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. Elections replaced coups as the primary mechanism for leadership change. Studies of other areas of public policy, including health and education, suggest that democracy sometimes prompts public policy reforms (e.g. Harding and Stasavage 2013; Carbone and Pellegata 2017) and has almost always prevented death through famine (Devereux and Tiba 2007). To date, however, there has been little analysis of whether and how democratization matters for social assistance in Africa, or of whether and how social assistance informs electoral and partisan politics.

The standard explanation of why elections matter focuses on the representation of poorer citizens. Opposition parties may oust incumbents whom poor voters consider insufficiently responsive to their needs. Even when opposition parties fail to win an election, they sometimes pose a sufficiently serious challenge that incumbent parties are pushed into reforms intended to bolster their support. Democratic freedoms also allow the media and civil society to monitor more effectively governments’ performance and to draw attention to governments’ failings.

The experience of the advanced capitalist countries suggests that democratic competition shapes both the extent and 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 1990; Huber and Stephens 2001). In Latin America and South and East Asia, social assistance reforms have generally been pioneered by politicians or parties on the left or centre-left (Seekings 2012), although some right-wing candidates have subsequently embraced and even extended these reforms (Fairfield and Garay 2017).

In Africa, few parties line up neatly on the left–right political continuum associated with industrialized societies. 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 (Rakner et al. 2007; Resnick 2012). Voters expect their parliamentary representatives to deliver patronage to their constituents rather than legislate programmatic reforms (Cheeseman 2016) and vote at least in part along ethnic lines (e.g. Norris and Mattes 2013; Hoffman and Long 2013). Election campaigns tend to focus on valence issues, with competing candidates claiming to be more efficient (and less corrupt) (Bleck and Van de Walle 2013).

Nonetheless, recent studies suggest that electoral competition in Africa has contributed to social assistance policy reforms. Changes of government were consequential in Zambia (Siachiwena 2016, Pruce and Hickey, Chapter 7 of this volume), Zimbabwe (Chinyoka and Seekings 2016), and perhaps also Ghana (Grebe 2015). The vulnerability of incumbent parties drove reform in Botswana (Hamer 2015; Seekings, Chapter 2 of this volume) and Zanzibar (Seekings 2016). In most of these cases, social assistance has been a valence issue, in that the competing parties have not staked out starkly contrasting positions. In any particular country, parties generally concurred on the direction of reform, i.e. they were usually either uniformly supportive (at least rhetorically, claiming pro-poor credentials) or uniformly opposed (sharing concerns over both the affordability of and ‘dependency’ on government ‘handouts’). Elections may have sometimes provided a mechanism through which voters have held governments to account, but they have rarely been decided on the basis of distinct policy platforms. In office, however, parties have differed in their approaches to social protection, shaping the form of welfare state-building. In Botswana, for example, the Botswana Democratic Party built a welfare state with conservative characteristics (see Seekings, Chapter 2 of this volume).

Malawi has been a significant exception to some of these more general patterns. Until the mid-2000s, Malawian parties were largely indistinguishable, voters did not form blocks defined by their common interests, and
elections were therefore not mechanisms for the representation of voters with well-defined interests (Rakner et al 2007; Svåsand 2013). Since 2005, however, the fluidity in partisan politics provided a powerful incentive to individual presidential candidates to develop strong, clear, and national ‘brands’. The dominant ‘brand’—developed by Bingu wa Mutharika (president from 2004 until 2012) and then inherited by his brother Peter Mutharika (who was elected president in 2014)—focused on generous support for small farmers to expand agricultural production. When Joyce Banda succeeded the older Mutharika as president in 2012, she chose to brand herself as the champion of social assistance. 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. Starkly contrasting positions on social assistance reform featured prominently in the 2014 elections.

This chapter contributes to the growing literature on the political conditions leading to social assistance policy reform in Africa. We argue that competitive elections in Africa can provide an incentive to reform by pushing presidential candidates and parties to brand themselves, often in populist ways. The chapter also points to the limits of this electoral impetus to reform. Joyce Banda was defeated heavily in the 2014 election. Although the scale of her defeat reflected other factors also, the case of Malawi does not support the contention by Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme (2010) that social assistance is uniformly popular. Voters might prefer alternative forms of public expenditure and might also doubt the deservingness of at least some categories of grant beneficiaries. Competition can push candidates to brand themselves with social assistance reform, but this may not be a sufficiently popular brand to win an election. Indeed, if it was clearly a popular issue, the other parties might be expected also to express at least rhetorical support for reform.

2. The Economy, Politics, and Policy
Under Bingu wa Mutharika

Malawi has long been one of the poorest countries in southern Africa, suffering from slow economic growth, chronic food insecurity, widespread poverty, and dependence on foreign aid. The overwhelming majority of the population remained dependent on peasant agriculture, supplemented with migrant remittances. Malawi’s first president, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, imagined that agricultural estates would be the primary engine of economic growth.
At the same time, he sought to encourage smallholder maize production, through price support and subsidized inputs. In the 1980s, economic crisis and pressure from the World Bank led to the liberalization of farm input and maize markets. Peasant cash crop production expanded, but maize production faltered (Harrigan 2003, 2005). Banda suppressed any discussion of poverty, but the country’s first household survey, conducted in 1997–8 after Banda had been ousted from office, showed that almost two thirds of the population lived in poverty (Ellis, Kutengule, and Nyasulu 2003).

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) were defeated in multi-party elections by the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by former MCP secretary-general Bakili Muluzi. Both the MCP and UDF had regional support bases, in the central and southern parts of the country, respectively. A third party—the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD)—was based in the north. All three parties tried but failed to project themselves as supra-regional (van Donge 1995). The parties did not have distinctive political platforms, and their leaders readily switched loyalties in shifting coalitions, changing their colours in a ‘democracy of chameleons’ (Englund 2002: 17). This regional distribution of support was largely repeated in 1999 (when Muluzi was re-elected) and 2004 (when his chosen successor Mutharika was elected). Voters seem to have been swayed by their perceptions of regional favouritism in patronage by successive governments (Ferree and Horowitz 2010).

The Muluzi governments acknowledged the scale of poverty in Malawi, in contrast to the previous regime, and focused on smallholder production. In 1998, one year prior to elections, the government launched a Starter Pack Programme to encourage maize production. Initially funded in large part by donors (primarily the UK’s Department for International Development, DFID, and the World Bank), the Starter Pack Programme provided free seeds and other inputs to almost 3 million households in 1999/2000. Donors became increasingly sceptical, however, preferring to address poverty through targeted public works programmes¹ and other measures. Donor pressure

¹ The World Bank supported successive phases of the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF): MASAF I (1996–2001), MASAF II (1998–2003), MASAF III (in three stages from 2002), and, much later, MASAF IV (from 2013). Most of these phases included a public works component, although most of the funds seem to have been allocated to the provision of building materials. Communities were expected to provide free labour; little MASAF funding was spent on paying for labour. We are grateful to one of the reviewers for clarifying this point.
resulted in subsidized inputs being targeted more narrowly on the poor, as a safety net rather than a production-oriented intervention (Harrigan 2005; Potter 2005). Nonetheless, and despite drought and food crisis in 2001–3 (during which one third of the population needed food aid—Devereux and Tiba 2007), real GDP per capita rose and poverty declined (albeit slowly).

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 (DPP). Mutharika chose to brand himself by launching what he presented as 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)—massively expanded the provision of subsidized fertilizer and seed to smallholder farmers. The programme was launched in the 2005/6 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). This in turn contributed to a sharp rise in real GDP per capita.

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. Mutharika himself took over the portfolio of Minister of Agriculture and Food Security. AISP subsidies were symbolically important as well as materially valuable to small farmers. Subsidized or free farm inputs appealed to strongly held values. Because ‘a good and respectable life in the village means growing one’s own food’, programmes such as the Starter Pack Programme and AISP helped ‘to restore self-respect’ (Van Donge, 2005: 125). In addition, Mutharika could 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, Mutharika famously declared: ‘Enough is enough; I am not going to go on my knees to beg for food; let us grow the food ourselves’.² 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’.³

² ‘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).

³ 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/news/it-possible-africa-become-food-basket-world-says-mutharika, accessed 3 June 2019).
government scaled up subsidies massively, to almost US$300 million, i.e. 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 presidential vote, with clear majorities in all three regions. No previous candidate had won even a plurality outside his home region. The DPP won 114 of the 193 seats in the National Assembly. Mutharika’s defiance of international aid donors in implementing the AISP and boosting maize production underpinned his supra-regional appeal and hence his electoral victory (Ferree and Horowitz 2010).

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 benefited. The programme did not target the poorest (or most food-insecure) households; indeed, female-headed households were less likely to receive benefits. The study found no evidence of either partisan or ethnic targeting, but there were partisan consequences. 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; see also Brazys et al. 2015).

Mutharika showed little interest in social assistance, 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 for the modest benefits (which averaged just over US$11/month/household). The programme’s advocates envisaged that coverage would be gradually extended, reaching about 140,000 households by the end of 2012. Even though the programme was almost entirely funded by donors, and a preliminary impact evaluation showed positive effects, the Mutharika government was not enthusiastic. By 2012, the programme reached only 30,000 households in total, and the roll-out

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4 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).
was yet to begin in nineteen of the country’s twenty-eight districts (Angeles et al. 2016: 282–305). A draft National Social Support Policy was not approved by the government. Many poor households did benefit from school feeding programmes, and some from other programmes, but less than 1 per cent of households received cash transfers (Malawi 2012: 173–4, 177–8). In contrast, about one half of all rural households received FISP subsidies. FISP, almost entirely funded by the government, cost five times as much as all social protection programmes (including feeding and public employment programmes), almost entirely funded by donors (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 elite more generally. In 2008, Kalebe-Nyamongo interviewed ministers and MPs, senior government officials, and prominent people in the media, academia, and NGOs. She found that Malawi’s elites tended to view poverty as ‘normal’ (at least in rural areas) such that it could not be eliminated in the short-term. Whilst elites 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. Social assistance programmes were said to encourage laziness and ‘dependency’ on ‘handouts’. The elites preferred policies that assisted the poor to work their way out of poverty (Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette 2014). Our interviews with Malawian government officials and other members of Malawi’s elite broadly corroborated this assessment.⁵

3. Joyce Banda, Social Assistance, and Political Branding

Mutharika pushed for his brother Peter to succeed him as DPP leader. When the elected 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. In April 2012, Mutharika suffered a heart attack and died. Banda—who had established her own party, the People’s Party (PP), four months earlier—became president.

Her expulsion from the DPP and then unexpected ascent to the presidency presented Banda with the challenge of constructing a distinctive national and moral image. She chose to brand herself and her party as pro-poor. Whereas,

⁵ Sam Hamer interviewed sixteen political leaders, officials in government and NGOs, and academics, in mid-2014.
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 assistance programmes played a central part in her branding exercise, distinguishing both her and her party from Mutharika and the DPP’s embrace of farmer input subsidies.

Banda thus staked out a public brand 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, ‘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 [the peri-urban township of] Ndirande to console a […] victim of police brutality’.6 Indeed, Mutharika had reportedly chosen Banda as his running mate in 2009 precisely because of her pro-women and pro-poor image.7 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 twenty-five, 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’, she claimed, 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’.8

Reality did not entirely match this carefully constructed image. Banda’s second husband was the Chief Justice, and the two of them were considered to

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6 Kondwali Munthali, ‘The Joyce Banda I Know and ‘Trust’, 26 April 2012, http://www.munthali.com/2012/04/joyce-banda-i-know-and-trust.html.
7 ‘Malawi Leader Chooses Foreign Minister as Running Mate’, Reuters, 6 February 2009, (http://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-malawi-election-idAFJOE5150KO20090206, accessed 19 April 2017).
8 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 and 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).
be core members of the powerful ‘Zomba mafia’ within the political parties that governed Malawi for twenty years. The National Association of Business Women celebrated successes that were far removed from the lives of poor women. Whatever the reality, however, Banda was energetic in promoting her new brand.

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 ‘ordinary Malawian’. 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 Zomba in southern Malawi—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.¹⁰

Mutharika’s widow 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.¹¹ 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’.¹² 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

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⁹ ‘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).
¹⁰ ‘JB Attacks Poverty: “I Know Malawians Are Suffering”, Nyasa Times, 22 July 2013 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/jb-attacks-poverty-i-know-malawians-are-suffering, accessed 9 June 2015).
¹¹ ‘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).
¹² ‘Madam President: Meeting Malawi’s Joyce Banda’, Guardian, 20 December 2012 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBmaeOM1omY&feature=youtube_gdata_player).
the causes of people who had fallen through the cracks as a result of Mutharika’s growth-focused policies.¹³

In practice, Banda’s government’s first priority was to stabilize the economy, which had slid into crisis under Mutharika’s second government. 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 became the darling of the international community. She ordered the government to shed its fleet of Mercedes-Benz automobiles, sold the presidential jet, and reduced her own salary by one third.¹⁴ ‘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’. Her government’s austerity measures did indeed require sacrifices by many Malawians, through inflation and food shortages. In response, the government sought social programmes that could ‘cushion’ the poor.¹⁵

In July 2012, the new government approved the long-dormant National Social Support Policy. The value of the social cash transfer (SCT) was increased and an ambitious implementation programme was developed. The SCT Scheme Pilot was renamed the SCT Programme. Whilst no new programmes were introduced (as DPP MPs pointed out¹⁶), the new government proposed a rapid, countrywide roll-out of the SCT Programme as well as the expansion of public employment and school feeding programmes, with the cost to be shared between donors and the government of Malawi. SCTs would be rolled out to the poorest 10 per cent of the population, i.e. about 300,000 households, at a total cost of more than 1 per cent of GDP, of which the government would pay 40 per cent (Angeles et al 2016; Juergens and Pellerano 2016). The World Bank was broadly supportive, recommending that FISP focus on ‘viable’ peasant farmers, i.e. farmers with the capacity to expand production significantly, so that funds could be freed up for SCTs targeted more precisely on the poor (World Bank 2013).

¹³ State of the Nation Address, May 2012.
¹⁴ ‘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).
¹⁵ 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).
¹⁶ George Chaponda, Response to the State of the Nation Address, Hansard, 20 May 2013. There does not appear to have been any significant discussion of an old-age pension. It was only in 2015/16 that the ILO and HelpAge International began to work with Malawi government officials in developing new plans for a more comprehensive social protection ‘floor’, including social pensions.
Banda herself was said to be ‘euphoric on how the social protection programme has […] acted as a cushion against devaluation’.¹⁷ In practice, however, programmes expanded much more slowly than envisaged. Service delivery failed to match the ambitious rhetoric. Only modest additional funding was provided for public works programmes by either the government or the World Bank (Juergens and Pellerano 2016).¹⁸ Whilst there are no available data on the coverage and cost of SCT programmes at the end of Banda’s government in mid-2014, data for late 2015 show that even then SCTs reached only 160,000 households (in eighteen of the country’s twenty-eight districts), at a cost of just under 0.6 per cent of GDP. Both coverage and expense were just over one half of the targets set in 2012/13. Moreover, the government was paying for only 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. The government contribution to the costs of the school feeding and public works programmes had remained low, at between 10 and 20 per cent (Juergens and Pellerano 2016).

Faced with slow progress in the roll-out of these programmes, and the imminence of elections in May 2014, Banda resorted to the longstanding practice of high-profile handouts, packaged as new presidential programmes, implemented through her office and run by her own appointees. The Presidential Initiative on Poverty and Hunger Reduction (PIPaHR) targeted rural women,¹⁹ including through the provision of seeds and a ‘Cow—a—Family’ programme that (borrowing from a similar programme in Rwanda) provided poor families with a cow. 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 people over the following five years, if she was re-elected as president. The government also distributed 8,680 goats and sheep through a parallel Small Stock Project.²⁰ The Mudzi (Village) Transformation Trust (MTT) was

¹⁷ Chaponda, Hansard, 20 May 2013.
¹⁸ ‘Malawi President Launches K10bn Public Works Programme: Economic Recovery’, Nyasa Times, 9 December 2012 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/malawi-president-launches-k10bn-public-works-programme-economic-recovery, accessed June 2015).
¹⁹ ‘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).
²⁰ ‘JB Launches “a Cow a Family” Initiative: Pledges Houses for Malawi Flood Victims’, Nyasa Times, 28 February 2013 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/jb-launches-a-cow-a-family-initiative-pledges-houses-for-malawi-flood-victims, accessed 8 June 2015); Henry Nyaka, ‘Malawi: One Cow a Family
another hallmark programme on Banda’s ‘people-centred development agenda’. ‘As a mother’, Banda explained, ‘it is my sincere wish that Malawians must have decent, adequate and affordable accommodation’. By building houses for poor households, the MTT would ensure that development was inclusive and prosperity was shared. Banda herself presented ‘Mudzi houses’ to beneficiaries, with much publicity—although only 500 houses had been built by the end of 2013.²¹

Banda’s new programmes were widely criticized as entailing self-promotion more than poverty reduction: ‘The president is just trying to popularise herself’.²² Opposition MPs claimed that the president’s travel to deliver cows cost many times the value of the cows themselves.²³ But even critics acknowledged that these programmes were politically popular.²⁴ Giving cows to poor women was reported to be ‘effective with female voters especially’.²⁵ In her campaign for re-election in 2014, Banda emphasized both the cow and house programmes as symbols of her dedication to the poor. ‘It is a known fact that

²¹ ‘Malawi Leader Lays Foundation Stone for 7,500 Houses’, Nyasa Times, 2 July 2013 (https://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 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/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).

²² ‘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).

²³ Chaponda, Hansard, 20 May 2013; ‘JB Takes Food Distribution Exercise to Mangochi’, Nyasa Times, 9 November 2012 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/jb-takes-food-distribution-exercise-to-mangochi, accessed 26 May 2015).

²⁴ ‘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-politicalConsiderations-81875, accessed 18 March 2015).

²⁵ 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).
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’.²⁶

Banda herself embraced the discourse of ‘handouts’, using a word that was usually anathema to elites not only in Malawi but also 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’.²⁷ ‘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 her initiatives, rather than 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’.²⁸ 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.²⁹ The PP’s logo was adorned with PIPaHR maize bags (which were also stamped ‘Joyce Banda’) and Mudzi houses.³⁰ Whilst the distribution of cash and even houses during elections was a well-established practice in Malawi, Banda differed from her predecessors in that she formalized ‘handouts’ as programmes and explicitly incorporated these into the core of her political brand.

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 MTT. 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 the poor.

²⁶ ‘JB Vows to Continue Pro-Poor Initiative: Seeks Her Own Mandate’, Nyasa Times, 11 May 2014 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/jb-vows-to-continue-pro-poor-initiative-seeks-her-own-mandate, accessed 26 May 2014).
²⁷ ‘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).
²⁸ Chaponda, Hansard, 20 May 2013; ‘JB Takes Food Distribution Exercise to Mangochi’, Nyasa Times, 9 November 2012 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/jb-takes-food-distribution-exercise-to-mangochi, accessed 26 May 2015).
²⁹ ‘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).
³⁰ ‘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).
(Dulani and Dionne 2014: 219). ‘If you want the programmes we have been doing for the people of Malawi [. . . ] to continue, vote for me’.³¹ ‘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’.³²

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 building up her party, recruiting seventy-seven MPs (out of 193) from other parties by February 2013. In September 2013, however, the ‘Cashgate’ corruption scandal broke. 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. Corruption had long been a concern to voters (Zimmerman 2015), but Cashgate served to link this firmly to Banda’s government specifically. The prospects for Banda and the PP began to look bleak, and many of her party’s 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 emphasize her brand on the basis of her ‘handout’ initiatives.

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

³¹ ‘JB Increasingly Upbeat to Win Malawi Elections’, Nyasa Times, 11 May 2014 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/jb-increasingly-upbeat-to-win-malawi-elections, accessed 18 March 2015).
³² Interview with Henry Chingaipe, Director, Institute for Policy Research & Social Empowerment, by Sam Hamer, 19 May 2014.
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’.³³ 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]’.³⁴

Peter Mutharika—the DPP leader and presidential candidate—simply promised to ‘continue from where my brother left off’.³⁵ 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 reforms of FISP 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, Mutharika explained, ‘so that every Malawian can afford the means to produce food while earning the dignity of labouring to feed [themselves]’.³⁶ Whereas Banda and the PP simply handed out houses, the DPP would subsidize cement so that Malawians could ‘build what they want by themselves’.³⁷ 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

³³ ‘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 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/chakwera-attacks-jb-on-hand-outs-in-zomba, accessed 23 March 2015).
³⁴ ‘Chakwera Bemoans Handouts’, Afriem.org, 12 May 2014 (http://www.afriem.org/2014/05/chakwera-bemoans-handouts-2, accessed 23 March 2015).
³⁵ ‘The Spirit of Bingu and a Leadership Without an Agenda: Z Allan Ntata’, Maravi Post, 11 May 2014 (http://www.maravipost.com/the-spirit-of-bingu-and-a-leadership-without-an-agenda-z-allan-ntata, accessed 22 June 2015).
³⁶ ‘Mutharika Wants Feedback on Proposals to Tackle Malawi “Intellectual Crisis”’, Nyasa Times, 19 April 2014 (https://www.nyasatimes.com/mutharika-wants-feedback-on-proposals-to-tackle-malawi-intellectual-crisis, accessed 24 March 2015).
³⁷ ‘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).
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.

The three parties articulated the three dominant approaches to poverty reduction across east and southern Africa. Chakwera’s position resembled that 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 (see Lavers on Ethiopia, Chapter 3 of this volume). Banda’s position was an unequivocal defence of social assistance for the poor, especially those poor people who were unable to take advantage of farming subsidies. In contrast to most advocates of social assistance, 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.

In the run-up to the election, these differences were overshadowed by other issues. In addition to the Cashgate scandal, the government’s perceived competence was undermined by another drought, which left almost 10 per cent of the population (or 1.5 million people) dependent on food aid. Amidst the swirling scandal and a stuttering economy, Banda won only 20 per cent of the vote, behind both Chakwera (with 28 per cent) and Mutharika (with 36 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 all of the central districts. Atupele Muluzi, son of the former president, earned pluralities for the UDF in south-eastern districts where co-ethnic Yaos predominated. The DPP dominated the rest of the south. The PP won only twenty-six parliamentary seats, behind the DPP (fifty-one seats) and MCP (forty-eight seats).

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 prioritized 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 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 research that suggested that poor farmers preferred programmes that helped them to produce more food themselves than food- or cash-for-work programmes (as suggested earlier by van Donge 2005). Several of our interviewees suggest that Banda may have been misguided in her belief that a focus on direct transfers (‘handouts’) would endear her to poor voters.³⁸

Afrobarometer polls in June 2012 and March/April 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 in 2012, when the PP was ahead of both the DPP and MCP, to only 19 per cent in 2014, 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.

Whilst Banda’s brand did not prevent a decline in support, had the election been fought in 2012 (or early 2013) then—the data suggest—she would have

³⁸ Interviews by Sam Hamer, 16 May 2014.
performed strongly. The 2012 Afrobarometer survey found strong evidence of enthusiasm for Joyce Banda, presumably in part because she was seen to be strong on the valence issues of economic management and fighting corruption. At that time, her distinctively 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 or, 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 and responsibility.

5. The Conditions for Social Assistance Branding

The presidential election in Malawi in 2014 was unusual, at least within Africa, in that the candidates held strong and contrasting positions on poverty-reduction strategy. Social assistance was, unusually, not a valence issue. 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. 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. The 2014 Malawi election was perhaps the first election in which contrasting positions on ‘handouts’ featured prominently in the rhetoric of the competing candidates and parties.

Why, then, did Banda seize on social assistance when branding herself and her new party? Conditions specific to Malawi in the 2000s may have favoured the emergence of social assistance on the electoral agenda despite elite ambivalence and uncertainty as to how voters would respond. Most obviously, political parties in Malawi were unusually weakly institutionalized. Malawian
parties have long been weak on the ground, MPs often switch allegiance from one party to another, and even opposition party leaders defect to join the government (Rakner et al. 2007; Svåsand 2013). Moreover, the parties of both presidents Mutharika (DPP) and Banda (PP) broke away from existing parties. Given that, ‘as a new party’ in 2005, Mutharika’s DPP had ‘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), bold branding was the obvious strategy—and, as it turned out, a very successful one. Banda’s expulsion from the DPP in 2011 placed her in a similar position. If she formed a new party rather than joining one of the existing opposition parties, bold branding was the obvious strategy.

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 et al. 2007). In 2009, it seemed that Bingu wa Mutharika had found a winning formula: his support for small farmers (at a time of sustained economic growth) enabled him to win the election by an unprecedented margin and with unprecedentedly broad support. Although support for Mutharika and the DPP declined thereafter, their ‘capture’ of the pro-farmer brand 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’, whether for farmers or the poor). 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 assistance rather than farm input subsidies.

Neither Banda/PP nor the Mutharikas/DPP adopted the kind of populist strategy discussed by Resnick, with particular reference to the experience of Michael Sata (and his Patriotic Front) in Zambia. Sata’s populism 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; see also Pruce and Hickey, Chapter 7 of this volume and Siachiwena 2016). Sata 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), or 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. 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, appealing to rural voters. Moreover, Banda could not brand herself as a critic of the poverty generated by free market policies given that the DPP was already championing massive (and expensive) state support for farmers.

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 BaNgwato. 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 2015; see also Seekings, Chapter 2 of this volume).

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 assistance. 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 noted by Dulani and Dionne 2014: 220). 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—costing about 5 per cent of GDP—mitigated rather than ended poverty. They 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. Under Banda, the roll-out of cash transfer and workfare programmes was accelerated but failed to achieve the targets. Even statist interventions were constrained by a general conservatism. Pro-poor rhetoric was not matched by service delivery on the scale required to reduce poverty significantly. Nonetheless, social assistance had been placed on the agenda, and ‘handouts’ loudly championed by an incumbent president. Critics of ‘handouts’ will be expected to deliver on their promises. If they do not, then electoral pressure for social assistance programmes is likely to intensify.

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