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SPOT THE DIFFERENCE: A COMPARISON OF PRESIDENTS' AND GOVERNMENTS' PERFORMANCE SINCE 1999

Introduction

Malawi has had two presidents since the start of multipartyism in 1994. The first was Bakili Muluzi, who led the United Democratic Front (UDF) to two successive electoral victories in 1994 and 1999. The second is Bingu wa Mutharika, who won as a UDF candidate in 2004, but quit the party to form his own, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), in 2005.

The performance of all governments is constantly being reviewed, reported on and rated by a variety of experts. If one picks up an annual economic and social report on Malawi, it will indicate how the government has performed on various fronts, including sectoral growth, overall gross domestic product (GDP) growth, inflation, exchange and interest rate movements, provision of health and education services, social security, and improved water supply, among others. Such reports are generally derived from data that has been professionally collected from administrative records. But we rarely hear from the people who directly feel the effects of government successes and failures in each of these sectors. In this bulletin, therefore, our goal is to present the views of the Malawian people on these topics. How do they evaluate the performance of their governments in general, and their presidents in particular, along similar lines to those covered in these annual economic and social reports?

With the advantage of datasets covering four survey points – namely 1999, 2003, 2005 and 2008 – Afrobarometer surveys allow us to compare performance ratings for the two presidents and their administrations. Two surveys have been conducted during each administration, although the two for Muluzi were both conducted in his second term in office, whereas those for Mutharika have both been conducted during his first term. But with this difference in mind, the data nonetheless provides a fair basis for comparison of the two administrations. We will also examine regional differences in popular assessments¹.

In sum, we find that President Mutharika and his government, especially in the most recent 2008 survey, are viewed by Malawians as significantly out-performing their predecessors. Across nearly every sector, the Mutharika government gets considerably higher popular performance reviews. Water supply and sanitation are the only exception, and even here, President Muluzi's advantage is very narrow. In addition, while the public was relatively cautious in its ratings the performance of President Mutharika himself in 2005, he has won overwhelming support in 2008. Moreover, he has done this by bringing the country together. Under President Muluzi, regional differences in performance ratings were stark – Southerners were much more satisfied than Northerners in nearly every aspect of government performance. President Mutharika initially

¹ This bulletin does not disaggregate the ratings by rural-urban or gender because in both cases, the differences between the two groups were generally not statistically significant. As is explained below, only differences between sub-groups greater than 5% are considered significant according to the design of the study.

(2005) reversed this pattern, satisfying Northerners much more than Southerners. But by 2008, he has closed the gap, and now achieves high performance ratings across all three regions. It appears that Malawians are now relatively united in liking much of what they see from the current administration. We also note, however, that the public still sees considerable room for improvement in the government's economic performance. The Mutharika government's job is not over yet.

Background

The Muluzi era is well known for unleashing freedoms for people to do anything, after years of strict economic and social control under the rule of former President Hastings Kamuzu Banda. It was an era of booming vending and trading businesses, improvements in the quality and ease of transport and communication, and greater ability to speak and organize freely. However, this period was also marked by rampant crime and price explosion. Muluzi's two administrations, but especially the first one, were credited with introducing free primary education and community day secondary schools², providing boreholes to almost every village, and providing free inputs to smallholder farmers and credit to small businesses. The Muluzi governments were often criticized, however, for poor economic management, and they were dogged by allegations of corruption. It often appeared that people at the right place at the right time seemed to become rich overnight, making the regime popular among those who managed to find themselves in such advantaged positions. In addition, many thought the Muluzi government was complacent in dealing with political violence and rampant crime.

Mutharika's government, in contrast, is known for its quest to fight corruption and stabilise the economy, which was very rocky at the time he came to power. His emphasis on national food self-sufficiency led to the introduction of input subsidies to smallholder farmers. Since he took office, there has been no further need to import maize to cover a national food gap. The Mutharika government is also credited by many for finally dealing decisively with the crime problem. At the same time, Mutharika's government has been plagued by false starts, and accused of selective justice and 'witch hunting' in the implementation of the highly publicised zero-tolerance program on corruption. The corruption charges against the former President and former Finance Minister, among others in the opposition, are cases in point. These cases remain under investigation for years. The Mutharika government is also accused of sensationalizing political crimes. The Vice President has been accused of plotting to assassinate the President, a case that has remained unresolved for years. In 2008 another 'plot' to assassinate the president was also 'uncovered'. Despite 'overwhelming evidence' in both cases, solid evidence is yet to be brought to court for everyone to see. Moreover, the Vice President is still under 'house arrest' and other 'plotters' are still in custody awaiting trial. Thus, while the economic boat appears to have been steadied under Mutharika's government, the political boat has been rocked by his decision to form his own political party after dumping of the party that sponsored his election.

How do Malawians' own assessments of government priorities and performance compare to these common perceptions and the claims of analysts about the strengths and weaknesses of each administration? Do people agree with the assessments described above, or do they have a different view? This bulletin presents citizens' assessments of government performance in each of these sectors, to be compared and contrasted with analysts' claims and conventional wisdom.

² The Muluzi government converted distance education centres (DECs) into community day secondary schools. These have served as secondary schools for primary schools surrounding them. This was in response to high demand for secondary school places following the success of the free primary education policy.

About the Malawi Round 4 Afrobarometer Survey

Afrobarometer surveys are now conducted in 20 countries in Africa, using a common survey instrument and methodology. The recent survey in Malawi was the fourth in a series. The first three rounds were conducted in 1999, 2003 and 2005 respectively. The Round 4 survey in Malawi was conducted in October 2008. A randomly selected, nationally representative sample of 1,200 potential voters (persons aged 18 years and above) were interviewed, comprised of equal numbers of men and women. The survey covered all districts of the country, with each district sampled in proportion to its share of the national population. The results of this survey are therefore representative at the national, regional and urban/rural levels. At the national level, inferences can be made about all voting age citizens with a margin of sampling error of approximately ± 3 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.³ The sampling strategy employed ensured that every adult Malawian had an equal and known chance of being selected.

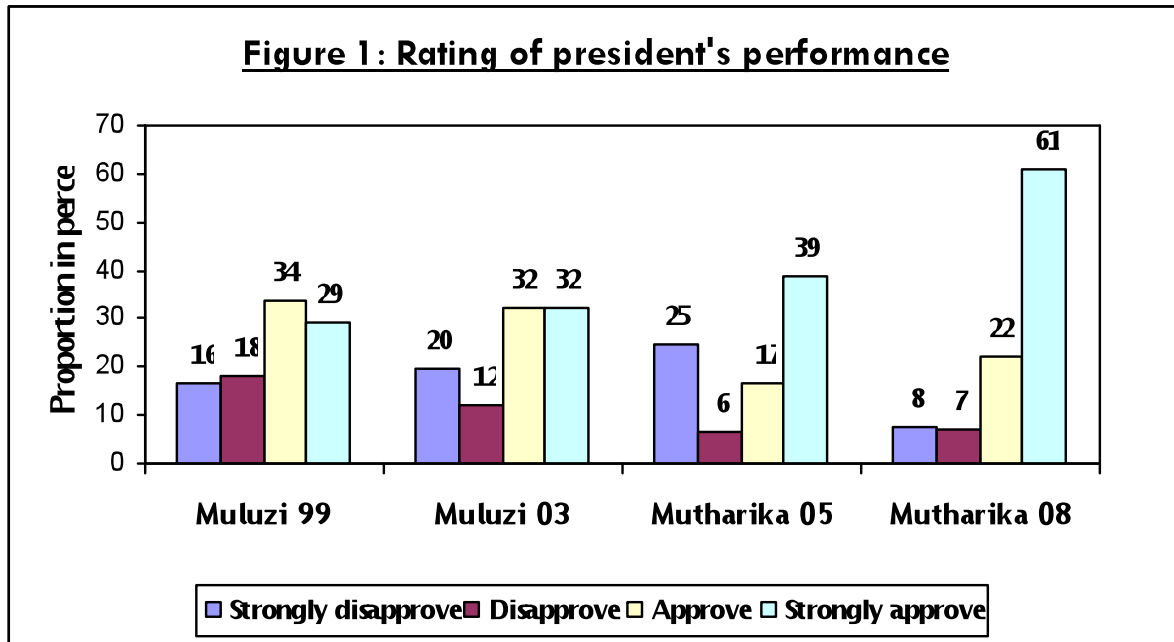
Presidential Performance

To evaluate presidential performance, we ask respondents: ‘Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Muluzi/Mutharika has performed his job over the past twelve months, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say?’ This question has been asked twice with respect to each of these presidents.

President Muluzi received reasonably positive marks from the public in both the 1999 and 2003 surveys, with 63% and 64%, respectively, saying that they either ‘approved’ or ‘strongly approved’ of his job performance. There was no significant change in popular evaluations between the first and second surveys. And those who gave a positive evaluation were relatively evenly divided between those who just approved, and those who ‘strongly approved’ of his performance (Figure 1)

Mutharika’s evaluation, in contrast, has changed markedly over the past three years. In 2005, early in his administration, and shortly after his departure from the UDF and the political turmoil that ensued, his approval rating was somewhat lower than Muluzi’s at 56%. It is also notable, though, that compared to Muluzi’s earlier ratings, the public was much more polarized in its feelings about President Mutharika, with higher proportions falling both in the ‘strongly approve’ (39%) and the ‘strongly disapprove’ (25%) categories. By 2008, however, there has been a dramatic shift in Mutharika’s favour – he received an impressive 83% positive rating, and fully 61% – nearly two-thirds of all Malawians – report “strongly approving” of his performance. Thus, while Mutharika started out slightly behind Muluzi in popular performance ratings, he has now far surpassed him. But again, it is important to keep in mind that the ratings of Muluzi’s performance were both captured during his second term, by which time the ‘glow’ has often worn off of an administration, whereas the assessments of Mutharika were both captured during his first term in office.

³ Thus, for an estimate of 50 percent holding a particular view, we can have a high level of confidence that the true percentage would lie within ± 3 percent, i.e., between 47 and 53 percent.



'Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Muluzi/Mutharika has performed his job over the past twelve months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?'

Government Performance

Why are the ratings and trends between the two leaders so different? One possible answer can come from the performance of the governments that each led. To assess government performance, we asked respondents: 'How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?' We then asked them about a host of issues, including managing the economy, providing water and sanitation services, and others. Figures 2 and 3 show the percent offering positive responses (fairly or very well) on a host of social and economic issues. Each government's performance is reflected in its 'party colours', yellow for UDF, and blue for the DPP.

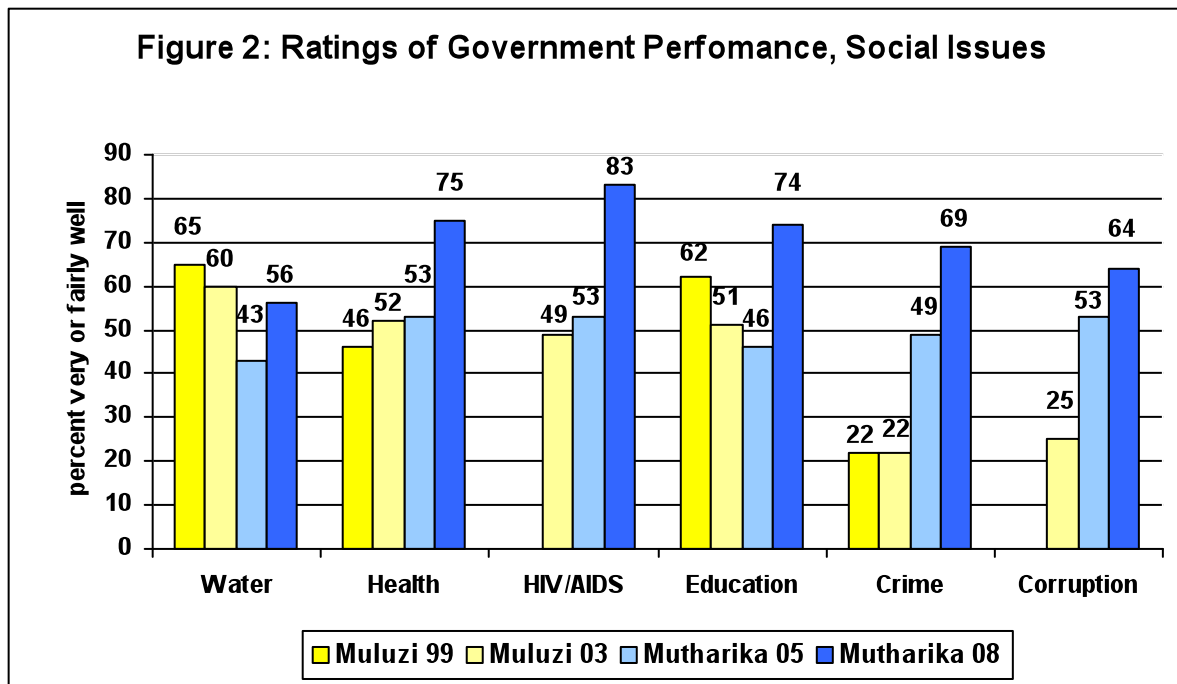
We again have 4 data points for most parts of this question (although some parts were not asked in 1999), though the fairest comparison might be between the first data point in 1999, taken 5 years into President Muluzi's rule, (early in his second term and shortly *after* presidential elections), and the last in 2008, 4 years into the government of President Mutharika (not long *before* the 2009 election).⁴

Overall, we note the higher ratings for Mutharika's government in 2008 relative to all of the other data points, but especially relative to those for Muluzi's government (in both 1999 and 2003). These recent high ratings of the DPP government's performance could explain the very positive review offered of Mutharika's overall performance in the most recent survey. In 2008, the DPP government outperformed the UDF governments in all areas except the provision of water and sanitation services, and even in this sector, the UDF governments only outperformed the DPP governments by a narrow margin.⁵ People perceive that the Mutharika governments may not

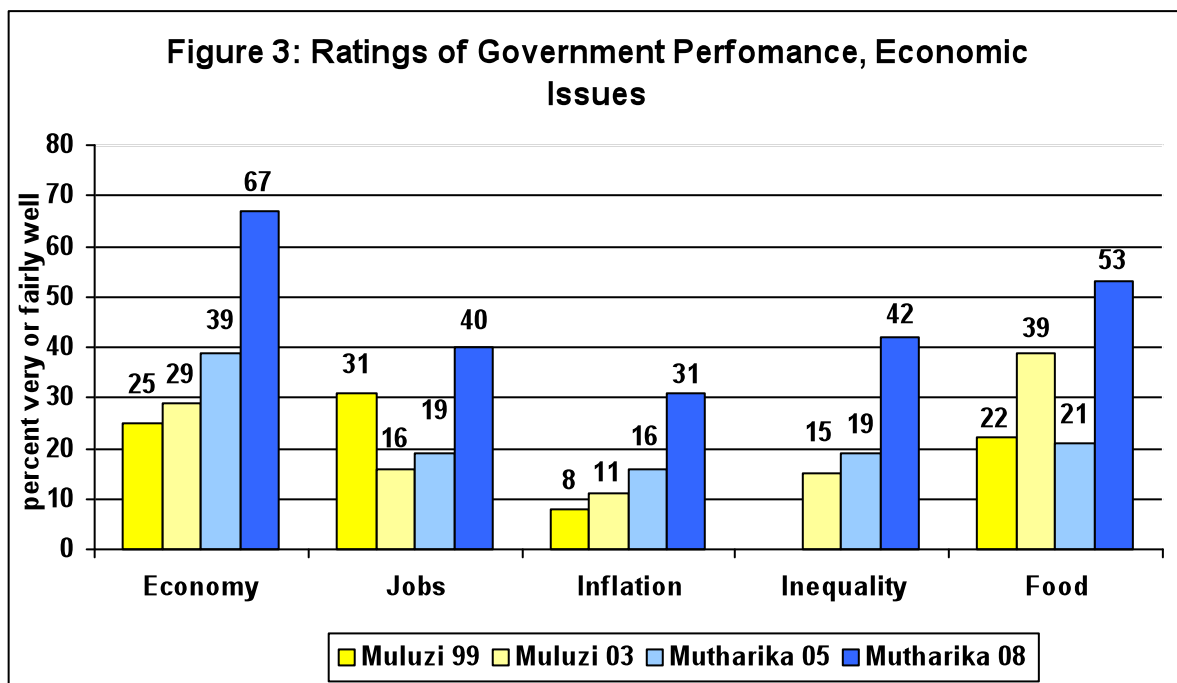
⁴ We do note that the timing relative to the election could play some role, especially as many governments tend to increase spending and activities in the months prior to an election. So these possible effects of timing should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

⁵ In fact the difference between Muluzi's 2003 government and Mutharika's in 2008 is less than 5%, which is not statistically significant.

have matched the borehole-drilling pace of the Muluzi era – when improving water supply was one of the highest priority issues – but on all other issues Mutharika’s government significantly outperforms Muluzi’s.



‘How well or badly would you say the current government is handling each of the following issues, or haven’t you heard enough to say?’



‘How well or badly would you say the current government is handling each of the following issues, or haven’t you heard enough to say?’

Several other points are worth noting as well. Food security (“ensuring that everyone has enough to eat” in the original question text) is the next closest issue for the two governments: the margin between the highest scores for each government is just 14 percentage points. This is significant in that the Mutharika government considers food security to be one of its priorities and an area of achievement that sets it apart from the previous government. Indeed, the budget for the Ministry of Agriculture has increased significantly and national food security has improved. Given this, and in consideration of the 2001-2002 food crisis under President Muluzi, we might have expected to see an even larger margin between the two governments. But apparently the public still sees considerable room for further improvement in government performance in this sector.

Ratings with regard to the fights against crime and corruption are also notable. These are two areas where even the initial rating of Mutharika’s government (in 2005) was far better than those for Muluzi’s, and the ratings have climbed considerably higher still by 2008 (69% positive for crime, and 64% for corruption). One is not sure whether these ratings are based on reports about the Mutharika government’s drives to combat these problems as reported on the radio and in newspapers, or lived experience. The ratings would have, at best, remained the same if they were based on lived experiences since there have been no positive changes in reported victimization between 2003 and 2008. For example, 84% said they never feared crime in their own homes in 2003, compared to just 70% in 2008. Similarly, there are no significant differences in the proportions of those who say that they never had anything stolen from their home or were never physically attacked in 2003 and 2008. This implies that the high rating of the current government for reducing crime is not necessarily based on lived experience, but rather on broader perceptions of the situation in the country at large.

A similar point can be made with regard to the fight against corruption. The proportion of people saying that various groups of officials are never involved in corruption is only slightly higher in 2008 than in 2003 for the OPC, tax administrators and judiciary, but the differences are small and not statistically significant (i.e., they are within the margin of error, or less than 5 percentage points). There is therefore no strong evidence to conclude that the current government’s high ratings for the fights against crime and corruption in 2008 are based on lived experience.

We also note that the fight against HIV/AIDS has the highest rating for the Mutharika government. People seem to be saying that the Muluzi warm up ‘*Tipewe*’ shouts⁶ were not as effective as Mutharika’s ‘*RVs*’⁷. People have seen the difference this move has made in the lives of many, perhaps often including respondents themselves or their own relatives.

Finally, we note that for both Muluzi’s and Mutharika’s governments, performance ratings for economic management issues are generally much lower than those for social issues, although the high positive ratings (67%) for economic management in 2008 are a big plus for the current government. But the Mutharika government’s low point is its rating for keeping prices down (only 31% positive), which is especially notable considering that inflation has been brought down to single digits for the first time in many years. It seems strange that people rate the Mutharika government relatively poorly on this issue, but it may in part reflect the fact that prices were already high when Mutharika came to office, so even reducing inflation was not enough to erase popular concerns about this issue. However, it may also be instructive to view this in conjunction with ratings on food security, job scarcity and unequal distribution of income:

⁶ President Muluzi usually started his rallies with the message ‘*Tipewe*’, to which the party ‘choir’ then responded ‘*chifukwa EDZI ilibe mankhwala*’ (meaning ‘let us prevent HIV/AIDS because there is no cure’) as an HIV/AIDS prevention message.

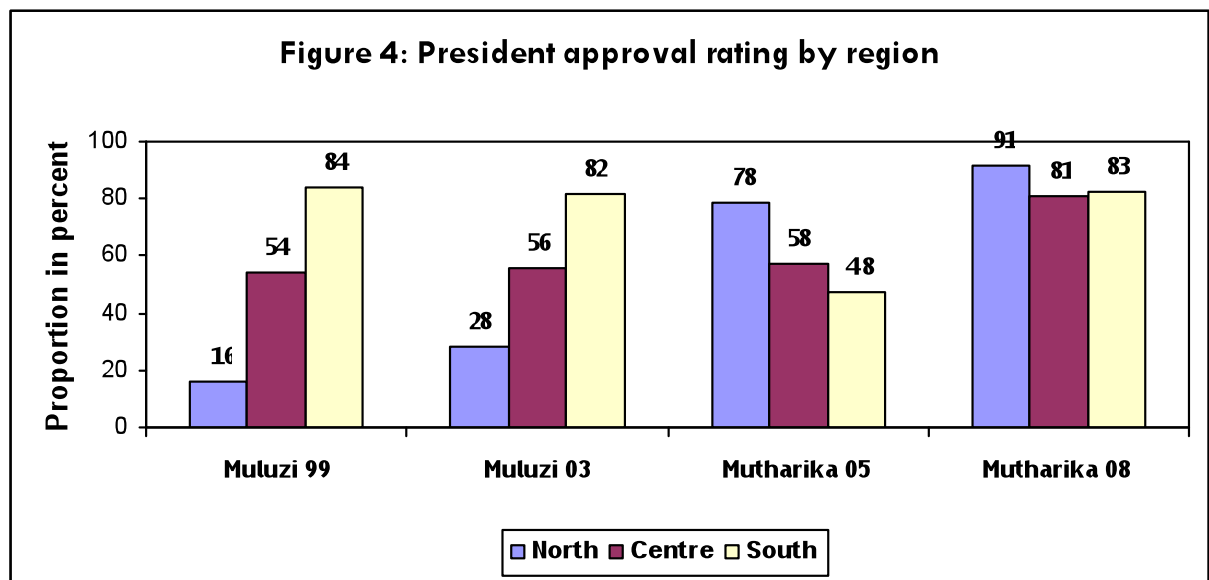
⁷ The Mutharika government has introduced the provision of anti-retroviral treatment (RVs) to HIV/AIDS patients who go for voluntary counseling and testing in public and semi-public health facilities.

economic performance, while improving, is clearly still not where it should be in the minds of many Malawians. The message is that while people may be seeing improvements in aggregate macroeconomic management, the big picture is still not necessarily putting food on the table, paraffin in the lamp, matches in the kitchen, salt on the vegetables, and sugar in the porridge.

Regional Differences in Performance Ratings⁸

Regional differences in these performance ratings are worth exploring. Starting with presidential performance, we see that when former President Muluzi was in office, there were very sharp regional differences in his performance ratings (Figure 4). Northerners were far less satisfied with their president’s performance than Southerners, although he made significant gains in the region between 1999 and 2003. But even so, in 2003 his support there was only about one-third of the level he secured in the South. Malawians from Central Region were more evenly divided on the issue, with a slim majority offering positive reviews in both 1999 and 2003.

President Mutharika initially reversed this pattern. In 2005 it was Northerners who gave the highest ratings, and Southerners the lowest – though the margin between the two groups was considerably less than for President Muluzi. And by 2008, the regional differences almost disappear. Ratings are still higher in the North, but now large majorities in the Centre and South also express satisfaction with the President’s performance.



‘Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Muluzi/Mutharika has performed his job over the past twelve months, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say?’

Mutharika’s high ratings in the North seem to suggest that the people in this region have ‘adopted’ him and his DPP government, just as the DPP itself adopted the bulk of northern MPs after they disbanded their own parties⁹. Malawians from Central Region, in contrast, were relatively consistent in their ratings of both presidents’ performance until the most recent survey. Apparently Mutharika’s performance changed the conservative position long held in the region. It is also worth noting that while Southerners might initially have been disappointed with

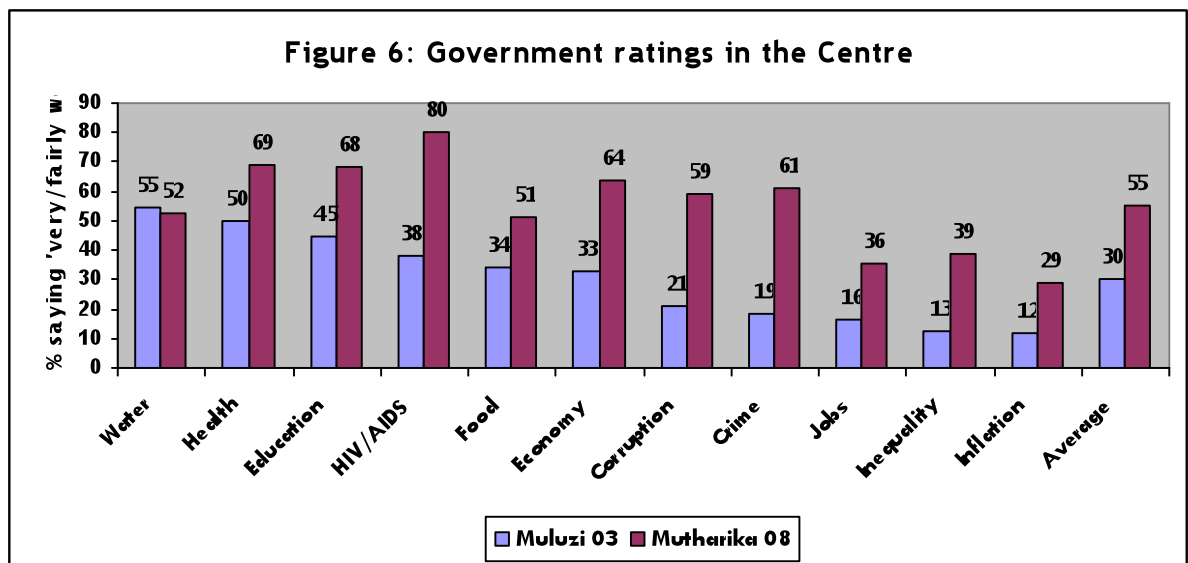
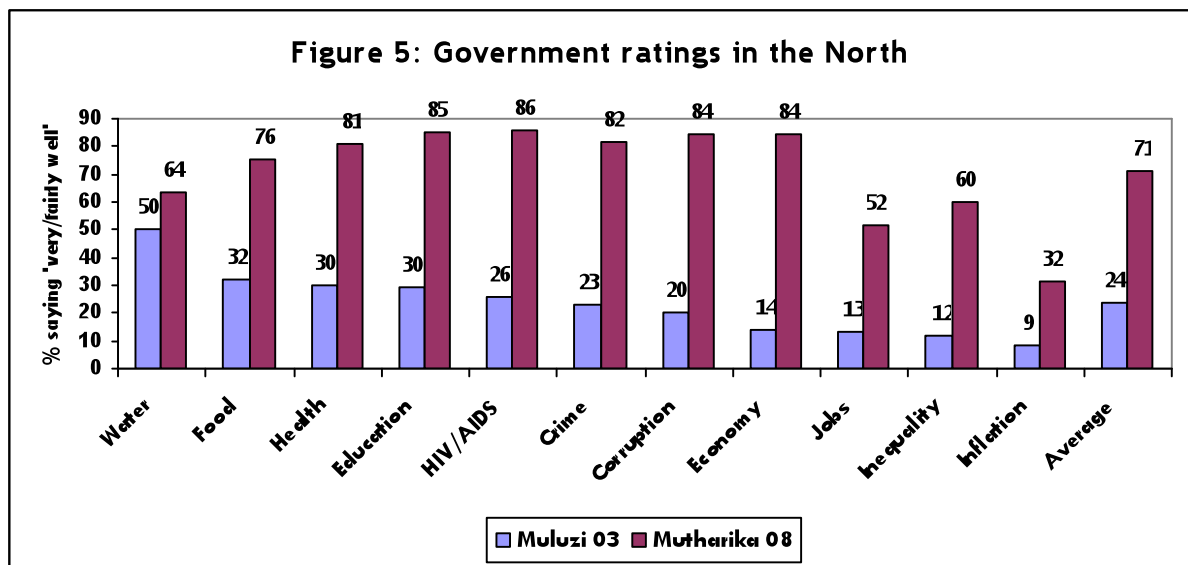
⁸ The analysis in this section is based on the combined ratings of ‘strongly approve’ and ‘approve’ on the overall performance of the president and ‘very well’ and ‘fairly well’ for current government performance, in the spirit of Figures 1, 2 and 3.

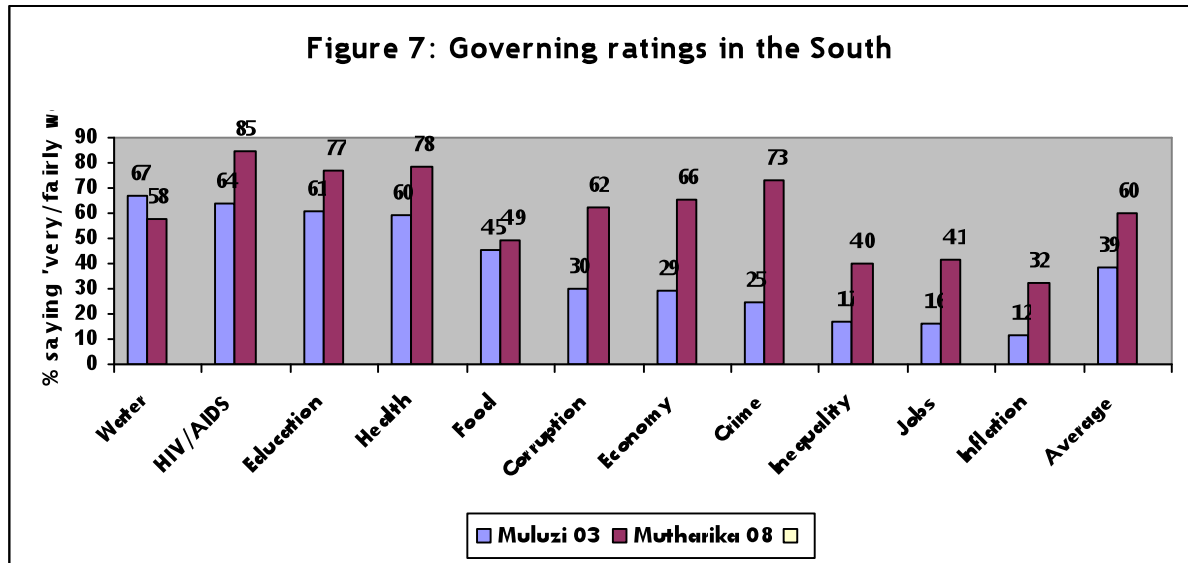
⁹ The related bulletin on ‘Political Party Support and the End of Regionalism’ provides some detailed background to this.

Mutharika's decision to dump their favoured UDF, they seem to have recovered after observing the president perform for four years.

It is clear that in 2008, Malawians, regardless of region, agree that the current president is doing his job well. For the first time since 1999, the president appeals to all people regardless of their region and political leanings. The question is why all the regions are now united in their approval of the president's performance? We explore this question by looking at regional ratings of government performance in 2003 and 2008.

Figures 5 to 7 present the ratings of the Muluzi 2003 government and the Mutharika 2008 government on eleven key issues. Again, the presentation uses the combination of 'very well' and 'fairly well' to signify a positive rating for each of the issues. A regional average is calculated to serve as a comparator.





'How well or badly would you say the current government is handling each of the following issues, or haven't you heard enough to say?'

We can detect some interesting regional differences. For example, with regard to the provision of water, we find that in the North, the Mutharika government is seen to have surpassed the Muluzi government, although the difference is not significant. In the Centre, the Muluzi government was rated to have done better than Mutharika, but again the difference is not significant. It is in the South where the Muluzi government is perceived to have significantly outperformed the Mutharika government on this issue. Apart from differences in political leanings, this could also indicate that borehole drilling was concentrated in the South.

Note the pattern of regional ratings. The ratings of the Muluzi government warm up as one moves to the South. For the Mutharika government, a 'V' appears as one move from the North to the South; ratings are high in the North, lower in the Centre, and high again in the South. The differences between the two governments are smallest in the centre, and highest in the North. Apart from a few issues like food security, there is consistency in the ratings of the two governments' performance across issues and regions.

These government ratings resemble the presidential ratings presented above. It is likely therefore that the approval ratings achieved by the two Presidents in 2003 and 2008 were closely related to the performance of their respective governments.

Conclusion

These findings clearly show that presidential and government performance ratings generally reflect some regional sympathies, although in the most recent survey, President Mutharika seems to have overcome these differences. He is the first president to register strong approval across all regions of the country. Clearly, his government is seen to be performing much more effectively than that of his predecessor. The provision of water earned the Muluzi government high marks – higher than the Mutharika government. But on all other issues, the Mutharika government earns higher marks for its performance from Chitipa to Nsanje, even in areas that have traditionally been predominantly 'yellow' and 'green'. Malawians in all regions and everywhere are reporting differences between the presidencies of Muluzi and Mutharika and the performance of their respective governments.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Maxton Grant Tsoka

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