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Sören Köpke M.A.

Abstract

Malawi, an African republic largely relying on smallholder production, has a longstanding authoritarian tradition. Frequent, devastating droughts have hit the rural population of Malawi hard. In the face of these adverse climatic conditions, political leaders have managed to gather popular support through the concerted application of fertilizer subsidies. While many have hailed the program for its contribution to improving food security, others have criticized the clientelist character of the system. The paper, using a political economy approach, will trace the development of agrarian populism in democratic Malawi, a political strategy that attempts to create alliances with small-scale farmers by concrete and symbolic acts. Considering the perpetuation of bitter poverty, the unjust dual land ownership structure, and Malawi's peripheral role in the global economic order, the analysis points to the limited effectiveness of the populist policies in alleviating the grievances of rural population. Nevertheless, the agrarian populist strategy seems to strengthen authoritarian modes of rule and to quell resistance to exploitative practices

Keywords: Agrarian populism; drought; political economy; fertilizer subsidies; Malawi

1 Introduction

From 2015, Malawi experienced severe multi-year drought conditions obviously connected to the strong El Niño phenomenon that struck all of Southern Africa (Famine Early Warning Systems Network, 2016). 6.5 million people, about a third of the country's population, were severely affected by the drought through severe food deficiency (World Bank, 2016, p. xviii). Only in early 2015, Malawi had been hit by floods that killed 276 people and left more than 200,000 displaced from their homes (Chonghaile, 2015). Malawi, a least developed country (LDC) with a population largely active in the agricultural sector, is obviously vulnerable against climate shocks, but among these, droughts are more frequent. The dry spells negatively affect the cultivation of maize, the staple food of Malawi, and cause food shortages and grossly inflated food prizes. In April 2016, President Peter Mutharika was forced to declare a state of national emergency due to the food insecurity situation (Oneko, 2016). International donor organizations stepped in to alleviate the food crisis.

Yet this is not primarily a tale of hunger, but a story of politicians exploiting the frequent drought-induced food crises for their own political gains. A I hope to demonstrate in the paper, the systematic and concerted distribution of fertilizer packages (and sometimes maize rations) works as an effective tool of political patronage for the government. It serves to insulate those in powers against criticism and discontent, and thus favours authoritarian tendencies within government. This would not be possible were the rural, farming population of Malawi not as vulnerable to drought and food insecurity.

In tracing the interlinkages between food crisis and political power in Malawi, I will employ a historically founded political economy approach that spills over into the field of political ecology, a materialist "political economy of food and famine", as Michael Watts (2013) has called it.

In the following sections, I will first lay out how I define agrarian populism, and how it relates to authoritarian politics and patronage. I will then continue to describe the Malawian rural setting and the impact of droughts on small-scale farmers. I will highlight the way clientelist networks, corruption, and regionalist affiliation shape politics in Malawi. I discuss the effectiveness of agrarian populist schemes, such as the input subsidy program, from the dual criteria of tackling rural poverty and consolidating political power. Finally, I consider the institutional structures in the country that enable populist strategies with an authoritarian tinge.

2 Authoritarian politics and agrarian populism

Populist tendencies in electoral democracies have been connected to many social phenomena, such as the weakness of national party systems (Kitschelt, 2002), a resurgence of the emotional in politics (Laclau, 2007), the failure of centrist parties to gather support for essentially liberal, often unwelcome policies (Judis, 2016), or chauvinist reactions to recent migration (Betz, 1994). Populist politics in itself is often authoritarian in its outlook, if not its actions; one might tend to believe that it is inherently so. It poses an imagined collective good, a will of the "people" (often portrayed as homogenous, hard-working, and honest) against nefarious outsiders, either the elites, foreigners, capitalists, some ethnic groups, or all of the above, promising to do away with the threat. Bernard Crick (2005) theorizes populism as an anti-politics, based on a claim to a immediate relationship between the populist leader and "the people". This direct relationship between leader and people, without the disturbances of intermediary institutions (p. 626), is undemocratic in its contempt of democratic procedures and ethics. It is an invitation to pursue an authoritarian path to power. Power that can in turn be secured by clientelist handouts and a nepotist grip on important positions within the state apparatus, in short, a rule characterized by patronage.

Populism and patronage have an intimate relationship in many world regions. But the diagnosis differs sharply. From a (neo-)liberal perspective, pro-poor development strategies have been accused of

employing patronage and causing fiscal excesses (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991). Left-wing policies with a (often moderate) redistributive element have been decried as populist "soft authoritarianism" (Weyland, 2013, p. 19). Paul Kenny (2017), in turn, understands populism as a mobilization process that arises when (centralized) nationalist patronage systems *break down*, to be supplemented by charismatic, personal and media-driven strategies of gathering mass support. To Danielle Resnick (2014), populism in Sub-saharan Africa is first and foremost an urban phenomenon, as populist parties and political entrepreneurs may find it easier to reach and mobilize the urban poor than their spread-out urban counterparts. However, Erik Green (2011) has shown that at least in Malawi a distinctively rural, agrarian populism does not only exist, it also has a long-standing tradition that goes back to colonial times.

Agrarian populism is a term that has its roots in a specific time and space, namely the South of the US between ca. 1880-1940 (Bauerly, 2016, pp.105-139), but has been applied to very different geographical, political and cultural settings, be it Mexico (Sanderson, 1981), Brazil (Wolford, 2010, pp.70-111) or Finland (Jungar, 2015).

Tom Brass (2000, p. 2) gives a fitting definition of agrarian-based populism which puts what he calls "the agrarian myth" in the centre of its ideological-cultural concept:

> An 'a-political'/'third-way' discourse that is simultaneously anti- capitalist and anti-socialist, populism is a 'from above' attempt to mobilize the rural grassroots on the basis of the agrarian myth, thereby obtaining support among peasants and farmers opposed to the effects of industrialisation, urbanization and capitalist crisis.

Agrarian populism, in Brass' reading, emerges as an ideological reaction to capitalist crisis (p.3). This points to a dual strategy pursued by populist politics: Addressing deep-rooted cultural moods such as a nostalgia for a better, unspoiled past, a distrust of urban elite politicians, a longing for tightly-knit communities, an enmity against intrusive strangers, etc., and at the same time making (more or less) concrete promises of a material nature, of improved economic conditions, of some kind of reward in return for electoral support.

At times, populist rhetoric and actions on the ground may be in stark contrast. For instance, populists may be able to effectively portray themselves as benefactors to small-scale farmers while pursuing self-enriching schemes. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the nationalist president Mahinda Rajapaksa (in power 2005-2015) was quite successful in styling himself as the protector of the ethnic majority Sinhalese peasantry (Wickramasinghe, 2009; Bastian, 2013) while embarking on a policy of building large-scale infrastructure projects with little direct benefit for rural populations.

The case study is set in Malawi, a country that is exemplary for a post-colonial agrarian populism arising under certain conditions of poverty and rurality. From 1964 to 1992, the country was a one-party state under the dictatorial rule of its founder, "President-for-Life" Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who had re-invented the British colony Nyasaland as the Republic of Malawi (Power, 2010). Banda and his party, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), were staunchly anti-Communist, reliable allies to the West and Apartheid South Africa, and firmly maintained their hold of the country for a generation. Only in 1992 – Kamuzu already very old and frail – Malawi peacefully transformed into a pluralist electoral democracy (van Donge, 1995). However, the transition to a multi-party democracy has brought forth a political system with relatively weak institutions, vulnerable to corruption, feuding between political leaders, regionalist fragmentation, and continuous systems of patronage (Englund, 2002).

3 Agriculture and drought in Malawi

Malawi is a relatively small, landlocked republic in Southern Africa, bordering Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia. Its outline is shaped by the historic "Scramble for Africa", as the British

colonizers carved out its territory against Portuguese and German possessions in the late 1880s; as British Central Africa, later renamed Nyasaland, it was a colony until 1964 (McCracken, 2012). In the absence of exploitable mineral resources, the British aimed to make use of the land by cultivation. Large coffee, later tea plantations where set up in the Southern highlands by European landholders. In the next decades, small-scale farmers were increasingly integrated into the capitalist market economy through production of cash crops, mostly cotton. The rising of commercial revenues had become necessity for many household who had to pay a so-called "hut tax" (Mandala, 1995). Cotton production was later replaced by tobacco cultivation, making Malawi the currently largest producer of tobacco on the African continent. The production of tobacco for exports, both by small farming households and estates, is said to have immense environmental impact (Tobin & Knausenberger, 1998), besides social issues like absent protection of labourers against nicotine poisoning, or child labour.

In the post-war years after 1945 the colonial authorities, as argued by Erik Green (2011, pp. 152-155), developed a mixture of state intervention in agriculture and reliance on peasant production he dubs "agrarian populism". This meant that large-scale estate structures were not to be further expanded as land was distributed to African farmers. Hence the dual structure of agriculture in Malawi, consisting of a cash-crop sector with tobacco, tea and sugarcane and a large, subsistence-oriented smallholding sector based on maize cultivation, is a legacy of British colonialism. The estate sector was maintained after independence and even expanded in some regions (Chinsinga, 2002). There never was a far-reaching land reform, and most land cultivated by small-scale farming households is officially customary land, making tenure rather unsafe (Peters & Kambewa, 2007).

Malawi's population of 17.5 million people is predominantly rural, and over 80% of the workforce is employed in agriculture (FAO, 2014, p. 20); cultivation is mostly rainfed subsistence farming with some cash-cropping on small plots below 1 hectare (Environmental Affairs Department, 2010, p. 26). White maize, mostly consumed in the form of porridge called nsima, is absolutely essential to Malawian diets. Almost 70% of arable land in Malawi is under maize cultivation, according to Kassie et al. (2012, p. 38).

Malawi is highly vulnerable to volatile and extreme climates such as floods and droughts. Drought is frequent, and not associated with famine in regular years; like in other African countries (De Waal, 1989) rural people have an arsenal of strategies to cope with food shortages during the lean season ("hunger season") in December to March, right before harvest. Occasionally, severe and prolonged droughts have led to food crises. One of the most memorable famines in Malawi occurred under British rule, in 1946-49. Megan Vaughan (1987), in her historic study of this famine, underlines that women and people with lower social capital were more affected by starvation. The famine led to a re-alignment of colonial agricultural policy in Nyasaland, heightening state intervention in food production. Malawi saw further droughts in 1992, 1996, 2001/02, 2004/05, 2015-2017. There is evidence that since the 1990s failing rains have combined with inadequate policies to create food crises. For example, the strategical grain reserves had been depleted on advice of the International Monetary Fond (IMF), which proved to be unsound (Menon, 2007).

4 Politics of patronage in Malawi

In 2005, the government of Bingu wa Mutharika initiated the *Farm Input Subsidy Program* (FISP), consisting of the subsidized distribution of fertiliz- ers and "improved" seed packages to small farming households. Entitlement to participation in FISP was regulated on the basis of coupons allowing the purchase of subsidized agricultural inputs from farm stores or outlets of the parastatal ADMARC chain. Although the program went against received wisdom of neoliberal economics, which hold that the state should refrain from interfering in the agricultural economy, the program was hailed on a global scale (Denning et al., 2009). Malawi had implemented fertilizer subsidies and seed distribution programs before under various names, but had to repeatedly discontinue the practice under pressure

from donors (Harrigan, 2008).

Due to the fertilizers distributed through FISP, as well as good rains, Malawi saw several consecutive years of bumper harvests from 2006. The political fanfare that followed the initialization of FISP cannot be underestimated. Bingu wa Mutharika was rewarded with a triumphant re-election in 2009 (see Table 1). His own Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), split from the United Democratic Front (UDF) of his predecessor Bakili Muluzu in 2005, displays four corn cobs as the party symbol. This highlights the centrality of the staple food to political success in drought-stricken Malawi.

The Malawian political system is peculiar in the sense that it is hardly organized along the lines of political ideology. All major political parties adhere to some mixture of conservatism/ traditionalism or liberalism. Socialist, social democratic or communist parties are practically absent, a legacy of Kamuzu Banda's anti-communism. Instead, regionalist affiliation plays an important role, as in each of the three regions of Malawi, other parties are majoritarian (Englund, 2002, p. 12). The MCP, for instance, dominates the Central Region; the DPP has its strongholds in the most populous region, the Southern Region. Mutharika had succeeded in winning more than his party's share of the vote, most likely due to his popular policies at the time.

Table 1 Results of Malawian presidential elections by party, 2004-2014. *Source:* Malawian Electoral Commission (2015)

Party	2004	2009	2014
UDF	35.97%	–	13.7%
MCP	28.22%	30.49%	27.8%
DPP	–	66.17%	36.4%
PP	–	–	20.2%
RP	25.16%	0.76%	–
NDA	8.61%	–	–

In 2011, Bingu wa Mutharika seemed to have taken an increasingly authoritarian turn. His personality and style of governing was seen as hardheaded and uncompromising (Malawian journalist, personal communication, September 14, 2015). Civil society organizations, academics and members of the opposition began to voice their discontent. They criticized the president for his inability to contain the economic crisis and the soaring costs of living, his diplomatic failures in dealing with key donor nations, and his attempts to silence criticism against him (Chinsinga, 2015). This culminated in a wave of nationwide protests in July 2011. Mutharika ordered police and army to clamp down on the protesters, and in several cities, demonstration were fired at by security forces. Altogether 19 people died in the course of these events (BBC News, 2011). At the same time, the FISP program reportedly shrank due to budgetary reasons and fertilizer shortages, from 1.6 million farmers eligible for subsidies to 1.4 million (IRIN, 2011). This indicated that the era of generous, populist handouts was coming to a close.

Bingu wa Mutharika remained president, but died from natural causes the following year. The overall situation had not changed to the better. In a representative survey in 2012, 72% perceived the state of the Malawian economy either as "very bad" or "fairly bad" (Tsoka & Chunga, 2012, p. 7).

Bingu wa Mutharika's constitutional successor, although fallen from grace with the president, was vice-president Joyce Banda (not related to Hastings Banda). She was inaugurated as the country's first female president and reversed some of the existing policies. She overhauled economic policy, devalued the currency and adapted fiscal austerity, measures favoured by the international institutions like the IMF, but unpopular with Malawians (Chinsinga, 2015). Yet Joyce Banda did not refrain from employing clientelism to boost her popularity with voters. She handed out maize in bags labelled "Joyce Banda" and gifted motorcycles and cows at "development ralleys" in 2013. Candidates of her People's Party running for parliament distributed maize allegedly donated by the United Arab

Emirates (Oracle News, 2014; Maravi Post, 2014). She was brought down by "cashgate", a corruption scandal that also destroyed her credentials with aid donors. Cashgate marked a network of corrupt officials within the administration, which had embezzled millions of *kwacha* through loopholes in the public finance system. Although this illicit network has been set up during Bingu wa's rule, it presumably cost Banda the re-election (Jomo, 2017). The scandal also highlighted the deeply entrenched culture of corruption within the higher echelons of government. Peter Mutharika, brother to Bingu wa, won the presidential election in 2014 on the DPP ticket.

Since the 2014 elections, the situation in Malawi stayed fairly calm. Peter Mutharika was not as much a target of criticism as his brother or Joyce Banda before him had been. FISP is still in place while the government promises a reform of the program, an increase of area under irrigation with heightened agricultural productivity, as well as an overall recovery of the nation's economy (Mutharika, 2016). Yet the recurring droughts and persistent food insecurity seem to have created an atmosphere of despair. There are reports of lynch murder against alleged vampires and witches who are accused of spreading evil and disease (Masina, 2018; AFP, 2017). In the face of the ongoing economic crisis, a harsh moral economy appears to play out in the rural sphere. This speaks for the de-politicization of economic and food-related problems.

5 Discussion

Programs like FISP are not much more than short-term technological fixes. It is also quite questionable wether they reach the desired aims to alleviate rural food insecurity. Better-off farmers might profit disproportionately, and fraud is an issue in program implementation (Dorward & Chirwa, 2011). For a few years, the subsidy programmes may bring about positive change for those who benefit from it. But in the long run, the programs do not only put strain on the government coffers, they also have adverse environmental impacts. Use of chemical fertilizers, for instance, has unwanted side-effects like eutrophication and contamination of groundwater (Ayoub, 1999). Also, fertilizer subsidies possibly hinder the proliferation of agroecological practices that are preferable, but much harder to implement, such as appliance of organic fertilizers, intercropping and use of traditional seeds (Wise, 2016), application of agroforestry (Thangata & Alavalapati, 2003), etc. What is more, there is a danger of complete commercialization of the seed and fertilizer market through international agribusiness companies (Bezner Kerr, 2012); to the degree that farmers rely on (subsidized) commercial seeds and fertilizers, they become more dependent on purchased inputs, which heightens the risk of debt and does not decrease the risk of food insecurity on the household scale. Long-term evaluations of the program has been less enthusiastic than initial accounts (Messina et al., 2017).

Still, it has to be determined why the politics of Bingu wa Mutharika, specifically, were of a populist character. There is an widespread alternative model of explanation in the theory of neo-patrimonialism. Based on Weberian institutionalism, neo-patrimonialism describes a hybrid mode of rule were a political leader distributes state resources, privileges and rents through highly personalized, informal clientel networks that escape public control (Erdmann & Engel, 2006). The concept has been criticized for its imprecise and unhistoric application in African national contexts (Mkandawire, 2015). Yet what is more, it can be maintained that Bingu wa Mutharika's agricultural policies in his first term were exactly geared towards gathering as much popular support as possible, hence the broad and encompassing, nationwide design of FISP (Chinsinga & Poulton, 2014, cf.), and did not only benefit certain networks of power. While elements of patronage were certainly present in Mutarika's government, those have been a constant in Malawian politics since Kamuzu Banda's regime (Phiri & Edriss, 2013, p. 1). Given the heightened occurrence of food crises in this century, policies overtly designed to combat food insecurity can be explained as an opportunist, flexible strategy of agrarian populism to create legitimacy.

6 Conclusion

Malawi's rural population is under immense pressure from several forces; one of them are frequent droughts, but the peripheral position of the country in the global economy manifests and exacerbates the impacts of climate calami- ties. Droughts and agricultural poverty have opened windows of opportunity for populist politicians to create and expand a rural power base, using fertilizer subsidy programs as an effective short-term tool to support their claim to power. President Bingu wa Mutharika was the first to go down this road, but he was followed by his successors, Joyce Banda and Peter Mutharika, to varying degrees.

Considering the perpetuation of bitter poverty, the unjust dual land owner-ship structure, and Malawi's peripheral role in the global economic order, the analysis points to the limited effectiveness of the populist policies in alleviating the grievances of rural population. In particular the FISP programs have not reduced vulnerability against climate extremes, or managed to abolish food insecurity.

Historically, in Malawi authoritarian rule and dependence on government assistance to farmers reinforce each other. Yet this is not an argument against intervention of state agencies in agricultural production per se. The main problem is the lack of accountability and democratic control of government which goes together with Malawi's own brand of agrarian populism. In times of hardship, the dissatisfactory performance of the government in battling drought, hunger and economic decline has been met by protest. But the politicization of this vital issues has remained imperfect and fails to gather mass support most of the times, with the exception of the 2011 protests. Civil society, party allegiance, and political mobilization are weak as most Malawians struggle to survive, and disillusionment with political leaders is widespread.

In the current lean season of early 2018, Malawi is in another drought- induced crisis, after food prices had slackened thanks to a relatively satisfactory harvest in 2016/17. But this time the situation is worsened by the appearance of a dangerous pest, the fall armyworm, that has arrived in Southern Africa since 2016. In response to these challenges, President Mutharika on January 19, 2018 has asked religious leaders to pray for rain (Phiri, 2018). When every other resource is used up, populist leaders may still appeal to the piety of their people – but to what avail other than their own clinging to power?

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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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