

Will the new government and local councils improve service delivery in Malawi?

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[Tam O'Neil](#) [1] 10 June 2014

Local administration and service provision are failing in Malawi. What can the government do to improve them?

Local administration and service provision are failing in Malawi. Overall [human development indicators](#) [2] have improved in the past couple of decades (e.g. life expectancy and school enrolment). But [social and service outcomes](#) [3] remain poor for most Malawians (e.g. school dropout, repetition and exam rates, pupil to teacher or classroom ratios, access to improved sanitation, maternal mortality and HIV rates). A visit to Malawi's hospitals and schools confirms that all is not well. It is still common to find overcrowded facilities with too few trained staff and not enough essential equipment and supplies ([medicine](#) [4], textbooks, electricity, water). Money and technical know-how cannot solve this alone: Malawi has had large injections of aid and technical assistance since at least the democratic transition in 1994. Rather, improving services is as much about [political and social institutions](#) [5] as technical innovation.

In the 1990s the international community saw democratic decentralisation as a way to make politics and services more pro-poor, and prodded Malawi's post-transition government to jump on the decentralisation bandwagon. (Ideas about the [politics of services delivery](#) [6] have since moved on.) President Muluzi reluctantly climbed on board with the Local Government Act in 1998 and after he secured a second term and local UDF base, with the election of local councils in 2000. But moving decision-making closer to the rural poor has not delivered on its promise of better quality and more equitable services. Why not? And will the newly elected councils and DPP government, [led by Mutharika Mark II](#) [7], be able to stop the decline?

The second question is difficult to answer, not least because the make-up of the new government is as yet undecided. But an educated guess is possible based on the answer to the first question: democratic decentralisation has not worked because Malawi's political and economic realities are inimical to the devolution of political and economic power. Malawi's [local authorities are dysfunctional](#) [8]. Mandates are unclear, financial controls inadequate, and procedures are inefficient. Local offices lack senior staff and essential equipment. [Participatory development and local accountability](#) [9] exist mostly in name only. But the principal reasons for this lie not in the cities and the districts but in the logic of national politics – and in particular the nature of the elite political settlement.

Since the introduction of multi-party elections, Malawi's political settlement has been competitive clientelist (using [Mushtaq Khan's categorisation](#) [9]). This means that the political elite consists of fluid factions who agree to compete for control of the state in (relatively) free and fair elections (the competitive part). It also means that the factions are held together primarily by ties of patronage, both horizontally and vertically (the clientelist part). This elite bargain holds as long as ruling coalitions do not try to use their incumbency to keep a stronger alliance out of power. (Although with a bizarre twist in the usual plot, in Malawi's recent tripartite elections the [incumbent Joyce Banda accused the opposition of rigging](#) [10].)

So what does the political settlement have to do with local

government and services?

First, this implicit elite bargain has meant that none of Malawi's presidents has really tried to implement democratic decentralisation. Decentralisation can serve to buy off powerful local elites, but Malawi has few elites at that level that are not already incorporated into either state bureaucracy or political parties. Therefore, it's simply not in the interest of the ruling party to lose control to lower-level officials of decision-making, and the patronage opportunities linked to these (and even if it were in the interest of opposition MPs, parliament is dominated by the Executive).

However, none of the Presidents has explicitly taken their formal commitment to decentralisation off the table. As a result, the decentralisation that has occurred has been rudderless and damaging. It has also placed local authorities in limbo. Since 2005, for all intents and purposes, District Commissioners and the cities' Executive Officers (appointed by the President) have been running local authorities, [with the help of ad hoc 'consultative' forums in the place of elected councillors](#) [11]. In the absence of a strong steer from the President, inter-ministerial mechanisms to deliver devolution were left to wither, individual ministries were allowed not to devolve real power and money to local government, and the Ministry of Local Government has been impotent in the face of their intransigence.

Third, local officials have not had the systems or resources to deliver adequate services. More powers have been delegated in some sectors than others (more in health and education than in water, for instance). But in no sector do local officials control the resources and decisions that would give them real power and the ability to plan and deliver services better. Of note, central ministries continue to control both capital investment and the hiring and firing of local staff. Financial transfers to local government have remained low (3.9% in 2013) and rural authorities have almost no local sources of revenue. Therefore, even if District Development Plans were serious documents, local authorities do not have discretionary funds with which to meet local needs.

Fourth, unsurprisingly, local government is fertile ground for mismanagement, waste and corruption. Decentralised graft is a common feature of a competitive clientelist settlement because political factions tend to have weak control over their networks. Take the recent [Cashgate scandal](#) [12], for instance. According to the [forensic audit report](#) [13], this not only involved organised fraud but also more opportunistic and banal corruption, as local officials used the same weakness in the IFMIS system to swindle the public purse. Similarly, manipulation of procurement processes is a common feature at all levels.

None of this is new. While advocates of democratic decentralisation hoped that devolution would empower people and allow them to work around dysfunctional ministries, [experts](#) [14] have long argued that local government is not an island: the character of local government is inextricably tied to that of central government and its interests. [Recent research](#) [15] reinforces that citizen participation and accountability work best where state structures enable these. What an understanding of Malawi's political settlement adds, however, is insight into the nature and distribution of elite powers, how these are likely to affect the ruling elite's attitude to decentralisation and whether there might be avenues to better services more attuned to Malawi's political and economic realities.

Can the new government and local councils make a difference?

The signs are not good. For councillors to make a difference, local government reform is essential – and the challenges are immense. The legal framework and administration need rationalisation and this requires new legislation and policy. The executive arms of local councils, including their committee structures, need to be rebuilt from scratch, as do the sub-district participatory structures for which local authorities have a legal responsibility, but which for nearly a decade have mostly existed in name only. A completely new cohort of 462 councillors, some with little formal education, has been elected and they must learn their roles. Councillors and MPs from different parties need to cooperate as both have votes on councils. Functions and funds need to be further devolved. All of this is unlikely to happen because the elite political settlement in Malawi has not changed. If anything, the 2014 elections and the distribution of votes – with four main parties, none of them

polling more than 36% of the vote in the Presidential elections, or seats in the National Assembly or Local Council, and a large number of independents – reinforce its competitive clientelist nature.

But it is early days, and President Peter Mutharika may yet forge a new settlement. Indeed, rumours are already circulating on social media about the DPP wooing independents MPs (currently the largest bloc in parliament) and of backstage bargaining between Mutharika and key opponents in the UDF and PP. (As such, the Section 65 saga is unlikely to go away any time soon!) It is therefore conceivable that President Mutharika could strike a new bargain with other factions, get a majority in Parliament, and gain control of most local councils through party alliances.

But Mutharika’s new government will also have to contend with historical legacies and structural realities, which include an economy that has changed little since independence, a fragmented political elite, a decimated civil service and, after years of underinvestment, a sorry-looking social services infrastructure. Patronage will certainly continue to be the glue that holds any ruling coalition together.

Does the DPP collective leadership have the skills and experience to make a settlement such as this developmental rather than extractive? This would be a big ask for anyone. It’s likely to be too much for a man with [little experience of politics](#) [16], who has a [failed coup attempt hanging over him](#) [17], and whose vision for Malawi failed to convince two-thirds of the electorate.

Country or region: Malawi

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 About the author

Tam O’Neil was a Research Officer in the Politics and Governance team (2005-2009) and became an ODI Research Associate in 2014. Tam specialises in the politics of governance and institutional reform in sub-Saharan Africa, and in women’s empowerment. Her recent research areas include parliaments and political participation, legal empowerment, and local governance and service delivery. Tam has participated in several large-scale thematic evaluations and policy reviews. She was also one of the managers of a two-year project to support Dutch Embassies to carry out applied political economy analysis (Strategic Governance and Corruption Assessments).

Subjects

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