

**Malawi**

# *Ethnicity in Malawi*

## *Group selection*

Relevance of ethnicity in politics of Malawi is complicated, as the scale of ethnic or tribal affiliation and coalition throughout history was very dynamic (<sup>3119</sup>). Malawi's society is divided along regional rather than ethnic lines. Yet, the comments on ethno-regionalism or super-ethnic identity by Kalipeni (<sup>3120</sup>, 152) are taken into consideration regarding access to power. Hence, we code the **Central (Chewa)** group, the **Northerners (Tumbuka, Tonga, Ngonde)** and the **Southerners (Lomwe, Mang'anja, Nyanja, Yao)** as politically relevant ethnic groups.

<sup>3119</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3120</sup> [Kalipeni, 1997]

## *Power relations*

### *1964-1994*

Regional identities are reflected by the Chewa and Ngoni (the two dominant ethnic groups in the central region) that are the groups in power, while people in the north and south are second to them. The Ngoni in the center aligned with the Chewa, while Ngoni - as the ethnic group dispersed throughout the country and without a regional stronghold (<sup>3121</sup>, 6f) - in other regions aligned with the dominant group in the respective region (<sup>3122</sup>; <sup>3123</sup>: 26).

<sup>3121</sup> [Ferree & Horowitz, 2007]

<sup>3122</sup> [Ferree & Horowitz, 2007]

<sup>3123</sup> [Erdmann, 2007]

<sup>3124</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

Kaspin shows the logic of the "development" of ethnicity in Malawi (<sup>3124</sup>; 598ff): While in 1950 Tew identified 25 ethnic groups, Pike and Rimmington reduced them to nine. The "canceling" of groups from the map was due to cultural visibility (ibid.: 601). During the Banda regime this tendency continued, leading to an enhanced visibility of the Yao in the South, the Chewa in the center and the Tumbuka in the north. All the literature reviewed clearly speaks of a Chewa government under president Banda, a Chewa himself (e.g. <sup>3125</sup>; <sup>3126</sup>; <sup>3127</sup>; <sup>3128</sup>; <sup>3129</sup>). Due to the Chewa dominance or actually monopoly in government which led to privileges for the central region (not only for Chewas but also other people residing there), discriminated people in the north and, to a lesser extent, in the south aligned to form super ethnic groups (<sup>3130</sup>; <sup>3131</sup>). While most of the "disappeared" groups aligned with the dominant group of their region, the Ngoni for example did not align unanimously with one group, but along their settling with the dominant group in the region. Kaspin argues that while visible during the colonial era, after independence they lost their visibility and political relevance as a

<sup>3125</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3126</sup> [Kalipeni, 1997]

<sup>3127</sup> [Hussein, 2009]

<sup>3128</sup> [Osei-Hwedie, 1998]

<sup>3129</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

<sup>3130</sup> [Kalipeni, 1997]

<sup>3131</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

distinct ethnic group after independence (<sup>3132</sup>, 601, FN 12; <sup>3133</sup>, 7). The period from 1964 to 1994, therefore, was marked by a dualism between being Chewa or not being Chewa, or living in the central region or not (<sup>3134</sup>, <sup>3135</sup>).

Yet, people in the north and people in the south did not form a united opposition to the dominance of the Chewa in the center. Therefore, and taking into consideration the development after 1994, the ethnic map is broken down into three regional blocs, representing the super-ethnic identities (<sup>3136</sup>; <sup>3137</sup>; <sup>3138</sup>).

Banda's regime was authoritarian and ethnically exclusive. Therefore, the Chewa/centraler are coded as being dominant (not holding the monopoly as there were at least pretended attempts of a more inclusive national agenda). All the other ethnic or regional groups are coded as powerless.

### *1995-2020*

In 1994, the first democratic elections took place. In the elections, the partition of the country into three regions became obvious (<sup>3139</sup>; <sup>3140</sup>; <sup>3141</sup>; <sup>3142</sup>; <sup>3143</sup>). Three political parties, each representing one region, dominated the elections: Banda's MCP the center, AFORD the north and UDF the south. Bakili Muluzi's UDF won the elections, yet needed to find allies for a majority in the parliament. The period after the 1994 elections saw countless reconfigurations of the cabinet (even the increase and subsequent decrease of ministries), including northerners as well as centraler into the cabinet (the representation in terms of ethnicity is difficult to assess (<sup>3144</sup>, 64)), yet the UDF remained in power from 1994 to 2005 (until its breakup), winning elections in 1999 and 2004. The period starting in 1995 was coded as one single period, as the 1999 elections brought about just some minor changes - people in the north got increasingly unsatisfied with the UDF government. This led for example the AFORD leader Chakufwa Chihana to align in the 1999 elections with his enemies of MCP and not with the UDF anymore, which on the other side led to AFORD's disintegration as not all northerners could stand an alliance with the party of the former dictator Banda (<sup>3145</sup>).

The Southerners are coded as Senior Partners and the Northerners and Centralers as Junior Partners. The 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections lead to the victory of the UDF presidential candidate Bingu wa Mutharika, while the parliamentary election was won by the MCP, leading somehow to a stalemate. The 2004 elections were, therefore, already marked by high fragmentation of the political arena, seeing new parties (and old disintegrate. e.g. AFORD) (see <sup>3146</sup>). Yet, voting was still done along regional lines (ibid.). When president Mutharika broke with his party, the UDF, in 2005, he had to look for new alliances within the parliament lacking representation there with his newly founded party DPP. Therefore, the tendency of weakened relevance of super-ethnic (ethno-regional) identity increased. This development found formal expression in

<sup>3132</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3133</sup> [Segal, 1995]

<sup>3134</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3135</sup> [Brown, 2008]

<sup>3136</sup> [Kalipeni, 1997]

<sup>3137</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3138</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

<sup>3139</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3140</sup> [Kalipeni, 1997]

<sup>3141</sup> [Meinhardt and Patel, 2003]

<sup>3142</sup> [Ferree & Horowitz, 2007]

<sup>3143</sup> [Ferree and Horowitz, 2010]

<sup>3144</sup> [Chirwa, Patel & Kanyongolo, 2004]

<sup>3145</sup> [Rakner, 2005]

<sup>3146</sup> [Rakner, 2005]

the 2009 elections when president Mutharika was re-elected with a landslide victory winning support regardless of his southern descent even in the center and the north (<sup>3147</sup>, <sup>3148</sup>, 364-365). However, it may be too early to speak of ethnicity as irrelevant; rather a further reconfiguration of the relevance of ethnicity or ethno-regional identity might be the case. Chirambo shows how president Muthiraka had especially in his first term to re-invoke cultural symbols and practices to win support within the population. In doing this he replicated practices “invented” by former president Banda. Yet, while Banda as a Chewa referred somehow authentically to Chewa cultural practices, Muthiraka additionally to his Lowme practices invoked practices from different other tribes (Chewa, Ngoni, Tumbuka). Thereby, on the one hand he won support among the people throughout the country, while at the same time his critics could also challenge his claims to national unity due to the inauthenticity of his cultural populism (<sup>3149</sup>).

In the literature, group sizes are most often indicated according to (ethno-)linguistic patterns. In those lists for example, Chewas are not distinguished from Nyanja and Mang'anja (see e.g. <sup>3150</sup>, 601). Kaspin offers a number regarding the electorate in the respective regions with 49% in the south, 39% in the center and 14% in the north (<sup>3151</sup>, 597). The census of 2008 shows similar results with about 42% of the population in the center, 45% in the south and 13% in the north. Therefore, the sizes of the three groups are indicated as follows: Chewa/Central: 40%; Northerner: 14%; Southerner: 46%.

In May 2009 national parliamentary and presidential elections were held. Bingu wa Mutharika, a Southerner, was elected president and the DPP won an absolute majority of seats in parliament. The UDF, MCP and AFORD were still running in the elections but had to suffer losses. This indicates that ethno-political mobilization is still relevant in Malawian politics during this period. However, Chinsinga and Kayuni (<sup>3152</sup>) and Bertelsmann (<sup>3153</sup>) point out that the DPP was able to overcome regionalist politics, drawing on popular support in the entire country. Binguwa Mutharika died naturally in 2012 to be succeeded by its Vice-President Joyce Banda, who is coming from the South too. The Southerners are still Senior Partners and the two other groups are Junior Partners in the government.

The 2014 elections were the first elections in which the people of Malawi were able to vote for national parliament, president and local governments at the same time. Bingu wa Mutharika's younger brother Peter Mutharika, also from the DPP, defeated MCP candidate Lazarus Chakwera (27.8%) and incumbent president Joyce Banda (20.2%) with 36.4% of the votes (<sup>3154</sup>). Ethno-regionality still plays a mayor role in Malawi's political sphere. Voting in the 2014 elections was patterned after tribal lines and “ethnicity is one of the important factors that play a significant role in Malawian politics” (<sup>3155</sup>, 184f). The centre supported the MCP with nearly 3/4 of their votes and a vast majority of the votes from the southern municipi-

<sup>3147</sup> [Ferree and Horowitz, 2010]

<sup>3148</sup> [Hussein, 2009]

<sup>3149</sup> [Chirambo, 2009]

<sup>3150</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3151</sup> [Kaspin, 1995]

<sup>3152</sup> [Chinsinga & Kayuni, 2010]

<sup>3153</sup> [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008-2014]

<sup>3154</sup> [Malawi, 2015]

<sup>3155</sup> [Zeze, 2015]

palties went to the two southern-based parties the UDF and the DPP (<sup>3156</sup>). For both the south and the centre this voting behaviour mirrors the previously noted and coded ethno-regional voting behaviour. There was no northern candidate in the presidential election in 2014, which complicates an analysis of ethno-regional voting affiliation of the northern region. The northern regions overwhelmingly voted for Joyce Banda (a southerner and former member of the UDF and DPP), who established the PP (Peoples Party) in 2011. This “chameleon” nature (<sup>3157</sup>, 84) of Joyce Banda (changing from being leader of a southern party to one that is mainly supported by the north) could be seen as an indicator of continuous decline of the importance of ethno-regionality in Malawi’s politics. However, the PP gained overwhelmingly and nearly exclusively votes from the northern region, regardless of the southern origin of the party-leader. It nearly completely replaced the AFORD, the former strong party in the north, which nearly vanished from the political landscape of Malawi (<sup>3158</sup>). Dulani and Dionne (<sup>3159</sup>, 222), furthermore contend that only two of the northern districts voted for a regional candidate that did not identify as a “northerner”, thus clearly indicating ethno-regional voting behaviour.

<sup>3156</sup> [Malawi, 2015]

<sup>3157</sup> [Gabay, 2015]

<sup>3158</sup> [Khembo, 2004]

<sup>3159</sup> [Dulani, 2014]

The ruling DPP, although seemingly overcoming regionalist mobilization, only gained minor support in the northern and central region. The Malawian cabinet is thus made up of representatives of parties that are predominantly supported by southerners since all ministers except for one (Atupele Muluzi from the UDF) are DPP members (<sup>3160</sup>). Some of the cabinet members originate from the central or northern region but most of them are southerners. Through the major role the Southern parties play in the cabinet, the southerners are still coded as Senior Partners while the two other groups are coded as Junior Partners.

<sup>3160</sup> [State Residences Malawi , 2017]

The 2020 report of the Bertelsmann Stiftung testifies to the continuing importance of ethnicity in Malawi: “The main cleavage in Malawian politics is ethnicity. All major political parties appeal to ethnic identity—which is broadly coterminous with regional origin—as a basis of mobilization. With the exception of the 2009 elections, [...] electoral support tends to follow regional cum ethnic lines” (<sup>3161</sup>, 29).

<sup>3161</sup> [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

In the 2019 elections, the incumbent President Mutharika was the candidate of DPP, and won the election, receiving votes predominantly from the southern region. Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera, the main opposition member, was the candidate of the MCP, and received electoral support mainly from the central region. On top of the geographical distribution of electoral support, there is also evidence of explicit ethnic claims made by Chakwera (<sup>3162</sup>). Finally, Saulos Chilima, former vice-president between 2014 and 2019, left the ruling DPP in mid-2019 and formed a new party, United Transformation Movement (UTM). He ran as its candidate in the elections and was the dominating force in the northern region. Although his ethnicity is unclear, he is certainly not Lomwe (Southerner,

<sup>3162</sup> [Maravi Post, 2019]

as Mutharika) and it seems that this was a factor behind some of the internal problems during his period in DPP (<sup>3163</sup>). Thus, even though some saw the importance of other cleavages in the elections, such as age (<sup>3164</sup>), ethnic divisions still played the most important role.

<sup>3163</sup> [Nyasa Times, 2016]

<sup>3164</sup> [The Guardian, 2019]

The 2019 elections were highly controversial because of fraud claims: “Days after the election results were announced, the two leading opposition candidates, Chakwera and Chilima, filed petitions to the Constitutional Court challenging Mutharika’s victory. The two cited widespread irregularities, including duplicate forms and the use of Tippex correction fluid and missing signatures on some result sheets” (<sup>3165</sup>). Amid post-election protests, the Constitutional Court annulled the results and ruled that new elections must be held.

<sup>3165</sup> [Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020]

## 2021

In the re-run of the elections in summer 2020, the opposition candidate Chakwera, of the Chewa-dominated MCP, won and became the new President, with Chilima as Vice-president. Evidence suggests that the Southerners will no longer be senior partners in the government (<sup>3166</sup>, <sup>3167</sup>). Indeed, the southern part of the country voted overwhelmingly for Mutharika’s ruling DPP, while the central region went for the Tonse Alliance led by Chakwera (<sup>3168</sup>). This new alliance includes “leaders from almost all regions of the country” and it will be Chakwera’s main task to bridge the political divide to the south according to one analyst (*ibid.*). Given Chakwera’s election success based on persisting ethno-regional voting patterns, the Central (Chewa) group becomes senior partner and the Southerners become junior partner. The Northerners keep their junior partner status.

<sup>3166</sup> [France-24, 2020]

<sup>3167</sup> [Quartz Africa, 2020]

<sup>3168</sup> [Mohamed, 2020]

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## Political status of ethnic groups in Malawi

*From 1964 until 1994*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Southerners (Lomwe, Mang'anja, Nyanja, Yao)	0.46	POWERLESS
Central (Chewa)	0.4	DOMINANT
Northerners (Tumbuka, Tonga, Ngonde)	0.14	POWERLESS

*From 1995 until 2020*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Southerners (Lomwe, Mang'anja, Nyanja, Yao)	0.46	SENIOR PARTNER
Central (Chewa)	0.4	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northerners (Tumbuka, Tonga, Ngonde)	0.14	JUNIOR PARTNER

*From 2021 until 2021*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Southerners (Lomwe, Mang'anja, Nyanja, Yao)	0.46	JUNIOR PARTNER
Central (Chewa)	0.4	SENIOR PARTNER
Northerners (Tumbuka, Tonga, Ngonde)	0.14	JUNIOR PARTNER

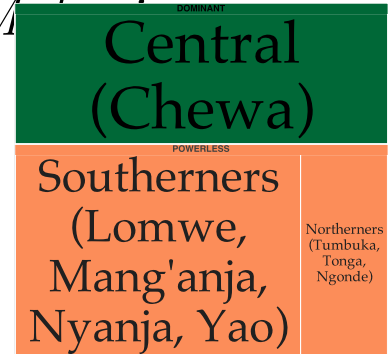


Figure 631: Political status of ethnic groups in Malawi during 1964-1994.

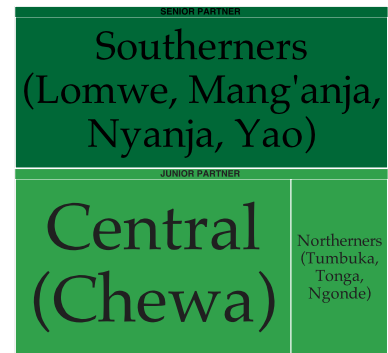


Figure 632: Political status of ethnic groups in Malawi during 1995-2020.

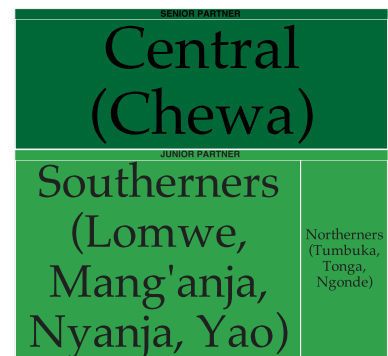


Figure 633: Political status of ethnic groups in Malawi during 2021-2021.

## Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Malawi

*From 1964 until 2021*

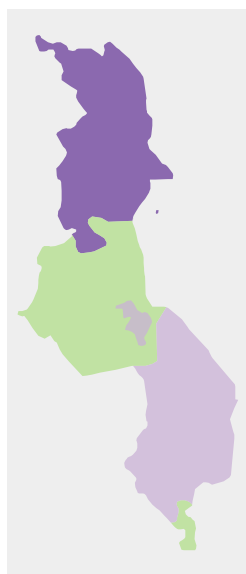


Figure 634: Map of ethnic groups in Malawi during 1964-2021.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
■ Northerners (Tumbuka, Tonga, Ngonde)	40 840	Regionally based
■ Central (Chewa)	40 058	Regionally based
■ Southerners (Lomwe, Mang'anja, Nyanja, Yao)	39 579	Regionally based

Table 232: List of ethnic groups in Malawi during 1964-2021.