 but they are still sustained at very high levels.

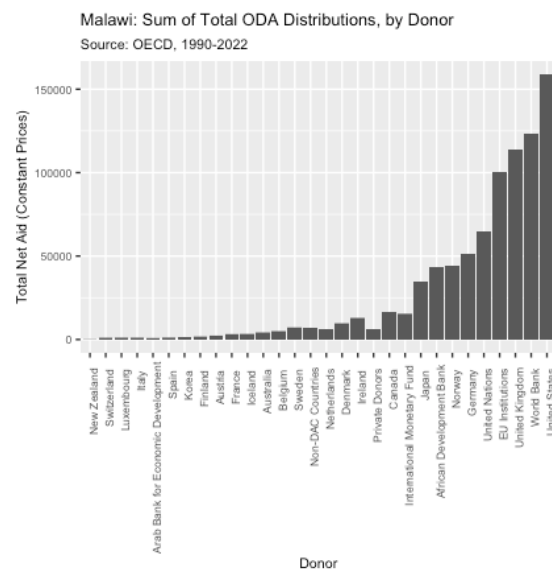
Figure 9: Malawi's total official development assistance distributions



Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

Malawi also receives aid from a wide variety of donors. The United States has historically been Malawi's largest donor. In 2006, the country became a focus of USAID programming, which has proved to sustain a long-term partnership between Malawi and the US. It also receives substantial aid flows from European donor agencies. Two of Malawi's biggest donors are the EU and UK, which together comprise the Common Approach to Budgetary Support (CABS) group and both have been important donors to Malawi (Wroe 2012). In total, over 31 donors have supported over 800 aid projects across 2,900 different sectors in Malawi (Weaver et al. (2014)). At least ten UN programmes and agencies, 16 bilateral donors, and 12 additional multilateral donors have been active there (Taylor 2014). This includes China and other emerging donors, which are growing in importance in Malawi's donor portfolio.

Figure 10: Malawi's sum of total ODA distributions, by donor

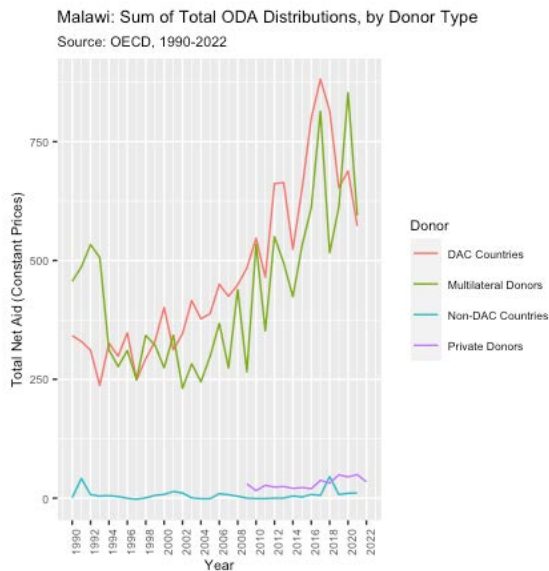


Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

Although heavily reliant upon official Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors for assistance, emerging donors have become increasingly important donors to Malawi, especially China but also India and the Arab States. Emerging donors comprise a small portion of total aid, but they appear to be carving a particular niche for themselves in Malawi. China, which has been the largest of Malawi's newest donors, offers a different type of assistance partnership, one focused upon infrastructure

development, grant- or concessional loan-based aid, and programme-based aid with few conditionalities (Resnick 2013; Banik and Chasukwa 2016). Ultimately, China's aid in Malawi has complemented DAC donor efforts, as it focuses upon different sectors of aid. Many Chinese-funded projects have also had downstream impact by helping fuel economic growth and development in the country. In the long term, Chinese aid may hinder local enterprises and government expenditures in maintaining many of its infrastructural development programmes (Banik and Chasukwa 2016), but for now, new donor aid is welcomed by officials in Malawi.

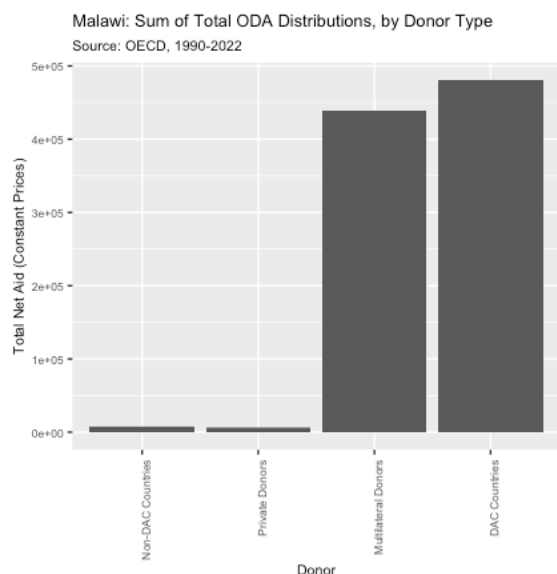
Figure 11: Malawi's total ODA distributions, by donor type



Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

Both multilateral and bilateral aid is important to Malawi and the country has received a lot of aid from both (Khomba and Trew 2022). Its two largest donors are a bilateral and multilateral donor: the United States and the World Bank. Both bilateral and multilateral donors are also important creditors to Malawi. The World Bank and African Development Bank have been the largest sources of loan distributions to Malawi, while China and India have been its largest bilateral creditors (Chasukwa and Banik 2019). It has received more aid from bilateral donors, mostly the United States and European states, which may make aid conditionalities, aid withdrawals, and aid partnerships easier to enforce and cultivate.

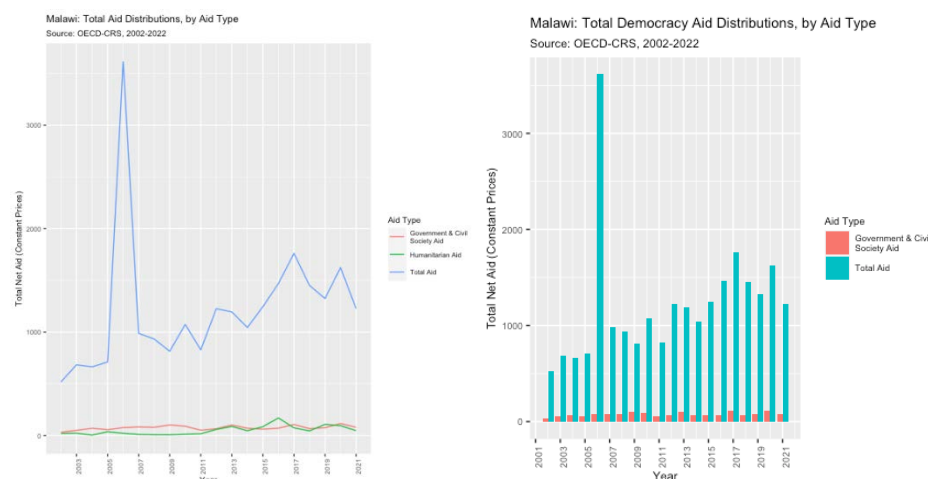
Figure 12: Malawi's sum of total ODA distributions, by donor type



Source: author's construction based on OECD data.

The bulk of Malawi's aid also is distributed in the form of development aid. Comparatively speaking, it receives much less aid for government, civil society, or humanitarian purposes. Development aid in Malawi is overwhelmingly targeted at health, education, and agriculture; a fair amount goes toward governance and only about 8% is distributed as humanitarian aid (Khomba and Trew 2022). Analysis on health and education aid reveal that they have decreased disease severity and increased accessibility of clean water and school enrolment, respectively (De and Becker 2015), suggesting general aid distributions are having a positive impact along certain sectors. However, the extent to which total aid distributions have contributed to economic development or specific outcomes is unclear and is deserving of more attention.

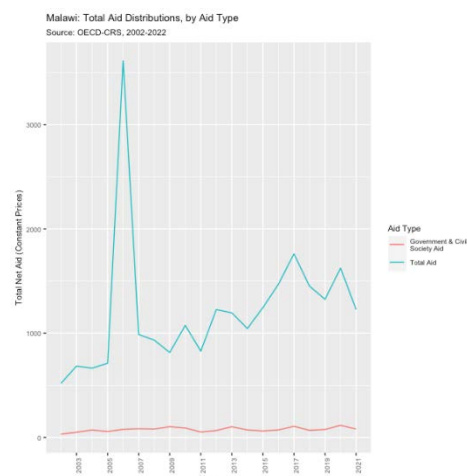
Figure 13: Malawi's total aid, humanitarian aid, and government and civil society aid distributions



Source: author's construction based on OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) data.

In terms of democracy aid, Malawi—as most other states—receives much less aid distributions toward government and civil society than it does toward development. Governance aid is still present in aid distributions, but aid flows to this sector are small and, as a percentage of the total amount of aid it receives, assistance to democracy and governance are dwarfed by aid flows to other development sectors.

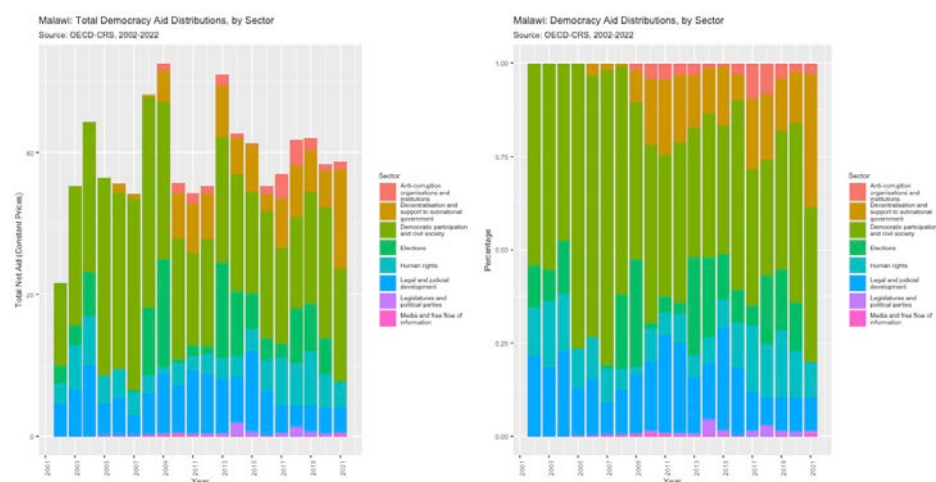
Figure 14: Malawi's aid distributions, by aid type



Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS data.

How democracy aid⁸ is disaggregated reveals that a large amount of aid has gone to democratic participation and civil society. This is consistent with the literature, which finds civil society as a stronghold of Malawi's democracy. Aid has also been regularly apportioned to legal and judicial development, human rights, elections, and subnational governance. Only a very small amount of aid has been targeted at anti-corruption efforts, the media, or legislatures or political parties. Most recently, democracy aid flows have been channelled at projects focused on subnational governance and civil society.

Figure 15: Malawi's democracy aid distributions, by sector



Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS data.

In terms of aid modality, the Malawian government prefers budget support aid flows. A substantial amount of aid is still delivered as project support to Malawi, but budget support aid has grown in recent years, at least from DAC donors (Resnick 2013). Budget support comprises about 40% of international aid flows to Malawi, which is mostly targeted at economic governance rather than democratic development, accounting for some of aid's failures in generating full democratization (Resnick 2013).

⁸ In the OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) data, purpose codes are selected that correspond most closely to democracy building to reflect democracy aid. Some aid flows, for instance public finance management or public sector policy, that are coded under Government and Civil Society purpose codes are excluded in this conceptualization of democracy aid.

DAC donors who offer budget support are also likely to do so on democratizing conditions (Banik and Chasukwa 2016). The debates around fungible aid caution that fungible budget support distributions may be subject to corrupt mismanagement, and indeed abuse of aid funds has occurred in Malawi. However, experimental evidence offers insight that internal aid distribution practices amongst local politicians are more likely to allocate fungible development assistance responsibly—across projects and programmes and to targets most in need (Seim et al. (2020).

Nonetheless, some of the challenges faced by donors in distributing aid include considerations about exactly how that aid reaches its intended targets. On the one hand, development aid is often not linked to local initiatives and continues to bypass some of the most vulnerable in the country (Chagunda 2021). Aid objectives incongruent with local attitudes or preferences are likely to be unsuccessful (Nowack 2018). There is also debate about whether aid should be channelled through the state apparatus or directly to individual actors. Democracy aid may be best suited for direct distribution to domestic actors, who are more likely to succeed in achieving the aims of that assistance (Nowack 2018). In fact, a lot of official assistance is distributed outside of local government institutions. Several funders apply loopholes in earmarked funds, project management units, or special arrangements to avoid having to deal with national institutions in aid implementation (Chasukwa and Banik 2019) and channel aid directly to local actors. However, on the other hand, bypassing local government reduces the state's policy-making capacity and increases fragmentation, rather than coordination, amongst stakeholders in aid disbursements (Chasukwa and Banik 2019). Circumventing strategies may have short-term benefit in reducing bureaucracy and the potential for corruption to occur, but in the long run, they may work counter to democracy-building objectives.

5 Specific aid examples

Many specific aid projects in Malawi are highlighted in the literature. Given the large amount of aid flows and huge amount of aid projects that have existed and continue to be run in the country, there is certainly a lot of room for additional research. A lot of aid projects are referred to generally, and few assess the specific outcomes and effectiveness of particular aid programmes.

China is often highlighted for its focus on infrastructure projects, including its work on a new parliamentary building in Malawi (Svåsand 2011). China has also contributed heavily to Malawi's Disaster Management and Risk Reduction fund (Banik and Chasukwa 2016). DAC donors have similarly offered support for domestic social assistance programmes, including Malawi's Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP), which relies on donor funding (Resnick 2013). Otherwise, donors have mostly contributed to health and education projects and projects aimed at economic governance.

In terms of democracy initiatives, Resnick (2013) highlights several specific sectors and programmes that have been supported in Malawi by UNDP, Germany, the UK, the US, and Norway. These donors have offered aid for legislative strengthening, judicial support, elections, and open media, specifically via UNDP's Democratic Consolidation Programme (DCP), USAID's Democracy and Governance programme, and the UK's Democracy and Governance unit and Voice and Accountability Programme. European and American donors have also offered long-term support for political parties in Malawi (Brown 2004; Svåsand 2011). Western donors have based a lot of their allocation choices on emphasizing human rights (Resnick 2013), although human rights aid flow totals remain underwhelming.

Designing effective aid interventions and institutional infrastructures is difficult, especially in Malawi with its particular agricultural needs and environmental conditions (Giné and Yang 2009; Skjølsvold 2010). Further research is needed on the specific effectiveness of democracy aid and aid to component sectors of democracy, considered within the context of how well these programmes are designed. Assistance seems to have sustained Malawi's democracy and have prevented it from significant backsliding into autocracy, but more work is needed to consolidate and deepen democracy within the country. Currently,

Malawi seems to be moving in a democratic direction, so it is imperative that foreign assistance aligns with those objectives and works to guide—rather than hinder—the country in its steps toward full democratization.

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