

A Critique of the Theoretical Rigour and Practical Relevance of Political Parties in Malawi's Public Sector Reforms

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Abstract

In an attempt to give new momentum to the design and implementation of public sector reforms, which were often riddled with myriad challenges, the Government of Malawi relaunched the public sector reforms in 2015. The new dawn of public sector reforms, among other things, sought to reposition various stakeholders to be active and effective actors in reform processes. However, comprehensive studies on the relevance of stakeholders with a stake in public sector reforms are still lacking in Malawi. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relevance of political parties as stakeholders in public sector reform processes in Malawi, drawing on a mixed research design. The main argument is that the relevance of political parties in processes of public sector reforms is in grave danger as they have failed to perform functions that are very critical to the success of reforms, such as lobbying for resources and offering oversight, having only made some strides in raising the profile of public sector reforms in their political manifestos and policy statements. The study concludes that political parties need to rethink how they perform various functions and do away with the “business as usual” approach, which reinforces a focus on their own political ambitions at the expense of the interests of people in reform processes. The results obtained are consistent with the country's Afrobarometer findings, which indicate that the relevance of political parties in Malawi's democracy is in crisis and in dire need of a tremendous upheaval.

Introduction

The public sector is regarded as the implementing agency of the state responsible for delivering goods and services by and for the state (Tambulasi & Kayuni, 2013). As an integral part of the executive arm of government, an effective and efficient public sector is key to sustainable development because it provides an enabling environment and the capacity to implement adopted policies that can spearhead socioeconomic development and reduce poverty, particularly in developing countries (ECA, 2011). The public sector has, however, been experiencing several challenges that have undermined its ability to effectively implement policies and programmes that are crucial for the transformation of the country (GoM, 2018). A noteworthy disappointment is the growing recognition within the scholarly community that these challenges have multiplied (Kayuni, 2017). As such, regular revision of public sector rules and procedures is necessary to enable the public sector to adapt to changing times and circumstances, reposition itself for higher levels of efficiency and effectiveness, and enhance service delivery (ECA, 2011). Certainly, it could be said that the consistent revisions of the public sector, which are typically

labelled ‘public sector reforms,’ are primarily geared towards strengthening its performance, capacity, and sustainability in the delivery of public goods and services (Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2013; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

Historically speaking, public sector reforms (hereafter PSRs) in Malawi are as old as independent Malawi. It is widely acknowledged in literature that the government of Malawi has, since independence in July 1964, been implementing a plethora of PSRs (GoM, 2018; Kayuni, 2017; Chingaipe, 2015). Notwithstanding a long history of implementing PSRs, the results have been largely disappointing in the post-2014 era, with few exceptions. This is attributed to a myriad of challenges similar to those faced elsewhere in the world such as: inadequate commitment to reforms; lack of ownership of reforms since they were mostly externally driven; inadequate resources allocated for implementation of reforms; lack of a shared vision for reforms due to inadequate participation of non-state actors and citizens in reforms, and lack of capacity to implement reforms (GoM, 2018; Tostensen, 2017). Yet in 2014, a paradigm shift occurred which changed the landscape of PSRs in Malawi. According to Kayuni, Chihana and Msiska (2018) the post 2014 reforms are unique in the following ways: there is apparent political will to push the reform agenda, the reform agenda is characterised by comprehensive consultation, and the launching of the public sector reform agenda report stipulating thematic areas and action matrices. These distinctive features are good news in the history of PSRs, worthy of celebration in academic feasts and policy dialogues.

One of the most celebrated achievements in the current generation of reforms, as noted earlier, is the involvement of diverse stakeholders in their design and implementation. The Malawi National Public Sector Reforms Policy (2018-2022) recognises that the design and implementation of the public sector reforms requires a multi-sectoral approach (GoM, 2018). Although the inclusion of the diverse stakeholders is a welcome development, the challenge borders on how to develop and sustain an institutional arrangement to ensure that their acts are pulling together. Therefore, the proliferation of stakeholders in public sector reform processes has led to the emergence of several issues. Firstly, it has stimulated the need to better understand and harness the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders such as political parties, media, and thinktanks in the design and implementation of public sector reforms. Secondly, it has highlighted the need to evaluate stakeholders' performance and to understand their interplay in reform processes. This study was stimulated by the desire to critically examine the relevance of political parties in the design and implementation of PSRs in Malawi, grounded in rational choice theory, which contends that actors act rationally to maximise their calculated gains and minimise risks. Specifically, the study was guided by the following objectives: (a) to interrogate the performance of political parties in the design and implementation of public sector reforms in Malawi; (b) to establish mechanisms that would more practically ensure that political parties are discharging their roles effectively. The study spans from 2014 to the present, since it is the period Malawi has witnessed the involvement of diverse stakeholders in PSRs.

This study is intellectually relevant for several reasons. Firstly, a review of the literature on PSRs and their link to political parties in Malawi reveals that the topic has, so far, not received the appropriate level of attention. Recent work on public sector reforms in Malawi has been engaging with the questions of the role of innovation and thought leadership in public sector reforms (Kayuni, 2017); the resurgence of public sector reforms (Tostensen, 2017), the status of institutional reform efforts (Bridges & Woolcock, 2017), and the relevance and applicability of reform models (Kayuni et al, 2018). There has been insufficient attention paid to the relevance of stakeholders in reform processes, in particular, political parties. Worse still, the Malawi National Public Sector Reforms Policy (2018-2022) outlines the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in passing. Such entities as development partners, CSOs, NGOs, training and research institutions, and the media are highlighted, but not the roles and responsibilities of political parties. Secondly, cognizant of the fact that the public sector in Malawi is now a hotbed of reforms, it is significant to understand and harness the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders in public sector reforms to ensure the greatest outcomes by examining their relevance. More precisely, the study aims to support the strengthening of institutional arrangements that facilitate stakeholders, in particular political parties, to be active and effective actors in reform processes. Finally, and most importantly, the findings of this study will

significantly contribute to a new understanding and reflections on the performance of political parties in PSR processes to the existing body of knowledge. On that basis, it will also open new platforms for further research.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: the research design and methodology that guided the study are presented in the second section. The third section reviews the relevant literature on PSRs and political parties. Of particular concern is illuminating the context of political parties within the landscape of public sector reforms. This is followed by the study's findings and discussion in the fourth section. Finally, the major issues identified in the study and the recommendations are outlined in part five as a conclusion.

Study Design and Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, with philosophical foundations in the pragmatic research paradigm. The mixed method paradigm was well-suited for this study, primarily because assessing the perceptions of adult Malawians regarding the performance of political parties in public sector reforms and gathering informative reflections from informants cannot be operationalised using a single paradigm. The study used a survey method of quantitative research tradition to collect data from adult Malawians. In total, 142 questionnaires were administered to adult Malawians drawn from Mulanje, Salima and Chitipa districts with a variety of survey questions revolving on the functions of political parties. These councils were chosen deliberately as they demonstrated exceptional performance in implementing some components of reforms, such as financial management and service delivery, according to the Local Government Assessment Report of 2021. The study analysed quantitative data through the application of descriptive statistics in Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 21) and Microsoft Excel. The study employed Cronbach's Alpha to test the reliability of the data collection tool, and the results demonstrated high internal consistency of the questionnaire as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics

Questions	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Sources of reform advice and policy	4 items	.79
Neutralising partisan politics	4 items	.80
Lobbying for resources	3 items	.82

Source: Final findings on Cronbach's alpha reliability statistics

A reliability analysis was carried out on the relevance of three functions of political parties using values scale comprising four items per function. Cronbach's alpha showed the questionnaire to reach acceptable reliability, $\alpha = 0.79$ for sources of reform advice and policy, $\alpha = 0.80$ for neutralising partisan politics, and $\alpha = 0.82$ for lobbying for resources. Most items of the functions of political parties seemed to be suitable for retention, resulting in a decrease in the alpha if deleted. The only exception to this was item number four of lobbying for resources, which would increase the alpha to $\alpha = 0.87$, hence deletion was carried out.

The study also used Qualitative Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to solicit primary data from informants using semi-structured interview guides. The key informants were purposively sampled based on their direct experiences with public sector reforms by virtue of their current or previous careers. In total, 18 KIIs were conducted with informants on the basis that they are the custodians of both theoretical and empirical knowledge obtained in a classroom and work settings, and research stamina related to the topics under study. Secondary data were collected through a systematic review of existing literature pertinent to public sector reforms and political parties.

The Intersection between PSRs and Political Parties

Thumbnail Sketch of Stakeholders in Malawi's PSRs

The process of reforming the public sector touches on the perceptions and interests of various actors. This is especially the case for public-sector management reform, given its cross-cutting nature, which integrates multiple actors (Bronchi & Larriza, 2015). It is, therefore, scarcely surprising to note that the Malawi National Public Sector Reforms Policy (2018-2022) recognises that the design and implementation of the public sector reforms require broad-based stakeholder participation (GoM, 2018). In this regard, public sector reform efforts should be guided by a holistic vision and be shared by all key stakeholders, as they bring together multi-sectoral skills and experiences that are vital to the design and implementation of reforms (ECA, 2010). This confers legitimacy and validation of solutions (Bunse & Fritz, 2012). Elaborating this point, Bridges and Woolcock (2017) argue that if the processes are to be viable, legitimate and relevant, the process of reform design and implementation should seek to establish broad communities of agents, including those needed to mobilise support, authorise change, provide reform content, facilitate procedures, supply finance, and foster and maintain relationships. Indeed, empirical evidence affirms that multi-stakeholder engagement is essential for the success of public sector reforms, as it contributes to a high degree of ownership, accelerates the implementation of reforms, and, most importantly, creates space for understanding and acceptance (Bronchi & Larriza, 2015). It is thus critical to engage a wide range of stakeholders at every level of the reform process to enhance synergies in addressing issues related to the design and implementation of public sector reforms.

The multi-stakeholder engagement offers an avenue for policy actors to articulate, lobby for, and induce public-sector reforms. In principle, political executives could take management advice on reforms from a wide range of sources such as political parties, mandarins, management consultants, academic specialists, business corporations, political or policy think tanks (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2011). In the course of their engagement, political executives accumulate a vast body of policy advice and transformative insights on how to design and implement public-sector reforms. The greater availability of information is expected to foster a broader understanding of the government's efforts and further empower citizens and key stakeholders to actively engage with the government and create additional pressure for reform (Bronchi & Larriza, 2015). However, despite concerted efforts to engage a multitude of policy actors in the design and implementation of reforms in Malawi, within all these elements, path dependency is apparent in placing donors as the main drivers of reforms to undertake diagnoses of governmental problems and courses of action followed by government adoption. One could say, therefore, that the engagement of local agents just rubber-stamps the reform agenda items already set by donors (Bridges and Woolcock, 2017).

Apart from serving as sources of policy advice on reforms, stakeholders are also expected to play different roles and assume responsibilities depending on their capacity and the nature of the work they perform. This is justified on the basis that policy problems faced by governments are increasingly complex, wicked, and global, rather than simple, linear, and national in focus, which, in turn, require more coherent responses from governments and greater collaboration across public-sector agencies (Robinson, 2015). This has highlighted the need for cross-cutting public-sector reform interventions by various stakeholders to address problems encountered in the public sector. Moreover, this has underscored the significance of a comprehensive institutional arrangement for implementing reforms, explicitly stipulating the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in reform processes to ensure role clarity and coordination. As Bronchi and Larriza (2015) rightly put it, if there is a lack of clarity and coordination, this can lead to confusion over the lines of authority, affecting the overall performance of public sector reforms.

Political Parties and PSRs in Malawi

The concept of political party has enjoyed wide currency since the wave of democratization swept across the African continent in the early 1990s. However, despite the extensive coverage of the concept in both policy and academic discourses, the quest for a catchall definition of a political party remains disappointingly elusive. As Tenthani and Chinsinga (2016) postulate, defining political parties is a futile exercise, as parties must be understood within a given context, specific ideology, and specific cultural settings. More fundamentally, these

enormous differences among political parties make it difficult to devise a definition that fits all of them, but they do share a few characteristics (Ethridge & Handelman, 2010). As a result, the conceptual boundaries of the term “political party” are blurred. For the sake of clarifying the concept of political party different definitions will be paraded prior to recommending the most encompassing definition best fitting the purpose of this study.

A political party is generally regarded as a vehicle for competing power among its leaders (Brown, 2004). In this vein, Svasand and Khembo (2013) look at a political party as an organisation that seeks political power by nominating candidates for publicly elected offices. While the emphasis for Brown (2004) and Svasand and Khembo (2013) is on political parties as crucial actors in securing political power, it is worthwhile to note that the functions of political parties go beyond the creation of political leaders to the formulation of government programmes and policies. In this regard, Ethridge & Handelman (2010) define a political party as an organization that unites people to place its representatives in government offices and influence government activities and policies. Similarly, GoM (2018b) defines a political party as a combination of natural persons who have constituted themselves with the objective of bringing about the election of its candidates to public office, striving for power by the electoral process and, by this means, controlling or influencing the actions of government. Therefore, it could be fairly said that the main purpose of establishing political parties is to use them as vehicles for winning elections and influencing public policy (Tenthani & Chinsinga, 2016). Employing that reasoning, a political party should therefore be seen as having a tripartite focus: recruitment of political leadership, formulating government policies and programs, and organising government (Ethridge & Handelman, 2010). Put differently, political parties and their elected officials are generally viewed as arbitrating between three types of incentives: votes, policy, and office (Brouard et al. 2018). Therefore, a more encompassing definition of a political party should at least accommodate these three important features.

It is worth noting that the aforementioned salient features of political parties reflect the three-dimensional analysis of the functions of political parties. According to Tostensen (2017), political parties serve three main functions in a democracy: (a) articulation and aggregation of interests in the electorate and conveying them as alternative platforms to the voters; (b) nomination of candidates for elected office; and (c) forming the basis of government or opposition. Moreover, by seeking votes and government offices and by aggregating and articulating social interests, they also perform a variety of other functions: engaging in policy-making, recruiting political elites, and formulating political programs and alternatives (Croissant & Merkel, 2004). The remainder of this section focuses particularly on the functions of political parties as a whole with respect to the landscape of PSRs in the third generation undertaken in Malawi’s public sector.

Political parties develop ideas about how they would like to govern, including issues of structure, style, and process (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Thereafter, political parties and their candidates are expected to aggregate sets of policy positions they have formulated and commit to implementing them as policies (Brouard, 2018). In this regard, a political party must have in-built mechanisms for capturing the real interests of citizens, which are often varied and at times competing, and attempt to propose policy alternatives that best serve the maximum number of its supporters (Tenthani & Chinsinga, 2016). The proposed policy statements are reflected in the policy statements and election manifestos of political parties. This provides voters with clear choices, based on their own personal principles and values (Kelly & Ashiagbor, 2011). More specifically, party programmes contained in manifestos play a key role in democratic political systems as they shape voters’ decisions during elections, serve as reference points to evaluate the performance of political parties, set policy agendas and propose solutions to address societal challenges (Zuniga, 2018). Simply put, election manifestos are the currency political parties use to purchase votes or to draw the attention of the electorate during a campaign. However, election manifestos also have a huge purpose, which is to contribute to democracy as yardsticks against which the compliance and responsiveness of governing political parties to campaign promises are empirically and rigorously assessed.

Public sector reform has become a key element in many party manifestos in many countries (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The manifestos and policy statements of all leading political parties in Malawi are an epitome of this statute

observation by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011). For example, the cash-gate scandal exposed the dysfunction of the country's public sector and spurred political parties ahead of the 2014 elections to include public sector reforms in their manifestos (Tostensen, 2017). The cash-gate scandal, in which about US\$32 million in government funds was mismanaged between April and September 2013, exposed serious public finance mismanagement in Malawi. To this end, all leading political parties promised in their 2014 manifestos and policy statements to fix the rot that created inefficiencies in the public sector (Nkhoma, 2015). In particular, the renewed impetus was inspired by the need to make the public sector more efficient, effective, and accountable in the face of the deep-seated inertia and stagnation, as well as the cash-gate scandal, which displayed deep corruption and theft in the public sector (GoM, 2018). As Zuniga (2018) memorably stated that the external political environment at the national and international level, including the programmes of other political forces, the strengths and weakness of the ruling political party, political and corruption scandals, political, social and economic crisis, and foreign policy, are likely to exert influence over political proposals made in the manifesto (Zuniga, 2018).

However, despite the impressive strides in raising the profile of reforms, political parties have also been faulted for fueling piecemeal implementation of reforms that would affect their royalists. For example, instead of reducing the number of positions of Principal Secretaries (PSs), they simply created another comparable position of Chief Director, and those who were taken out of the PSs' position were simply given this newly created position of Chief Director, retaining the same grade and benefits of the PS position (Kayuni, 2017). It is argued that when the top senior service positions are politicised rightsizing is difficult because the occupants are known to have specific party sympathies (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). As Bunse and Fritz (2012) lament, governments in many developing countries face incentives to initiate public sector reforms, but at the implementation stage, political costs frequently outweigh potential gains; hence, reforms are abandoned or left to wither. For example, a report prepared by Fischner that recommended strong governance reforms as part of the power sector reforms under the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) was abhorred by the Government and shelved (Chingaipe & Chikadza, 2019). Of late, the task-force report on reforms of allowances, procurement, and employment of contracts, which was submitted in 2021 to the President of the Republic of Malawi, is also the epitome of a flowery document that has been left to gather dust on the shelf.

The public sector reform agenda also succumbed to inter-party and succession politics during the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)- led government (Tostensen, 2017). The Public Sector Reforms Management Unit (PSRMU) was established in 2006 within the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) to catalyze, drive, facilitate, and coordinate all reforms (GoM, 2017). However, there was a public outcry that reforms used to be highly fragmented due to lack of strong coordination to facilitate planning and implementation of reforms as there was little contact between the PSRMU at OPC and implementing agencies (Nkhoma, 2015). In short, there was no strong horizontal mechanism for managing reforms, which is captured by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) as the degree to which central executives are able to 'get their acts together' by ensuring that all ministries, departments, and agencies are pulling together in the same direction.

As a result of the nucleus to drive the reform agenda, the governing President then established the Public Service Reform Commission on 23rd June 2014 headed by Vice President's office to champion the implementation of the reforms (GoM, 2017). The Public Service Reform Commission was mandated to chart the national direction and establish national priorities in the public sector reforms that would ensure successful change towards a dynamic, efficient and effective public service (GoM, 2018a). However, the president relocated the public sector reforms from the Office of the Vice President to the OPC, a move that attracted mixed reactions. Several reform attempts were drawn in the sea of failure under the OPC in the previous generations of reforms, therefore, reverting to OPC would simply suffocate the renewed impetus of the reform agenda. The chairmanship of the public sector reforms not only raised the profile of the Vice President given the potential dividends from quick-win reforms but also his leadership style and ability to provide strategic substance to the reform process were considered promising (Tostensen, 2017). As such, some senior party members feared that the Vice President's success in fostering the implementation of the reforms would put him in a strong position to become a strong DPP presidential candidate

for future general elections (Chikoko, 2017). Therefore, the reform agenda had to be annexed from the Office of the Vice President to OPC in order to cut his popularity in processes of reforms and cripple its subsequent political mileage. Whatever the intra-party succession effects, in terms of implementing real reform, the Vice President was expected to champion the agenda (Tostensen, 2017). As Chikoko (2017) rightly put it, the Vice-President's annexation of the reform agenda as a decision showed a lack of political will to see them succeed.

Study Findings and Discussion

Political Parties as Sources of Reform Advice and Policy

This objective sought to interrogate how political parties have articulated, aggregated and elevated PSR programme as sources of reform advice and policy. The most common method to assess parties' policy positions is the analysis of their written programmatic statements stipulated in manifestoes as pledges or policy prescriptions (Zuniga, 2018). Therefore, a discord between the interests of the people and the content of political parties' manifestos would thus be an indication of the irrelevance of the political parties and their failure to successfully serve as link agents (Chunga, 2014). Dwelling on this standpoint, this objective primarily focused on a systematic review of manifestos and policy statements of all leading political parties to ascertain whether their policy positions on the same are aligned with the reform areas proposed by people. The table below shows the most pressing areas for reform identified by leading political parties in their manifestos.

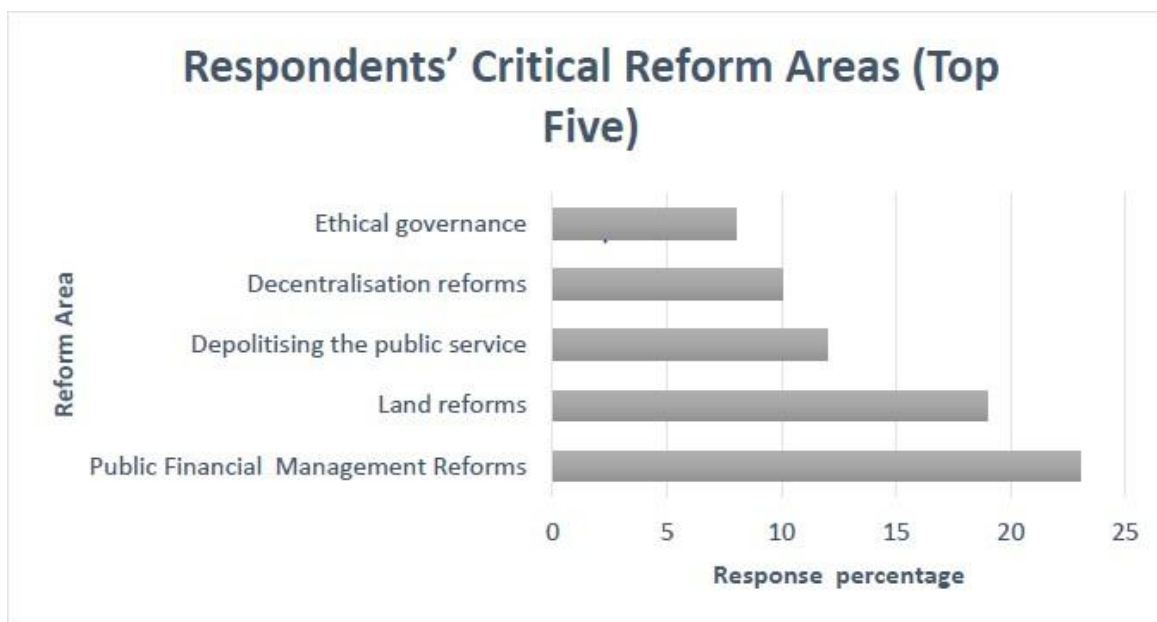
Table 2: Public Sector Reforms salient issues according to 2014 and 2019 Electoral Manifestoes

PARTY	PRIORITIES	
	2014	2019
DPP	1. Macroeconomic Policy Reforms	New Architecture of running the Public Service
	2. Civil Service Reforms	Strengthen accountability
	3. Nonpolitical patronage or hegemony-based recruitment and promotion	Information and Communication Technology (ICT) reforms
	4. Agricultural Sector Reforms	Establishment of Integrated Public Service Delivery Centers
	5. Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) and Build, Operate and Transfer (BOT) arrangements	Strengthen Human Resources Capacity in Local Government Councils
MCP	1. Structural reforms	Redesign the structure of the public service
	2. Economic governance reforms	Reduce Presidential powers in public appointments
	3. Policy and institutional reforms	Entrench the culture of meritocracy in recruitment and develop the code of ethics and conduct
	4. Malawi Police Reform Programme	Effective performance management system
	5. Macroeconomic Policy Reforms	Institutionalize the culture of learning and innovation
PP	1. Depoliticize the recruitment and appointment processes	PP formed an electoral alliance with MCP in 2019 general elections.
	2. Special leadership code for public sector managers	

	3. Comprehensive performance management and reward system	
	4. Work Ethics	
	5. Review the Decentralization Policy and Local Government Act	
UDF	1. Public sector leadership cadre	Public sector leadership cadre
	2. Personnel reforms	Personnel reforms
	3. Institute Service Delivery Pacts	Institute Service Delivery Pacts
	4. Institute a performance-based recognition and award system	Institute a performance-based recognition and award system
	5. Merit-based promotion system	Merit-based promotion system
UTM	Not yet founded	1. Enhance accountability
		2. Depoliticise the public service
		3. Merit-based, transparent and competitive recruitment
		4. Review of remuneration and National Pension Scheme
		5. Review the organizational structure and management of parastatals

Source: Author's own construction based on the 2014 and 2019 electoral manifestos of leading political parties.

It is worth noting that the table has only presented the high-ranking reform areas regarded by the leading political parties as sticky and in need of their attention. The general picture is that political parties have made concerted efforts to include PSRs in their electoral manifestos in the third generation of reforms. More so, a synopsis of the recordings of the 2014 and 2019 presidential debates shows that PSRs remained a topic of much heated debate in all rounds. Arguably, the political parties and the candidates they nominated for political office in the 2014 and 2019 elections have done a good job in terms of raising the profile of PSRs. This now brings us to the profound question we posed in the introduction to this section: Are the reform areas stipulated in the manifestos in line with the people's demands? The respondents were asked about the most critical areas in dire need of reform, and the responses have been presented graphically below.

Figure 1: Respondents' Critical Reform Areas (Top Five)

Source: Findings from the Fieldwork

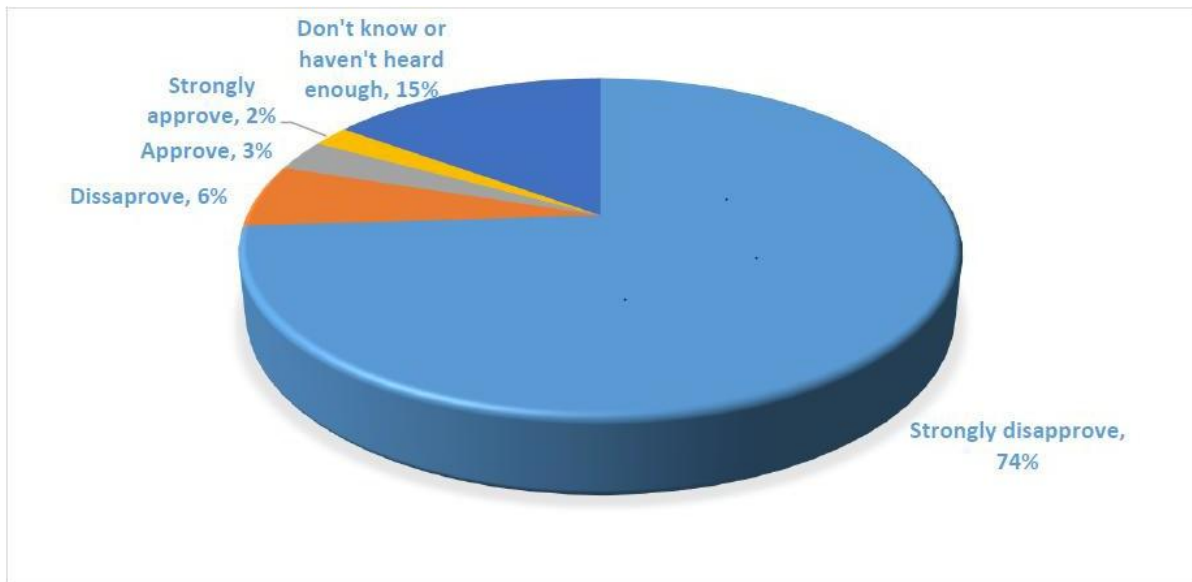
The graph depicts that public financial management reforms were the most proposed reform area, claimed by 23% of respondents. This was followed by land reforms, as claimed by 19% of respondents. Depolitising the public service, decentralization reform, and ethical governance were proposed by 12%, 10%, and 8% of respondents, respectively. Apart from the land reforms, the other reform areas proposed by respondents are also in line with those the Public Service Reform Commission recommended upon soliciting views from stakeholders and conducting study tours (GoM, 2017). Under normal circumstances, political parties would be expected to draft manifestos that reflect these sticky issues as their priority areas (Chunga, 2014). This is justified on the basis that political parties fulfil a vital intermediate role between citizens and the state, in which they are supposed to represent citizens' interests and translate these into a policy agenda that responds to citizens' concerns (Zuniga, 2018; Kelly & Ashiagbor, 2011).

From a comparative perspective and in general, political parties have partly tried to include the reform areas proposed by people and stakeholders at large in their manifestoes. However, despite making small strides in aligning the reform priority areas proposed by people with political party ideas, there are still some outstanding issues that need to be resolved to ensure compatibility. The fundamental challenge contributing to the mismatch between the interests of the people and political parties' ideas in Malawi is that political parties are rarely concerned with effectively communicating with their followers, largely due to the entrenched culture of secrecy and suspicion in the political system (Tenthani & Chinsinga, 2016). More so, political parties have worst fears of being criticised and even condemned for some of their acts, hence they shun platforms to interact with people (Patel, 2005). The lack of interaction between political parties and people gives significant room for doubt about the relevance of political parties and their effectiveness in undertaking the representative role and has led to a worsening of relations between the party and the public (Chunga, 2014; Patel, 2005). To this end, political parties should not only be motivated to raise the profile of PSRs but also articulate and aggregate the real issues that fall within the interests of people identified in the course of their interaction.

Shielding PSRs from political Interferences

The level of performance of political parties in insulating PSRs from political interference indicates the extent to which political parties attempt to unscramble the policy space and incentive structures that compel political parties to monopolise the policy space of PSRs. Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way political parties have performed their role in insulating public sector reforms from political interferences or have not heard enough about public sector reforms? The results showed that more than seven out of ten respondents (74%) strongly disapproved, 6% disapproved, 3% approved, 2% strongly disapproved, and the rest 15% were not aware or had not heard enough.

Figure 2: The level of Performance of Political Parties in insulating Public Sector Reforms from Political Interference



Source: Findings from the Fieldwork

In general, the majority of respondents disapproved of the performance of political parties in neutralising partisan politics in processes of PSRs. Political parties have been very calculative in weighing the political costs of reform choices that have been at the heart of Malawians since the country attained independence. For example, a systematic review of the 2014 and 2019 electoral manifestos of all leading political parties shows that they have failed to articulate and aggregate Malawians' interests on land reforms for political reasons. In particular, the electoral manifestos often discuss land reforms in passing and alongside other activities such as agriculture, but still remain largely articulated and aggregated to the best interest of lay Malawians.

The meaningful design and implementation of land reform is important for a number of political consequences in a mainly agrarian country like Malawi. Historically speaking, land reform was flagged by proponents of democratisation as a key strategy for dealing with the deep, widespread and severe poverty levels prevalent in the country, the existence of which was officially denied for more than three decades (Chinsinga, 2008). Yet despite attaining democracy, land reform remains a pressing issue in Malawi. This is attributed to the fact that the neoliberal legal order that formally guarantees various human rights to everyone, including the right to own property and the right to development, has been inherently incapable of empowering peasants and workers to gain access to sufficient land for their livelihoods (Kanyongolo, 2005). As a result, the persistence of land occupation movements is over as they have started to reorganise themselves and to speak with one voice concerning the shortages of land. This has given birth to the establishment of People's Land Organisation (PLO) with the

overarching objective to fight for the redistribution of idle land on tea estates to neighboring rural communities in the tea-growing districts of Thyolo and Mulanje (Regalia, 2019). Finally, and most importantly, land reform is argued to be a catalyst for a country's agrarian transformation and crucial for social and economic well-being (Kanyongolo, 2005).

Yet despite these political outcomes aforementioned, there is mounting evidence that progress toward implementing the land reforms has been painfully slow, thereby stretching the patience of the 'land hungry people' (Chinsinga, 2008). From a political angle, however, one of the greatest challenges may rest in the new, limited role of traditional leaders in land management (Regalia, 2019). In this regard, land reforms are likely to rob the local influence over land that traditional leaders have been enjoying historically. To this end, no single political party has articulated and aggregated meaningful land reforms in its manifesto or policy statement to sustain the symbiotic relationship between political leadership and traditional leaders. This is attributed to the fact that Malawian traditional leaders are seen by political parties and candidates as powerful agents for influencing voting decisions (Kayuni et al., 2019). To testify to the foregoing, Sangala (2018) disclosed that chiefs' honoraria were established purely for political reasons in order to secure cooperation and votes in the 2019 elections (Sangala, 2018). This continues to be the case, as political interests are increasingly focused on investing in projects that could demonstrate quick gains and therefore sustain political and electoral support for the party in government (Chingaibe & Chikadza, 2019). Indeed, the focus of reforms in the third generation has been to a larger extent on quick-win reforms leaving critical reform areas to be on standby and in some cases partly and controversially implemented for political reasons. This is largely attributed to the failure of political parties to insulate PSRs from political interference and monopolisation of PSRs by the ruling parties.

The land reform is one of the epitome examples where political parties –especially the ruling party- have failed to rise above their interests in designing and implementing meaningful reforms without weighing the political costs of reform choices. As rightly observed by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011), the likelihood that the reform area will rise on the agenda is a function of elite perceptions of what reforms are feasible and desirable, political and administrative systems, socioeconomic forces, and chance events. It therefore follows that the success of political parties in shielding public sector reforms from politics of reform choice, design, and implementation is contingent on the complex interplay between political parties themselves and other forces. As a result, political parties are caught in the middle of a high-stakes game, torn between serving their own political agendas and the interests of the people. In such scenarios, political parties are supposed to make hard decisions that would hurt them, but heal people's souls nevertheless.

Lobbying for Budgetary Resource Allocation for PSR Implementation Support and Offering Oversight

Political parties especially those represented in Parliament play a pivotal role in resource allocation through the budget process (Chingaibe & Chikadza, 2019) in the sense that they scrutinize, debate and pass the state budget as law (Patel & Tostensen, 2013). One dimension of this is to examine the financial resources allocated to on-budget modalities intended to support the implementation of public sector reforms. This indicates the extent to which political parties represented in parliament are fulfilling their role in lobbying for adequate resources to finance PSR processes. It can also be used to ascertain the government's commitment to ensure that the processes of PSRs are well funded. The tracking of resources allocated to the public sector reform support was drawn from a review of budget and financial statements ranging from 2014/15 to 2020/21 fiscal years (FYs). Table 3 sets out the allocations to public sector reform support for FYs under review.

Table 3: Budgetary Resource Allocation for PSR Implementation Support

FY	APPROVED ESTIMATES	REVISED ESTIMATES	% REVISION
2014/15	152,200,000.00	152,400,000.00	0.13
2015/16	222,186,455.00	271,561,222.00	18.18
2016/17	-	-	0
2017/18	-	-	0
2018/19	-	-	0
2019/20	-	-	0
2020/21	-	-	0

Source: Author's own construction based on the direct budget allocations to Public Sector Implementation Support.

It should also be noted that, in 2020, a Ministry of Economic Planning and Development and Public Sector Reforms was established and was allocated K2,433,247,728.00 in the 2020/21 FY. However, it was not specified how much was allocated to support the implementation of PSRs, making it very difficult to track the actual allocation. The table shows that on-budget resource allocation for public sector reform support was made only twice, explicitly, in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 FYs. It is scarcely surprising to note this finding since the PSRs were high on the government agenda for a number of reasons. Firstly, the President re-launched public sector reforms in 2015 with renewed and considerable vigour in order to demonstrate political will (GoM, 2018). The allocation of resources was meant to demonstrate that he was walking the talk, even though the allocations were not sustained in other FYs. Secondly, during the same period, the championship of the public sector reform agenda was raised in an attempt to regain the confidence of donors in resuscitating direct budget support, which was suspended in the wake of the cashgate scandal (Tostensen, 2017). In an attempt to give new momentum to the implementation of reforms, the government introduced direct allocation in the national budget.

Whatever the justification for injecting resources into PSR Implementation Support for two FYs only, the allocations were supposed to be maintained. Yet, sufficient budget for reform processes was included as one of the reform enablers necessary for effective implementation of reforms (GoM, 2017). The lack of commitment to uphold this enabler has given some quarters the impression that PSRs are doomed to failure, just as in previous generations of reforms. As such, political parties represented in parliament are supposed to engage with the Parliamentary Committee on Governance Assurance and Public Sector Reforms and the Budget and Finance Committee to lobby for resources to support the implementation of reforms. In this regard, political parties can use their influence to compel the government to allocate more resources by advocating shifts in allocations within an overall budget framework (Chingaibe & Chikadza, 2019).

Political parties represented in parliament also provide oversight of the executive's performance in implementing national policies, strategies, laws, and budget commitments (Patel & Tostensen, 2013). By doing so, political parties sustain political heat and pressure on the relevant authorities to stick to the plans and account for results as necessary (Chingaibe & Chikadza, 2019). This role is primarily invested in the Parliamentary Committee on Governance Assurance and Public Sector Reforms, with the mandate to hold the PSRMU to account and to advocate for reforms in parliament (GoM, 2017). However, the performance of this parliamentary committee is constrained by several bottlenecks. The major challenge has been that there is lack of information sharing between the guardian and the guard attributed to the trust issues that exist between them. To give weight and credence to

this finding one of the members of Parliamentary Committee on Governance Assurance and Public Sector Reforms lamented in one of the dailies: “there is nothing moving on the ground, as an oversight committee, we are finding it hard to track the status of reforms, there is need for the PSRMU to come up with a timeline or implementation plan” (Chikoko, 2017: 1).

Additionally, the Parliamentary Committee on Governance Assurance and Public Sector Reforms just like any other parliamentary committee in Malawi are often constrained by lack of technical expertise, limited funding and resources for committees to meet frequently, frequent shuffling of Members of Parliament (MPs) by political leadership, and various types of pressure from administrative officials and party leaders (Patel 2016; Basit, 2018). There is therefore a greater need to iron out these chronic challenges in order to create a conducive environment for the Parliamentary Committee on Governance Assurance and Public Sector Reforms to discharge its mandates in the best interest of Malawians.

5Conclusion

The take-home message is that political parties have generally failed to perform their functions with only some strides in raising the profile of public sector reforms in their political manifestos and policy statements. This finding is in line with Chunga’s (2014) study which concluded that political parties’ relevance is under real threat of decline and on course for further decline upon examining their relevance in Malawi’s democracy. Dwelling on this credence, the future of political parties in processes of governance and development, in particular, public-sector reforms, will be just more of what it has been in the past without changing its direction. The persistent poor performance of political parties, characterized by a lack of dedication and functional inefficiency, poses a threat to their ability to shape outcomes of reform policy. The paper concludes by calling a need for radical change in transforming the performance of political parties in Malawi’s public sector reform processes. Such radical change entails a system of governance that is based on institutional mechanisms to strengthen parliamentary committees, manifesto monitoring frameworks, and formalized roles for parties in PSR oversight might put political parties in the forefront of changing the landscape of reforms. Political parties risk becoming mere observers in the country’s quest for successful public sector reform in the absence of such a reawakening. As such, political parties need to rethink how they perform various functions and do away with the “business as usual” approach which negatively affects their performance to serve in reform processes.

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