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Social protection, electoral competition, and political branding in Malawi

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Abstract: Competitive elections in many parts of Africa generate powerful incentives to presidential candidates (and to a lesser extent political parties) to brand themselves in ways that transcend regional or ethnic loyalties. In Malawi, Joyce Banda—President from 2012 to 2014—sought to distinguish herself from her competitors by branding herself and her new People’s Party as the champions of social protection for women, children, and the poor. Some of the conditions that favoured Banda’s adoption of a social protection brand were specific to the political context in Malawi. Elsewhere in East and Southern Africa, presidential candidates and parties have generally denounced ‘handouts’ and avoided the social protection brand. In practice, her rhetorical embrace of social protection and ‘handouts’ was not matched by delivery during her two years in office. Banda’s defeat in the 2014 Malawi election, although caused partly by other factors, suggests that there are limits to the efficacy of social protection branding. Nonetheless, the fact that she has used this brand at all suggests that social protection has grown in political significance, as an expression of pro-poor priorities.

Keywords: elections, political branding, social protection, poverty alleviation, Joyce Banda, Malawi, social spending

JEL classification: I38, O29, O21, O57

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1 Introduction

The proliferation of social assistance programmes across Africa has coincided with redemocratization, i.e. the return of multi-party systems with regular, competitive elections in place of one-party states and military regimes. The average score for African countries on the standard indices of democracy jumped substantially in the 1990s and 2000s. Almost one half of African countries scored high enough to be considered broadly democratic by 2010. Elections replaced coups as the primary mechanism for leadership change (Carbone 2013). In other parts of the world, including Brazil, India, and Korea (Seekings 2012), there is evidence that electoral competition has fuelled the recent expansion of social assistance. Studies in Africa of other areas of public policy, including health and education, also suggest that democracy sometimes matters (e.g. Carbone 2012; Stasavage 2005). Contrary to Amartya Sen's famous assessment, however, it turns out that democracy does not *always* prevent drought-related starvation (Attwell 2013; Rubin 2008).

The standard explanation of why elections matter focuses on the representation of interests that are otherwise marginalized politically. Elections provide poorer citizens with more power than they generally enjoy when politics is controlled by elites or even organized interest groups. Opposition parties that appeal to poor voters may oust incumbents whom voters consider insufficiently responsive to their needs. Across much of Africa, democratization has entailed not only competition but also occasional turnovers in leadership. In Southern Africa, elections resulted in changes of government in Zambia in 1991 and 2011, in Malawi in 1994 and 2014, and in Lesotho in 2012. In West Africa, Ghana has experienced three turnovers (in 2000, 2008, and 2016). Nigeria experienced its first turnover in 2015. In early 2017, Gambia's incumbent president resisted handing over power after he was defeated at the polls, but was prevailed upon to do so when neighbouring states sent soldiers to uphold the election result. Kenya saw a change of government following elections in 2002, the formation of a coalition government following elections in 2007, and a further change of government following elections in 2013. Both Namibia and South Africa saw a change of government as soon as democratic, inclusive elections were held (in 1989 and 1994, respectively), although both then became dominant party systems. Elections in Zimbabwe led to the inclusion of the opposition party in a Government of National Unity between 2009 and 2013. There are thus many instances of changes of government that might have led to changes in social protection policy and welfare-state-building.

In many other cases, opposition parties have mounted sufficiently serious challenges to incumbent parties that the results of elections remained uncertain almost until the vote count was announced. In 2014, for example, the Botswana Democratic Party for the first time since independence failed to win a majority of the vote, and held onto power only because of the divisions between the opposition parties. The incumbent Patriotic Front in Zambia won two successive presidential elections by the narrowest of margins, in 2015 and 2016. In such cases, the threat of defeat might prompt the incumbent party to introduce social protection policy reforms, so as to consolidate its support base.

The experience of the advanced capitalist countries suggests that democratic competition shapes the form of welfare-state-building. Indeed, Huber and Stephens argue that 'partisan politics was the *single most important factor* that shaped the development of welfare states through time' (2001: 1, emphasis added). The form of welfare-state-building in the advanced capitalist countries after the Second World War was largely determined by whether their governments were dominated by a social democratic party, a Christian democratic party, or parties in the 'secular centre and right' (Esping-Andersen 1985, 1990; Huber and Stephens 2001). Social democratic parties in Europe

represented predominantly poorer voters, and implemented policy reforms in their interests. Christian democratic parties also constructed welfare states, but they were responsive to a more multi-class coalition, and their welfare states were less redistributive, whilst the support bases of secular, conservative parties generally led those parties to try to minimize (or even roll back) the welfare state. In Africa, very few parties line up neatly on the left–right political continuum associated with European history. Many presidents and parties have regional or even ethnic support bases and vague ideological positions. Populist leaders and parties have emerged, but their populism tends to be rather nebulous. Politicians, and even presidents, move from one party to another (Bogaards 2013; Rakner et al. 2007; Resnick 2012, 2013).

A series of recent studies have suggested that electoral competition in Africa contributed to social assistance policy reforms, through both changes in government and the vulnerability of incumbent parties. Such cases include Botswana (Hamer 2015b; Seekings 2016a), Zambia (Siachiwena 2016), Ghana (Grebe 2015), Zimbabwe (Chinyoka and Seekings 2016), and Zanzibar (Seekings 2016b). Other studies have suggested that, conversely, some governments have been able to resist reforms when opposition parties posed a weak electoral threat, as in South Africa (Seekings and Natrass 2015) and Tanzania (Ulriksen 2016). In some of these cases, the form or direction of welfare-state-building was shaped by the approaches taken by particular parties or leaders. In Botswana, for example, the Botswana Democratic Party built a welfare state with much more conservative characteristics than its South African or Mauritian counterparts (Seekings 2016a). In Zanzibar, social assistance reforms were shaped by the governing party’s religious as well as ‘socialist’ traditions (Seekings 2016b). Some parties and leaders articulate clear and distinctive normative positions, whether from conviction or in order to appeal to specific groups of voters.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on the effects of democratization—and especially competitive elections—on welfare policy reform in Africa. We argue that competitive elections in Africa can provide an incentive to welfare policy reform by pushing presidential candidates and parties to brand themselves, often in populist ways. This may be true even in contexts where voters do not form blocks defined by their common interests, and elections are therefore not mechanisms for the representation of voters with well defined interests. In Malawi, parties might have been largely indistinguishable up to 2004, as argued by Rakner et al. (2007).¹ Since 2005, however, the fluidity in partisan politics has provided a powerful incentive to individual presidential candidates to develop a strong, clear, and national ‘brand’. The dominant ‘brand’—developed by Bingu wa Mutharika (President from 2004 until his sudden death in 2012) and then inherited by his brother Peter Mutharika (who was elected President in 2014)—focused on generous subsidies to small farmers to expand agricultural production. A bizarre series of events forced Joyce Banda, who succeeded the older Mutharika as President in 2012, to develop her own brand, and she chose to brand herself as the champion of social assistance reform. Despite widespread ambivalence within the Malawian elite and the absence of any organized domestic constituency in favour of social assistance reforms, the issue was raised high up the national policy agenda. In the 2014 election, Banda was defeated heavily, although the scale of her defeat reflected other factors also. Her recourse to social assistance for branding indicates the rising significance of social assistance whilst her defeat points to the political limits of social assistance.

¹ Young (2014) reports that he found little evidence in 2007 that voters could distinguish policy differences between locally relevant parties. Scholars of the 2009 election concur, however, that by then voters had no difficulty in associating farm input subsidies with Mutharika and the DPP. It is possible that Young’s evidence from 2007 tells us more about perceptions of parties and their candidates at the district level than it does about evolving perceptions of Mutharika on the national stage.

2 The economy, policy, and politics under Bingu wa Mutharika

Malawi has long been one of the poorest countries in Southern Africa, suffering from chronic food insecurity, widespread poverty, and dependence on migrant remittances and foreign aid. Economic growth following independence, in 1964, led to an economic crisis and structural adjustment in the 1980s. By 1994, GDP per capita was only about one-third higher, in real terms, than at independence 30 years earlier.² President Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who declared himself ‘Life President’, imagined that agricultural estates would be the engine of economic growth and did little to support smallholder production, although the overwhelming majority of the population depended on the latter. Aggregate food production doubled over thirty years, but the population rose faster, so that food production per capita declined. Banda himself suppressed discussion of poverty in Malawi, but the country’s first household survey, conducted in 1997 after Banda had been ousted from office, showed that at least two-thirds of the population lived in poverty.

In 1993, after a devastating drought, deepening domestic opposition, and growing international criticism, Banda acceded to a referendum on the restoration of multi-party democracy. Banda lost the referendum, and the following year he (and his Malawi Congress Party, MCP) was defeated in multi-party elections by the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by a former MCP Secretary-general, Bakili Muluzi. The three major parties had regional support bases: the UDF in the south, the MCP in the central part of the country, and the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) in the north. All three parties tried to represent themselves, and especially their leaders, in broader terms, so as to build a cross-regional coalition, but none of the three party leaders succeeded in assuming a superior moral stature to the others, leaving the parties with regional bases (van Donge 1995). The parties did not have distinctive political platforms, and their leaders readily switched loyalties in shifting coalitions, i.e. they changed their colours, producing ‘a democracy of chameleons’ (Englund 2002: 17). Regional patterns were repeated in 1999 (when Muluzi was re-elected) and 2004 (when his chosen successor Mutharika was elected). Using Afrobarometer data, Ferree and Horowitz (2010) argue that these highly regional patterns did not reflect political identities (whether regional or ethnic) as much as contrasting assessments of the performance of the government.³

The Muluzi governments emphasized the scale of poverty in Malawi, in contrast to the previous Banda regime. In 1994, the government adopted a Poverty Alleviation Programme, with a strong emphasis on smallholder agricultural production and small enterprise development. In 1998, it launched a Starter Pack Programme, which provided seeds and other inputs to almost 3 million people in 1999/2000. Despite another terrible drought and a food crisis in 2002—during which one-third of the population (more than 3 million people) needed food aid (Attwell 2013; Rubin 2008)—real GDP per capita rose and poverty declined, albeit slowly, over the 10 years between 1994 and 2004. In addition to subsidies for small farmers and emergency food aid (much disbursed through food-for-work programmes), large cash-for-work public employment programmes were run under the auspices of the World Bank-linked Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) from 1996.⁴

The political landscape changed dramatically in 2005. One year after his election, President Mutharika resigned from the UDF and founded a new party, the Democratic Progressive Party

² World Development Indicators.

³ Although assessments of performance might not be entirely independent of regional or tribal identity.

⁴ MASAF I started in 1996, MASAF II in 1998, and MASAF III in 2002. MASAF IV was initiated much later, in 2013.

(DPP). Mutharika was seen to want to free himself from Muluzi's attempts to control him and prevent him from reining in corruption. He and the DPP had little time to build support before the next election, due in 2009. Mutharika chose to brand himself by launching a historic crusade against famine and food insecurity. His flagship programme—the Agricultural Input Subsidy Programme (AISP), later renamed the Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP)—provided subsidized fertilizer and seed on an unprecedented scale to smallholder farmers. The programme was launched in the 2005/06 season, following a drought, raised maize prices, and food shortages (Chinsinga and Poulton 2014). The programme helped to stimulate rapid growth in maize yield and restored national food security (Denning et al. 2009), which in turn contributed to a sharp rise in real GDP per capita. In 2008, real GDP per capita in Malawi finally passed its previous peak, in 1979.⁵

The AISP was not only the government's flagship programme; it was also what defined the DPP, which adopted a logo featuring four maize cobs. The President himself took over the portfolio of Minister of Agriculture and Food Security.⁶ AISP subsidies were symbolically important as well materially valuable to small farmers, allowing Mutharika to tap into nationalist sentiment in a populist but positive way. When the international development community insisted that the government accept more food aid instead of offering subsidies, the President famously declared: 'Enough is enough; I am not going to go on my knees to beg for food; let us grow the food ourselves'.⁷ In the 2009 election, Mutharika used the AISP to present himself as a 'food security president'. Mutharika even boasted that the programme's success showed that 'it is possible for Africa to become the food basket of the world'.⁸ In the run-up to the election, Mutharika's government scaled up subsidies massively, to almost US\$300 million, mostly funded from the government's own revenues. The programme accounted for one-sixth of all government expenditure and about 6.5 per cent of GDP.

Malawi's citizens rewarded Mutharika and the DPP with their votes. Mutharika himself won 66 per cent of the vote, with clear majorities in all three regions. No previous candidate had won even a plurality outside his home region. He defeated the MCP candidate by a massive 35 percentage points. The DPP won 114 seats in the National Assembly, against 26 for the MCP, 17 for the UDF, and 32 for independents. Mutharika's success was in part due to his recruitment of prominent northern politicians into his new coalition, his clampdown on corruption, and his symbolic rehabilitation of Kamuzu Banda. Most importantly, Mutharika defied the international aid donors in implementing the AISP and boosting maize production—and thereby popular ratings of his government's performance (Ferree and Horowitz 2010: 553). Applying van Donge's earlier analysis, it seems that Mutharika succeeded in building a supra-regional moral image, rooted in his new farm subsidy programme. Afrobarometer data showed that few northern voters had approved of Muluzi's performance in 2003, but most approved of Mutharika in 2005. Conversely, Mutharika's performance ratings in the south were much lower than Muluzi's had been. By 2008,

⁵ World Development Indicators.

⁶ 'Malawi Announces Cabinet Reshuffle', *Scotland Malawi Partnership*, 11 May 2007 (<http://www.scotland-malawipartnership.org/news.html?newsid=34>, accessed June 2015).

⁷ 'Unravelling the "Miracle" of Malawi's Green Revolution', *GRAIN*, 14 January 2010 (<http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4075-unravelling-the-miracle-of-malawi-s-green-revolution>, accessed 19 April 2017).

⁸ Molalet Tsedeke, "It Is Possible for Africa to Become the Food Basket of the World", Says Mutharika', *Nepad.org*, 28 October 2010 (<http://www.nepad.org/foodsecurity/news/1786/%E2%80%99Cit-possible-africa-become-food-basket-world%E2%80%9D-mutharika>, accessed June 2015).

Mutharika's performance was very highly rated in all three regions (Ferree and Horowitz 2010: 551).

The AISP reached a large number of voters across the country. A panel study of three districts (one in each region) found that three-quarters of rural households benefitted. The programme did not target the poorest (or most food insecure) households; indeed, female-headed households were less likely to receive benefits.⁹ The study found no evidence of either partisan or ethnic targeting. Households that received a subsidy in 2009/10 were more likely to become DPP partisans than households that did not receive the subsidy, and this effect remained significant even when controlling for a range of other variables (Dionne and Horowitz 2016). Another study, of subsidy and voting patterns at the constituency level, reached a similar conclusion (Brazys et al. 2015).

In his second term as President, however, Mutharika tarnished his reputation through economic mismanagement, repression, and worsening relations with aid donors. His decision to impose a price floor on burley tobacco, ostensibly to support smallholder farmers, backfired when wholesalers refused to pay the high prices and left the country. Without tobacco sales, which were Malawi's principal source of foreign exchange, currency reserves plummeted, leaving the government unable to import sufficient petroleum, medicine, and manufacturing inputs. No longer able to transport crops to market, many of the farmers who had expanded into commercial production with the help of fertilizer subsidies began to suffer. The government also struggled to transport fertilizer to rural areas. Hospitals ran out of medical supplies, factories closed, and taxi drivers queued for days waiting for fuel. Economic growth, which had reached an impressive rate of 9 per cent p.a. in the mid-2000s, slipped to 4 per cent p.a. by 2012. The national poverty rate hardly fell between 2004/05 (when it was 52.4 per cent) and 2010/11 (50.7 per cent).

Mutharika resorted to heavy-handed measures to limit dissent. When academics criticized his leadership, he shut down Chancellor College. The suppression of protests resulted, in July 2011, in the deaths of 20 people. Mutharika expelled the British High Commissioner after he had accused the President of 'becoming ever more autocratic and intolerant of criticism'. Britain promptly withdrew US\$30 million in aid. In March 2012, Mutharika told representatives of a group of development partners to 'go to hell'.¹⁰ Mutharika spurned IMF-led development partners when they offered a US\$79 million relief package in exchange for the devaluation of the currency. Prices continued to rise and shortages worsened. Donors decided to withhold all direct foreign budgetary assistance to the government in the 2011/12 fiscal year. Meanwhile, Mutharika began to negotiate for his brother Peter to succeed him by positioning him as DPP presidential candidate in 2014. Peter Mutharika had only just returned to Malawi from decades abroad, where he had worked as a professor. When the Vice-President, Joyce Banda, declined to step aside, Mutharika expelled her from the DPP—but was unable to depose her as Vice-President of the country (Cammack 2012; Kimenyi 2012; Malawi 2012; Ware 2014; World Bank 2013).

In April 2012, Mutharika suffered a heart attack and died. DPP leaders tried to have Peter Mutharika succeed his older brother, but they were unable to prevent the legal succession of the elected Vice-President, Joyce Banda.

⁹ The 2010/11 Integrated Household Survey found no difference between male- and female-headed households, but did find that access was higher among non-poor than among poor households (World Bank 2013: 117).

¹⁰ 'Malawi's President Mutharika Tells Donors "Go to Hell"', BBC (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17256718>, accessed 19 April 2017).

3 Joyce Banda, social protection, and political branding

Joyce Banda was expelled from the DPP in December 2010 and established a new party of her own, the People's Party (PP), in September 2011. She was immediately faced with the need to brand her new party to establish a national, moral image. This imperative became even more pressing when she unexpectedly became President in April 2012. She chose to brand herself and her party as pro-poor. Whereas, she claimed, Mutharika and his DPP had been pro-growth without concern for the poor, she and the PP were both pro-growth and pro-poor. Social protection programmes played a central part in her branding exercise, distinguishing both her and her party from Mutharika and the DPP, with their embrace of farmer input subsidies.

Mutharika had shown little interest in social protection, despite evidence that farmer support programmes were missing many poor households. In 2006, a report co-authored by German consultant Bernd Schubert suggested that one in ten households in Malawi was poor because it had no one able or available to work and was thus unable to benefit from farm input subsidies. It was estimated that a targeted cash transfer programme costing approximately 1 per cent of GDP would reduce the ultra-poverty rate from 22 to 12 per cent. In 2006, a pilot Social Cash Transfer Programme was initiated in Mchinji District, with backing from Unicef. Only 'labour-constrained' households below the ultra-poverty line were eligible. Minimum benefits ranged from US\$4/month to \$12/month depending on household size, with supplementary benefits linked to school attendance. The average benefit per household turned out to be just over \$11/month. The original plan was that coverage would be gradually extended, reaching the countrywide target of 250,000 households by 2014 or 2015, at an estimated cost of just over 1 per cent of GDP. By 2012, however, the programme was fully rolled out in only three districts, and partly in another six, reaching only 30,000 households in total. It had not been rolled out at all in the other 19 districts in Malawi. The programme was funded initially by the Global Fund, and then by the German Government (Garcia and Moore 2012: 269–73; Handa et al. 2014).¹¹ The Mutharika government had drafted a National Social Support Policy before the 2009 election, but it lacked specific commitments, and was never approved.

Many poor households did benefit from school feeding programmes, and some from other programmes, but almost none received cash transfers. The 2010/11 Integrated Household Survey showed that 15 per cent benefitted from school feeding programmes, 3 per cent from other feeding programmes, just over 2 per cent from food- or cash-for-work programmes, and fewer than 0.5 per cent from government or donor-run cash transfer programmes (Malawi 2012: 173–74, 177–78). At the time, about half of all rural households received FISP subsidies. In 2012/13, the World Bank reported, FISP cost 4.6 per cent of GDP, compared with the 1.1 per cent of GDP spent in total on all other social protection programmes (including feeding and public employment programmes (World Bank 2013: 111).

The slow expansion of cash transfer programmes in Malawi reflected ambivalence or even hostility towards cash transfers not only within the DPP but also within the Malawian elites more generally. In the first half of 2008, Kalebe-Nyamongo conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 members of Malawi's elites, including ministers and MPs, senior government officials, and prominent people in civil society (including the media and academia as well as NGOs). A larger number of informants completed a structured questionnaire. She found that Malawi's elites tended

¹¹ In 2008/09, the World Bank ran a small experimental cash transfer programme in Zomba District, to collect data on the effects of variations in programme design (Garcia and Moore 2012: 275–76).

to view poverty as ‘normal’ (at least in rural areas), and something that would be eliminated only in the medium or even long term. Whilst they attributed poverty to insufficient economic development and political will, and poor education, they also blamed poor people for not trying hard enough to escape poverty, squandering opportunities, and remaining too dependent on others for handouts. The elites were not positive about cash transfer programmes:

Malawi’s elites prefer policies that support those among the poor who can work to help themselves. Many respondents’ ideas about the poor—that they are passive, dependent, and fatalistic—seemed to contribute to a lack of support for social assistance schemes like cash transfers. These were seen as likely to encourage laziness or dependency (Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette 2014: 1).

The elites thus favoured public employment, microfinance, and education programmes over cash transfer programmes (although pensions were not viewed as badly as other cash transfers). Fertilizer subsidies fell somewhere in between. Cash transfers were seen as undermining the work ethic and a waste if spent on inactive poor people.

Joyce Banda staked out a public position not only outside the mainstream of the elite, but in defiance of it. ‘The Joyce Banda I have come to know’, commented blogger Kondwani Munthali shortly after the new President had entered office in 2014, ‘is the mother who speaks on empowering the poor [...] who removed all the trappings of the Vice Presidency and went to sit down on a mat in Ndirande to console a [...] victim of police brutality’.¹² Indeed, Mutharika had chosen Banda as his running mate in 2009 precisely because of her pro-women and pro-poor image.¹³ Banda’s own story was one of success in the face of the difficulties facing many women in Malawi. She completed secondary school at the age of 25, having had three children. She left an abusive marriage, remarried, and opened a textile manufacturing company that grew to employ more than a hundred people. She made it her ‘mission in life to assist women and youth to gain social and political empowerment’, just as she herself had experienced empowerment through education and business. In the 1980s, she co-founded the National Association of Business Women, which grew into the country’s largest network of rural women, with more than 50,000 members. She co-founded the Young Women Leaders Network and the Hunger Project. The Joyce Banda Foundation provided meals and care for thousands of orphans and vulnerable children, earning Banda a Goodwill Ambassadorship for Safe Motherhood from the African Union. In interviews, Banda explained her decision to enter politics as following on from her work as an activist and philanthropist: ‘For me, the motivation [...] was to be involved in influencing laws that have a big impact on women and children’. Banda was first elected as an MP for the UDF, then followed Mutharika into the DPP. Mutharika appointed her first as Minister of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Development, and then as Minister of Foreign Affairs, before Banda was elected Vice-President in 2009.¹⁴

Banda refused to resign as Vice-President after she was expelled from the DPP because, she declared, she had a constitutional responsibility and mandate to fight for the well-being of the

¹² Ndirande is an impoverished peri-urban township outside Blantyre.

¹³ ‘Malawi Leader Chooses Foreign Minister as Running Mate’, *Reuters*, 6 February 2009 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-malawi-election-idAFJ0E5150KO20090206>, accessed 19 April 2017).

¹⁴ Joyce Banda, ‘Why We Care’, not dated (<http://www.universalaccessproject.org/global-leaders/joyce-banda/>, accessed 7 March 2017); ‘President Joyce Banda on Women’s Health & Empowerment in Malawi’, January 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzcoHYNR0yA>); ‘The Journey of Dr Joyce Hilda Banda, the President of Malawi’, November 2013 (<https://wethewomenourjourneys.wordpress.com/2013/11/28/dr-joyce-hilda-bandathe-president-of-malawi/>, accessed 16 March 2015).

‘ordinary Malawian’.¹⁵ As leader of a new opposition party, and then as President, Banda developed her brand as a champion of women and the poor, whom (she claimed) Mutharika had neglected. Distancing herself from her more elitist and male peers, Banda professed to understand the challenges facing women and the poor. At a rally in the north, Banda—herself from Central region, but ethnically from a group that dominated the south—explained:

I know the kind of suffering that women are going through in this country. Their suffering does not need any introduction to me. I am the best advocate of the poor because I know what poverty is. I have fought against this, and will continue to fight.¹⁶

Mutharika’s wife, Callista Chimombo, mocked Banda for supposing that someone who had distributed a ‘little money here and there for village women to sell fritters or doughnuts’ could become President.¹⁷ Banda turned this around, responding: ‘she is right, because I’ve spent thirty years of my life empowering rural women; if I am aligned with the majority of women who struggle every day [...], that’s fine, that’s my mission’.¹⁸

Banda used her first State of the Nation Address, in May 2012, to distance her government from her predecessor’s. In addition to ‘transforming the structure of the economy in order to achieve economic growth’, her government would protect ‘the vulnerable and the excluded’. She staked out a distinctive populist position: ‘As a Malawian woman who knows the humiliation of Malawian women; as a Malawian who has championed the plight of rural poor’, she would champion the causes of people who had fallen through the cracks as a result of Mutharika’s growth-focused policies. In practice, her first priority was to stabilize the economy, paying attention to the ‘foreign exchange shortage, tobacco industry crisis, fuel shortages, energy crisis, bad governance and poor human rights record, unemployment and diplomatic crisis among others’.¹⁹ She sought a rapprochement with international aid donors, agreed an aid package from the IMF and World Bank in exchange for devaluing the currency, and reversed several Mutharika-era laws curtailing political freedoms. Banda ordered the government to shed its fleet of Mercedes-Benz automobiles, sold the presidential jet, and reduced her own salary by one-third.²⁰ ‘I had to look at the situation of my fellow Malawians’, Banda said; ‘if we are going to ask Malawians to make sacrifices, I must be the first to do it’. Banda became a ‘development darling’ in the international community (Ware 2014: 128).

The Banda Government’s austerity measures undermined (at least in the short term) her pro-poor agenda. Devaluation fuelled inflation. The price of maize, for instance, almost doubled, from US\$7

¹⁵ ‘Malawi: Vice President Joyce Banda Launches New Party’, *Vibe Ghana*, 8 September 2011 (<http://vibeghana.com/2011/09/08/malawi-president-joyce-banda-launches-new-party/>), accessed 3 June 2015).

¹⁶ ‘JB Attacks Poverty: “I Know Malawians Are Suffering.”’ *Nyasa Times*, 22 July 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/07/22/jb-attacks-poverty-i-know-malawians-are-suffering/>), accessed 9 June 2015).

¹⁷ ‘Malawi’s First Lady Weighs in on Sacked VP Vilification Campaign’, *Afrique en ligne*, 19 December 2012 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20101220022458/http://www.afriquejet.com/news/africa-news/malawi-first-lady-weighs-in-on-sacked-vp-vilification-campaign-2010121864612.html>), accessed 7 March 2017).

¹⁸ ‘Madam President: Meeting Malawi’s Joyce Banda’, *Guardian*, 20 December 2012 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBmaeOM1omY&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

¹⁹ State of the Nation Address, May 2012.

²⁰ ‘Malawi Sells Presidential Jet to Feed Poor’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 2013 (<http://www.smh.com.au/world/malawi-sells-presidential-jet-to-feed-poor-20130906-2t944.html>), accessed 18 March 2015).

per 50 kg bag prior to May 2012 to nearly US\$13/bag by the end of the year.²¹ The World Food Programme reported that 1.63 million people (11 per cent of the population) faced severe food shortages by the end of 2012.²² Rising prices moved civil servants to strike for higher wages until the government agreed to salary increases of on average 19 per cent (World Bank 2013: 8). Disgruntled Malawians took to the streets in January and February 2013, protesting against high prices and what they perceived to be Banda's careless concessions to the IMF. Banda tried to explain that tough medicine was needed to treat the economy: 'To get back on track, we needed to make some bold decisions [...] that resulted in some negative impact on the poor'. This meant, she added, that 'we had to come up with the social programmes that cushioned that shock'.²³

In July 2012, the Cabinet finally approved a National Social Support Policy. Over the following year an implementation programme was developed. This envisaged the countrywide rollout of the SCT Programme as well as the expansion of public employment and school feeding programmes. The Government of Malawi would assume increased financial responsibility. With respect to the SCT Programme, for example, the government set itself the target of funding 40 per cent of the total cost of providing cash transfers to the poorest 10 per cent of the population, i.e. about 300,000 households. The total cost of the programme would be more than 1 per cent of GDP, and the government's share less than 0.5 per cent of GDP (Juergens and Pellerano 2016). No new programmes were envisaged (as DPP MPs pointed out²⁴). In January 2013 Banda said that she had asked the World Bank 'to provide resources in order for us to implement public works programs, cash transfer programs, [and] school feeding programs, to ensure that we take care of the shock of the devaluation'.²⁵ The World Bank was broadly supportive in a *Public Expenditure Review* completed in late 2013. It recommended that FISP be redesigned to focus on 'viable' peasant farmers, i.e. farmers with the capacity to expand production significantly. Funding should be transferred to cash transfer programmes that would target the poor more effectively. This would help to address the 'financing gap' facing the SCT programme, which was supposed to cover the whole country by 2014 (World Bank 2013).

Banda was said to be 'euphoric on how the social protection programme has [...] acted as a cushion against devaluation'.²⁶ In practice, however, programmes expanded much more slowly than envisaged. In late 2012, the government scaled up the Public Works Programme by injecting a meagre additional US\$2.5 million.²⁷ In 2014, the World Bank renewed its funding for public works programmes, but with only a modest increase in real expenditure (Juergens and Pellerano 2016).

²¹ 'IMF Reforms Spark Malawi Consumer Backlash', *Equal Times*, 16 January 2013 (<http://www.equaltimes.org/imf-reforms-spark-malawi-consumer-backlash>, accessed 10 June 2015).

²² Masimba Tafirenyika, 'What Went Wrong? Lessons from Malawi's Food Crisis', *Africa Renewal Online*, January 2013 (<http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/january-2013/what-went-wrong-lessons-malawi%E2%80%99s-food-crisis>, accessed 19 April 2017).

²³ Interview with Joyce Banda, *Talk Africa*, 28 August 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yS0FR2XDDSU>, accessed 7 March 2017); 'Malawi Leader Defends China Links, Tells the West: "Don't Tell Us What to Do"', *Nyasa Times*, 22 March 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/03/22/>, accessed April 2017).

²⁴ George Chaponda, Response to the State of the Nation Address, *Hansard*, 20 May 2013.

²⁵ 'President Banda Outlines Her Vision for Malawi', *VOA*, 22 January 2013 (<http://www.voanews.com/content/president-banda-outlines-her-vision-for-malawi/1588981.html>, accessed 18 March 2015).

²⁶ Chaponda, *Hansard*, 20 May 2013.

²⁷ 'Malawi President Launches K10bn Public Works Programme: Economic Recovery', *Nyasa Times*, 9 December 2012 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2012/12/09/malawi-president-launches-k10bn-public-works-programme-economic-recovery/>, accessed June 2015).

Whilst there are no available data on the coverage and cost of these programmes at the end of Banda's government in mid-2014, data for late 2015 show that even then, more than a year later, none of the 2012/13 targets had been reached. The SCT programme had expanded more than five-fold to reach 160,000 households, at a cost of just under 0.6 per cent of GDP, but these figures were only just over half of the target. The programme was being rolled out in 18 of the country's 28 districts. The Government of Malawi was paying for just 11 per cent of the cost (less than 0.1 per cent of GDP), compared with the target of 40 per cent (or just under 0.5 per cent of GDP). School feeding programmes had expanded slowly, but only to reach 25 per cent of all primary school children. Public employment programmes had also expanded slowly. The Government of Malawi's contribution to the costs of the school feeding and public employment programmes had remained low, at between 10 and 20 per cent. Any expansion was largely donor-funded (Juergens and Pellerano 2016). Slow progress might have been due to obstructionism by entrenched DPP-appointed bureaucrats who remained loyal to the Mutharikas and sceptical about cash transfers.

What Banda did do was initiate several new high-profile programmes, implemented through her presidential office and run by Banda's own appointees. 'While I'm trying to bring the country back on track,' she explained, 'I'm also very mindful of my mission, to make sure that I continue to empower women [...] For me, that is what being a leader is all about'.²⁸ Within one month of becoming President, Banda launched a Presidential Initiative on Maternal Health and Safe Motherhood aimed, among other ends, at reducing childhood mortality by establishing 'safe mother motherhood committees' that supported pregnant women and infants.²⁹ In her third month as President, Banda launched a Presidential Initiative on Poverty and Hunger Reduction (PIPaHR), a poverty-alleviation programme that targeted rural women.³⁰ One PIPaHR programme provided seeds to rural women. Another PIPaHR programme that became integral to Banda's 2014 election campaign was the 'Cow-a-Family' programme. 'This [is] the time for poor families to own a dairy cow so that in the long run [they] can come out of poverty', Banda declared. Banda herself regularly and personally distributed cows to beneficiaries. Although the Cow-a-Family programme had distributed only 756 dairy cows by the end of April 2014, it was given massive publicity. Banda announced her intention for the programme to benefit 1.5 million Malawians over the next five years, if she was re-elected President. The government also distributed 8,680 goats and sheep through a parallel Small Stock Project.³¹

²⁸ Janet Fleischman and Julia Nagel, 'President Joyce Banda: New Focus on Women's Health and Empowerment in Malawi', 8 January 2013 (<https://www.csis.org/blogs/smart-global-health/president-joyce-banda-new-focus-womens-health-and-empowerment-malawi>, accessed 19 April 2017).

²⁹ 'Malawi's Leader Makes Safe Childbirth Her Mission', *Opinionator*, 6 February 2013 (<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/malawis-leader-makes-safe-childbirth-her-mission/>, accessed 20 May 2015).

³⁰ 'Presidential Initiative on Hunger Reduction to Realize K7 Billion', *Banthu Times*, 12 December 2013 (<http://banthutimes.com/presidential-initiative-on-hunger-reduction-to-realize-k7-billion/>, accessed 18 March 2015).

³¹ 'JB Launches "a Cow a Family" Initiative: Pledges Houses for Malawi Flood Victims', *Nyasa Times*, 28 February 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/02/28/jb-launches-a-cow-a-family-initiative-pledges-houses-for-malawi-flood-victims/>, accessed 8 June 2015); Henry Nyaka, 'Malawi: One Cow a Family Initiative Goes to Rumphu', *Malawi News Agency*, 16 July, 2013 (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201307170205.html>, accessed 7 March, 2017); 'JB Says "one Cow per Family" to Benefit 1m Families in Malawi', *Nyasa Times*, 5 April 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/04/05/jb-says-one-cow-per-family-to-benefit-1m-families-in-malawi/>, accessed 8 June 2015); Memory Kutengule, '756 Cows Distributed to Vulnerable Farm Families', *Malawi Voice*, 29 April 2014 (<http://joycebanda2014.org/?p=518>, accessed 19 April 2017).

The *Mudzi* (Village) Transformation Trust (MTT) was another hallmark programme on Banda's 'people-centred development agenda'. Banda announced the MTT at the end of her 2013 State of the Nation Address. 'As a mother', the President explained, 'it is my sincere wish that Malawians must have decent, adequate and affordable accommodation [...] That is why I have established the Mudzi Transformation Trust[,] to make sure that our development is inclusive[,] with shared prosperity'. The MTT would use non-state funds to build houses for the rural and peri-urban poor. Funds were raised from the private sector, through the People's Party and the Joyce Banda Foundation. In September 2013, Banda travelled to the United Nations with a delegation that included some 'ordinary villagers' to lobby aid donors for funds. Just as she handed over cows, Banda presented 'Mudzi houses' to beneficiaries. By the end of 2013, the MTT had delivered 500 houses.³²

The MTT and Cow-a-Family programmes attracted much criticism. Academic observer Ernest Thindwa articulated a common opinion that the ceremonies at which Banda handed over houses and cows were more about cultivating her brand than truly about poverty alleviation: 'The president is just trying to popularise herself'.³³ In Parliament, opposition MPs argued that the President's travel to deliver cows cost many times the value of the cows themselves.³⁴ But even critics acknowledged that the MTT and Cow-a-Family programmes were politically popular.³⁵ Giving cows to poor women was reported to be 'effective with female voters especially'.³⁶ In her campaign for re-election, Banda emphasized both the cow and house programmes, as symbols of her dedication to the poor Malawians. 'It is a known fact that anyone who will come after me will not continue these projects', she beseeched voters at one rally in early 2014; 'so for the continuation, vote for me'.³⁷

³² 'Malawi Leader Lays Foundation Stone for 7,500 Houses', *Nyasa Times*, 2 July 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/07/02/malawi-leader-lay-foundation-stone-for-7500-houses-chinese-company-to-build/>, accessed 7 June 2015); 'Malawi President Banda Leaves for US for UN General Assembly', *Nyasa Times* 16 September 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/09/16/malawi-president-banda-leaves-for-us-for-un-general-assembly/>, accessed 7 June 2015); 'Mzimba Chiefs Happy with Mudzi Trust', *Nyasa Times*, 22 September 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/09/22/mzimba-chiefs-happy-with-mudzi-trust/>, accessed 7 June 2015); 'JB Hands over Mudzi House to Gogo Nyasoko of Kasungu', *Nyasa Times*, 3 December 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/12/03/jb-hands-over-mudzi-house-to-gogo-nyasoko-of-kasungu/>, accessed 7 June 2015); Memory Kutengule, 'Malawi: Almost K1 Billion Spent On Mudzi Transformation Trust Project', *Malawi News Agency*, 25 November 2013 (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201311260092.html>, accessed 19 April 2017); 'JB Storms Ndirande, Assures Better Life for Malawi Citizens', *Malawi Nyasa*, 9 December 2013 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/12/09/jb-storms-ndirande-assures-better-life-for-malawi-citizens/>, accessed June 2015); 'Mudzi Transformation Trust to Continue', *Malawi24*, 7 July 2014 (<http://malawi24.com/2014/07/07/mudzi-transformation-trust-to-continue-pp/>, accessed 12 June 2015).

³³ 'Queries over Joyce Banda Maize', *Face of Malawi*, 3 November 2012 (<http://www.faceofmalawi.com/2012/11/queries-over-joyce-banda-maize/>, accessed 23 March 2015).

³⁴ Chaponda, *Hansard*, 20 May 2013; 'JB Takes Food Distribution Exercise to Mangochi', *Nyasa Times*, 9 November 2012 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2012/11/09/jb-takes-food-distribution-exercise-to-mangochi/>, accessed 26 May 2015).

³⁵ 'CSOs Thrash JB on Mudzi Transformation Trust, One Family One Cow', *Malawi Voice*, 20 June 2013 (<http://malawivoice.com/2013/06/20/csos-thrash-jb-on-mudzi-transformationtrust-one-family-one-cow-we-need-decisions-that-transcend-political-considerations-81875/>, accessed 18 March 2015).

³⁶ McGroarty, Patrick, 'Malawi President Looks to Ride Free Cows to New Term', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 May 2014 (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304908304579565453088446512>, accessed 19 April 2017).

³⁷ 'JB Vows to Continue pro-Poor Initiative: Seeks Her Own Mandate', *Nyasa Times*, 11 May 2014 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2014/05/11/jb-vows-to-continue-pro-poor-initiative-seeks-her-own-mandate/>, accessed 26 May 2014).

Banda herself embraced the discourse of ‘handouts’, using a word that was usually anathema to elites not only in Malawi but across much of Africa. ‘Even in Western countries’, she said, ‘there are ultra-poor people who survive on handouts’. If re-elected, she would ‘continue to give help to those in need’.³⁸ ‘I want all of you to know’, she proclaimed at a November 2012 food distribution event, ‘that I will continue distributing maize to the needy people of this country. There is no way I can stand by and drink tea when people are suffering’. Moreover, she emphasized that these were not government programmes: ‘I will not tire, myself and various members of the People’s Party will continue to distribute maize where it is needed most’.³⁹ Images of Banda personally delivering bags of maize, dancing with rural women, and sitting with elderly villagers appeared in the media during the weeks leading up to the election.⁴⁰ The PP’s open lock-and-key logo adorned PIPaHR maize bags (which were also stamped ‘Joyce Banda’) and Mudzi houses.⁴¹

As the election approached, Banda attempted to keep the public’s attention on her ambitions to reduce poverty. The PP manifesto, ‘Transforming Malawi Together’, trumpeted Banda’s successes in ‘modernizing rural areas and fighting poverty’ through the MIT. In her preface, Banda wrote that she remained ‘committed to continue to champion the cause of the rural and urban poor’ (PP 2014). Banda toured the country, touting her record on poverty alleviation and distributing maize, livestock and houses at ‘development rallies’, reinforcing the notion that she was the champion of poor Malawians (Dulani and Dionne 2014: 219). ‘If you want the programmes we have been doing for the people of Malawi [...] to continue, vote for me’.⁴² ‘The president loves handouts’, noted one observer; ‘she says she’s a charitable president and would like to give to people to alleviate their poverty’.⁴³

4 The 2014 election and the limits to the social protection brand

Banda approached the election in 2014 with a clear brand but a party in disarray. After forming a party in 2011, and especially after assuming the presidency in 2012, Banda had achieved considerable success in recruiting MPs. By February 2013 she had recruited 77 MPs—or about 40 per cent of all MPs—into her party caucus. When the ‘Cashgate’ corruption scandal broke later that year, however, and Banda’s electoral prospects began to look bleak, many of her MPs defected. Lacking an established grassroots network or a reliable bureaucracy that could implement a large-scale poverty alleviation programme, Banda had little choice but to develop her brand on the basis of her ‘handout’ initiatives.

³⁸ ‘JB Vows to Continue pro-Poor Initiative: Seeks Her Own Mandate’, *Nyasa Times*, 11 May 2014 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2014/05/11/jb-vows-to-continue-pro-poor-initiative-seeks-her-own-mandate/>, accessed 26 May 2014).

³⁹ (see footnote 34 above)

⁴⁰ (see footnote 17 above)

⁴¹ ‘A Long Way to Go’, *Economist*, 19 March 2013 (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/baobab/2013/03/malawi>, accessed 19 April 2017). See also Gabay (2014).

⁴² ‘JB Increasingly Upbeat to Win Malawi Elections’, *Nyasa Times*, 11 May 2014 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2014/05/11/jb-increasingly-upbeat-to-win-malawi-elections/>, accessed 18 March 2015).

⁴³ Interview with Henry Chingaipe, Director, Institute for Policy Research & Social Empowerment, by Sam Hamer, 19 May 2014.

Both major opposition parties were outspoken in their condemnation of Banda's initiatives. They denounced 'handouts' and insisted that economic growth was the only way to alleviate poverty. The President's fiercest critic was the MCP's presidential candidate Lazarus Chakwera, a minister in the Assemblies of God church and a newcomer to national politics. In his preface to the MCP's election manifesto, Chakwera wrote of the 'dependency syndrome', which was 'being exploited by the leaders to gain political popularity through handouts'. The manifesto itself emphasized the importance of economic growth and did not specify any poverty-alleviation programmes (MCP 2014). In his stump speech, Chakwera attacked Banda's programmes on the basis that they actually increased poverty: 'Malawians are poor not just because of God's will but [...] due to the spirit of hand-outs which has grown roots among Malawians', Chakwera declared; 'no country in the world can develop through the spirit of giving its citizens Cows, Houses and any other Materials'; development required 'teaching people to work hard'.⁴⁴ On Election Day, Chakwera urged voters to vote for him 'not because I am giving you handouts in this campaign but because you desire to see change of things in a Malawi to come [sic]'.⁴⁵

DPP candidate Peter Mutharika's campaign theme was simply to 'continue from where my brother left off'.⁴⁶ The DPP added pictures of Bingu wa Mutharika to their party regalia alongside the maize cob motif. It promised to abolish the Banda government's coupons and to 'make subsidized fertilizer available for every maize subsistence farmer that needs it'. Malawi would be transformed 'from being a predominantly importing and consuming country to a predominantly producing and exporting country; and a food-sufficient country where hunger is eliminated' (DPP 2014). Subsidies were still needed, Peter Mutharika explained, 'so that every Malawian can afford the means to produce food while earning the dignity of labouring to feed [themselves]'.⁴⁷ Whereas Banda and the PP simply handed out houses, the DPP would subsidize cement so that Malawians could 'build what they want by themselves'.⁴⁸ The DPP also promised to pass a 'Law on Handouts', without providing any detail (DPP 2014: 11).

The three major parties thus campaigned with three distinct brands with respect to poverty alleviation and hence to the moral imagery required of political leaders in order to build supra-regional coalitions (as van Donge had argued in 1995). Banda branded herself unapologetically as the champion of 'handouts' to the poor, including especially her own initiatives. Chakwera branded himself (and the MCP) as the pro-growth party, and denounced 'handouts'. Mutharika and the DPP rebranded themselves as the party of farm input subsidies. Both Chakwera and Mutharika lauded hard work, but Mutharika and the DPP were happier for the state to play a large role in fostering agricultural growth.

⁴⁴ 'Southern Region Shuns MCP Once More, As Chakwera Scorns JB's One Cow Per Family Initiative', *Malawi Voice*, 8 May 2014 (<http://malawivoice.com/2014/05/08/southern-region-shuns-mcp-chakwera-scorns-jbs-one-cow-per-family-initiative/>, accessed 23 March 2015); 'Chakwera Attacks JB on Hand-Outs in Zomba', *Nyasa Times*, 8 May 2014 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2014/05/08/chakwera-attacks-jb-on-hand-outs-in-zomba/>, accessed 19 March 2015).

⁴⁵ 'Chakwera Bemoans Handouts', *Afriem.org*, 12 May 2014 (<http://www.afriem.org/2014/05/chakwera-bemoans-handouts-2/>, accessed 23 March 2015).

⁴⁶ 'The Spirit of Bingu and a Leadership without an Agenda: Z Allan Ntata', *Marawi Post*, 11 May 2014 (<http://www.maravipost.com/national/opinions/general-scope/8810-the-spirit-of-bingu-and-a-leadership-without-an-agenda-z-allan-ntata.html>, accessed 22 June 2015).

⁴⁷ 'Mutharika Wants Feedback on Proposals to Tackle Malawi "Intellectual Crisis"', *Nyasa Times*, 19 April 2014 (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/2013/04/19/mutharika-wants-feedback-on-proposals-to-tackle-malawi-intellectual-crisis/>, accessed 24 March 2015).

⁴⁸ 'Goodall Mocks JB's Mudzi Transformation Trust', *Malawi Oracle Times*, 7 April 2014 (<http://www.orakonews.com/goodall-mocks-jbs-mudzi-transformation-trust/>, accessed 11 June 2015).

The three parties articulated the three dominant approaches to poverty reduction across East and Southern Africa. The Chakwera position resembled the neoliberal stance of political leaders such as Peter Ng'andu Magande, the Finance Minister of Zambia in the mid-2000s, who had blocked donor-backed social protection programmes (Kabandula and Seekings 2016). The Mutharika/DPP position was the classic 'agrarian' route to poverty alleviation that had been more common in the first decades after independence. Banda's position was an unequivocal defence of social protection for the poor, especially those poor people who were unable to take advantage of farming subsidies. In contrast to most advocates of social protection, however, Banda chose not to defend it on developmental grounds—as, for example, the World Bank did, including in Malawi (World Bank 2013)—but on the basis of need. This was a discourse employed more often by foreign and local NGOs, and only rarely by political leaders (one exception being the South African Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya).

The election was dominated not so much by these differences, however, as by the Cashgate corruption scandal that exploded in September 2013. It was revealed that civil servants and senior ministers in the Banda government had stolen about US\$30 million from government coffers, prompting donors to withhold about US\$150 million in budgetary support (Ware 2014: 128). In addition, another drought left almost 10 per cent of the population, or 1.5 million people, dependent on food aid. Although the drought was exogenous and the Cashgate scandal likely predated her presidency, Banda was discredited.

Amidst the swirling scandal and a stuttering economy, Banda won only 20 per cent of the vote, behind both Chakwera's 27.8 per cent and Peter Mutharika's 36.4 per cent. Banda won pluralities in every Northern district, and majorities in Southern districts where her co-ethnic Lomwes predominated. Chakwera and the MCP won only (and all) Central districts, thanks to the support of fellow Chewas. Atupele Muluzi, son of the former President, earned pluralities for the UDF in south-eastern districts where fellow Yaos predominated. The DPP dominated the rest of the south. The PP won only 26 parliamentary seats, behind the DPP (51 seats) and MCP (48 seats).⁴⁹

The election outcome seemed to mark a return to the regional patterns characteristic of Malawi prior to 2009. There were, however, two significant shifts between the pre-2009 and 2014 elections. First, although he did not win a majority of the votes in any Northern or Central district, Mutharika nonetheless came second in both of those regions, suggesting that there may have been some residual support there for the Mutharika/DPP food security brand (Patel and Wahman 2014). Second, Banda did win one in five votes—rather more in the north—after she was endorsed by important northern politicians. Banda's result suggests also that her pro-poor brand did not preclude all support.

In early 2014, prior to the election, Afrobarometer asked Malawian citizens to identify the most important difference between the incumbent and opposition parties. The largest proportion (40 per cent) indicated 'economic and development policies', with much smaller proportions opting for the honesty or integrity of leaders, ethnic or regional loyalties, or the leaders' personalities. The Afrobarometer data suggest, however, that Malawian voters prioritize food security over the alleviation of poverty per se. When they were asked to identify the most important problem facing the country that the government should address, the most commonly cited problem in every Afrobarometer poll between 2003 and 2014 was 'food shortage and famine'. The proportion of respondents citing this peaked at almost 50 per cent in the 2005 survey, declined in the 2008 and 2012 surveys, but then rose somewhat in the 2014 survey, to 27 per cent. By comparison, 'poverty

⁴⁹ The UDF won 14 seats, and other parties and independent candidates—many of whom were newly independent of one or other of the big parties—won 54 seats.

and destitution' were cited by between 4 and 7 per cent across these surveys. In both 2012 and 2014, the second most frequently cited 'most important problem' was the 'management of the economy'. All of this suggests that there remained a strong constituency for programmes to support small farmers, and this constituency grew during periods of drought. The Banda 'brand' was probably not a substantial vote-winner. Dorward et al. (2009: 9–10) report that an evaluation of a pilot programme found that poor farmers preferred programmes that helped them to produce more food themselves than food- or cash-for-work programmes. Interviewees suggest that Banda may have been misguided in her belief that a focus on direct transfers ('handouts') would endear her to poor voters.⁵⁰

Afrobarometer polls in 2012 and 2014 show that Banda's branding did not prevent a rapid decline in popular approval of her performance, from more than 65 per cent to less than 40 per cent. Approval of the government's economic management also declined dramatically. The proportion of voters saying that they would vote for the PP, if elections were held tomorrow, fell from 46 per cent, ahead of both the DPP and MCP, to only 19 per cent, behind both the DPP and MCP (which was almost exactly the outcome of the election). By 2014, the DPP was identified by most voters as the party most likely to solve every one of a set of challenges, including not only fighting corruption, managing the economy, and ensuring food security, but also reducing poverty. The contrast between the 2012 and 2014 polls might be significant. The 2012 Afrobarometer survey found strong evidence of enthusiasm for Joyce Banda, presumably in part because she was seen to be strong on economic management and fighting corruption. At that time, her pro-'handout' stance did not seem to have been a political liability, although it was yet to be subjected to the intense criticism of an actual election campaign. The sharp decline in support for Banda and the PP between 2012 and 2014 suggests that a strong pro-poor and, more specifically, pro-'handout' brand is likely to succeed only if the candidate is expected to deliver also on basic economic management and action against corruption. Put another way, if the economy is growing or expected to grow, voters may feel more indulgent towards the poor, but at times of economic difficulty and widespread corruption, voters veer towards more conservative candidates with their discourse of hard work (perhaps assisted through government subsidies).

5 The conditions for social protection branding

The presidential election in Malawi in 2014 was unusual, at least within Africa, in that the candidates held strong and contrasting positions on social protection. In post-apartheid South Africa, the major parties have broadly concurred over the importance of extensive social protection. In Botswana, the opposition parties have accused the governing party of not doing enough, but they share a general commitment to both the principle of state responsibility for the poor and specific social protection programmes. In Kenya, rival coalitions share both a rhetorical commitment to social protection and a reticence to implement reforms when in office. In Zimbabwe, the entry of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change into a Government of National Unity in 2009 did lead to reforms, but these were not because the MDC itself had any clear commitment to social protection (Chinyoka and Seekings 2016). In Zambia, the then opposition Patriotic Front did include a commitment to expanded social protection in its 2011 election manifesto, but it was not a prominent element in its campaign (Siachiwena 2016). The Malawi election is perhaps the only one where contrasting positions on 'handouts' have featured prominently in competing candidates' and parties' rhetoric.

⁵⁰ Interview with Patience Kanje (KfW), by Sam Hamer, 16 May 2014.

This is hardly surprising, given the widespread distaste for social protection among elites across much (but not all) of Africa. As Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette (2014) have shown, Malawian elites are no exception to this. Why then did Banda seize on social protection when branding herself and her new party? Conditions specific to Malawi in the 2000s may have favoured the emergence of social protection on the electoral agenda despite elite ambivalence. Most obviously, political parties in Malawi are unusually weakly institutionalized. Malawian parties have long been weak on the ground (Rakner et al. 2007; Svásand 2013). Malawian MPs often switch allegiance from one party to another (Young 2014). Moreover, the parties of both presidents Mutharika (DPP) and Banda (PP) were young—established in 2005 and 2011, respectively. Banda’s expulsion from the DPP in 2011 compelled her either to join one of the existing parties or to form a new party and invent a new brand for it and her—just as Bingu wa Mutharika’s resignation from the UDF in 2005 had prompted him to develop a new brand for his new DPP and himself. ‘As a new party, the DPP lacked even minimal infrastructure and was poorly suited to monitor clientelist exchanges at the local level’ (Dionne and Horowitz 2016: 217; see also Dulani and Dionne 2014).

Immediately after the 1994 election, van Donge (1995) argued that the regional and ethnic demographics of Malawi led presidential candidates to search for a moral brand that could underpin and justify a supra-regional (and supra-ethnic) coalition. For ten years, political leaders failed to develop a successful brand (see also Rakner 2007). Between 2005 and 2009, Bingu wa Mutharika appeared to have found the formula: his support for small farmers (at a time of sustained economic growth) enabled him to win the 2009 election by an unprecedented margin and with unprecedentedly broad support (Ferree and Horowitz 2010). The success of Mutharika and the DPP pushed rivals into alternative positions that they might otherwise not have chosen. The MCP was pushed into a stark neoliberal position, advocating growth and the state’s retreat from statist interventions (‘handouts’). This left little space for Banda and the PP other than to adopt an interventionist, pro-poor position, distinguished from the DPP by its support for the poor rather than farmers, i.e. social protection ‘handouts’ rather than farm input subsidies.

Banda and the DPP did not adopt the populist strategy discussed by Resnick, with particular reference to the experience of Michael Sata and his Patriotic Front (PF) in Zambia. This kind of populist strategy was characterized by ‘an anti-elitist discourse, a policy message oriented around social inclusion, and a charismatic leader who professes an affinity with the underclass’ (Resnick 2012: 1352). In the Zambian case, Sata and the PF adopted a populist stance in opposition to the broadly pro-market incumbent Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), appealing to poor urban voters not through clientelism (or vote-buying), nor through ethnic appeals, but rather through a populist promise to incorporate them into the political arena. Resnick shows that this populism made particular sense in Zambia, with its unusually large, urbanized populations in Lusaka and the Copperbelt (Resnick 2013), but similar strategies were used (albeit less successfully) by other opposition leaders elsewhere (including Odinga in Kenya and Koma in Botswana). In Malawi, in contrast to Zambia, the urbanized population was small, and elections were fought and won in rural areas. Both Mutharika and Banda therefore developed brands that were in their own way populist but were quite different from that of Sata and the PF. Mutharika and the DPP championed the ‘political inclusion’ of farmers, symbolized by subsidies for maize production. Banda tried to champion the ‘political inclusion’ of the poor, through ‘handouts’. She could not adopt a more generalized populism (along the lines of Sata and the PF) against an incumbent party like the DPP because the DPP already championed massive—and expensive—government intervention through farm input subsidies.

One other Southern African leader who sought to develop a personal ‘social protection’ brand was Ian Khama in Botswana. Khama became President in 2008, largely on the basis that he was the son of founding President Seretse Khama and, like his father, had been chief of the BaNtswana. His party—the Botswana Democratic Party—had been in power since independence in 1966, but

its support had fallen to only just over one half of the vote. Ian Khama needed a distinctive brand that would carry him through the election in 2009 by allowing him to claim his father's mantle at the same time as emphasizing novelty and distancing himself from his immediate predecessors. Like Banda, Ian Khama seized on social protection as the basis of his brand, but his chosen focus was a public employment programme. He had the advantages of being able to dust off a public employment programme associated with his father—and appealing to conservatives concerned with the work ethic—whilst presenting this as an innovative reform that would address problems of urban as well as rural unemployment. He succeeded in sustaining the BDP's share of the vote in the 2009 election. In 2014, he held onto enough votes to be re-elected, despite not winning a majority (Hamer 2015b). In Botswana, as in Malawi, parties have staked out positions with clear policy implications. In this they are unlike the kind of 'cartel' parties that were common across much of Africa in the 1990s and early 2000s (Bogaards 2013; Rakner et al. 2007).

The case of Malawi in the 2010s contributes not only to a rethinking of the factors underlying electoral success in contemporary Africa but also to a fuller understanding of the emerging politics of social protection. In the 2009 and 2014 elections in Malawi, presidential candidates offered clearly distinctive brands to the voters, even if their parties' manifestos did not demonstrate meaningful or obvious ideological or policy differences (as Dulani and Dionne (2014: 220) note). In 2014, the three major candidates offered brands corresponding to the key developmental and political choice facing governments across much of Africa: liberalized markets (Chakwera), statist interventions to sustain small and medium farmers (Mutharika), or pro-poor interventions (Banda). In practice, even Mutharika's subsidies mitigated rather than ended poverty. FISP might have cost close to 5 per cent of GDP (in 2014/15) (van de Meerendonk et al. 2015), but the subsidies helped poor households 'to "hang in" but not "step up" or "step out"' from poverty (Dorward et al. 2013: 103). Banda's 'handouts' were even more modest, although they were more precisely targeted at the poor. By 2015, school feeding programmes, public employment programmes, and cash transfers were together costing less than 2 per cent of GDP, with most of the cost borne directly by donors (van de Meerendonk et al. 2015). Banda had been slow to expand cash transfer or workfare programmes, and there does not appear to have been any discussion even of a social pension.⁵¹ Even statist interventions were constrained by a general conservatism. Nonetheless, social protection had been placed on the agenda, and 'handouts' loudly championed, without derision, by an incumbent president. The policy agenda might thereby have been further shifted.

⁵¹ In 2015/16, the ILO and HelpAge International worked with Malawi government officials to develop new plans for a more comprehensive social protection 'floor', including social pensions.

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