

# “We Will Re-distribute Land When You Vote Us into Power...” Electoral Politics and Peasant Struggles Amidst Unresolved Land Question in Southern Malawi

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## Abstract

The people of tea growing districts of Thyolo and Mulanje have been at constant loggerheads with estate owners for decades now. The borne of contention is that the tea estates own huge thatches of land and utilize less than 50% for plantation agriculture while the majority remain land-poor. The objective of the research was to understand the role of political parties in supporting or resisting land reform initiatives in Thyolo and Mulanje, Malawi. Political Parties in Malawi since 1994 have promised to redistribute land to peasants, but little action has been taken on the same. Using qualitative research approach, data was collected from peasants, local leaders, political parties and other secondary sources. Four main political party manifestos were studied: Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Malawi Congress Party (MCP), United Transformation Movement (UTM); and United Democratic Front (UDF). The study finds out that political parties in Malawi uses the land struggle to woo votes from the electorates; promise them land redistribution and after they get into power the issue is forgotten. Party Manifestos from 1994 to 2019 have either included the issue in their blueprint, or omitted entirely. The study finds out that during the 2019 tripartite elections, no single party outlined what procedure it would use to free up land in the estate lands. This paper suggests that a successful reform in the area starts with political will within the ruling party, with governing institutions having a carefully mapped plan on how they would go about land reform; rather than mere propaganda on the matter.

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## Setting the Scene

On 30<sup>th</sup> April 2019, opposition Party president Lazarus Chakwera for Malawi Congress Party (MCP) promised the people of Thyolo and Mulanje that once he and his party is voted into power, he will solve the outstanding problem of land shortage affecting thousands of people in Thyolo and Mulanje districts. The opposition party leader was speaking during whistle stop tours in Thyolo and Mulanje, convincing the masses in the area to vote for his party MCP in the May 2019 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections. Ironically, another opposition party President in the same race Saulos Klaus Chilima<sup>1</sup> promised the same people a week earlier that his administration would stimulate land reforms in the Southern region where many Malawians were turning into tenants in their own land. The UTM president narrated that he was aware that ordinary locals had been at in conflict with huge tea estate owners over the issue of land. According to Chilima, land was a very important aspect in the UTMs agenda to transform the country's agriculture.

These sentiments have been a song sung by many politicians who have gone to campaign in the area since Malawi adopted multiparty democracy in 1994. After gaining independence in 1964, land reform was not on agenda. Kamuzu Banda promoted dual agriculture; where cash crops were for estate farmers. Locals were banned from cultivating cash crops like tea and coffee. From 1994-2005 (under multiparty democracy) United Democratic Party (UDF) with Bakili Muluzi as President ruled Malawi. Bingu Wa Mutharika resigned from UDF in 2005 and formed his party that ruled Malawi from 2005-2012. After his sudden death in office, his vice president Joyce Mtila Banda and her Peoples Party ruled Malawi from 2012-2014. Peter Mutharika, brother to Bingu wa Mutharika was elected president from 2014 defeating incumbent Joyce Mtila Banda and her Peoples Party (PP). Almost all these governments had in one way or the other promised land redistribution to peasants in Thyolo and Mulanje. In 2001 when Bakili Muluzi was ruling, Malawi Government commissioned a land inquiry, which revealed massive skewness in land ownership. Land for most peasants in Thyolo and Mulanje had been dwindling. In areas where peasants have some land, it is unproductive as the estates consumed all almost prime land in the area. In 2003, Malawi in conjunction with World Bank commissioned a Community Based Rural Land Development Programme (CBRLDP) popularly known in vernacular 'Chewa' as Kuzigulira Malo. The plan for this project was to relocate 15,000 families to other districts like Mangochi, Balaka and Machinga under a willing buyer willing seller philosophy. The World Bank considers this project a success though a score of studies have disputed the same. Chinsinga (2008) notes that Majority of the relocated families went back to their original districts of Thyolo and Mulanje. Instead of solving land conflicts between the peasants and the estates, the CBRLDP bred new land

<sup>1</sup> Also known popularly known as SKC by his supporters

conflicts between returnees and those who stayed behind<sup>1</sup>. What has been perceived as a successful reform by international organization like World Bank has proved to be a failure on the ground where the reform occurred. Since then, little has been done to plan and implement a land reform in Thyolo and Mulanje.

It has been highlighted by scholars that the estate owners in Thyolo and Mulanje got land fraudulently<sup>2</sup> from locals in the 1880s. They then converted the ownership from customary to freehold land tenure. The MCP government from 1964 maintained the colonial dual agriculture systems: the estate agriculture and subsistence agriculture. Most of the estate owners were white British, descendants of colonizers. The subsistence farmers were restricted to cultivate cash crops. Surplus grain from the small-scale farmers was sold at government markets at lower prices. This was done to accumulate capital to provide the estate owners some soft loans. The philosophy was that the estate agriculture would generate more income and develop Malawi.

Since multiparty democracy, political parties have gone to town to promise peasants in Thyolo and Mulanje that once voted into power they would solve the Malawian land question. It's been about two decades with only promises to the landless poor and no tangible steps to a workable land question. Poor people who have close and intimate relationship to land continue to live in abject poverty. A successful land reform might need a stronger political will from a governing political party.

### **Theoretical Background**

Being a liberal multiparty democratic country, political parties in Malawi draft manifestos to outline their intended policies they would wish to implement once successful in an election. These policies are presented to people to choose their leaders. Scholars agree that many factors are at play that makes people vote for a party. There is a huge debate on whether in Africa manifestos has an impact on voting patterns or not. Some scholars have argued that people in Malawi do not vote on issues, policies, but regionalist grounds, patronage and charismatic personalities. However, the 2009 elections proved otherwise (Mpesi, 2011). Bingu Wa Mutharika was voted into power and won with an overwhelming majority because of his pro-poor policies like the fertilizer subsidy programme. Patel (2015) agrees that food security policies by the DPP played a major role in catapulting its torchbearer (Arthur Peter Mutharika) into power in 2014. The food security and economic successes of the Bingu Wa Mutharika government made the DPP so popular hence winning with a landslide. We can therefore argue that policies especially those to do with welfare of local people have a play in deciding whom to vote for. This actually is more evident on the majority of voters. For rural votes, party manifestos might not be such relevant. For the middle-class, most of which are educated, manifestos play a key role. However, manifestos play as a yardstick on which electorates can hold leaders accountable when they acquire legal mandate to rule.

Land reform is a contentious issue. In any land reform there are winners and losers. There are also groups of people that reap benefits of status quo before any land reform. Chances are that landowners (mostly elites and well connected politically) have to loose power over land if a reform is to be successful; difficult route but manageable. Due to the contentious nature of land reform, there is need for through clarification on how land redistribution might occur. Chinsinga (2019) shed more light on how stakeholders can approach a land reform. Stakeholders need to understand the clarity of reform (Land reforms can take different forms: restitution; redistribution; and tenure reform). Land reforms are often disagreements between and among stakeholders regarding the exact nature land reforms should take in a particular context.). The second consideration is the disjuncture between domestic and international political economy perspectives- multinational development partners have pushed for 'one-size-fits-all' perspective on land reform, which might not work in all contexts. Thirdly, there is need to understand the complexity of the land reform in practice- land reform is more complex; and it 'involves identities not just mere economics and material wealth. Lastly, challenges with data to guide land reform need to be taken in consideration. Land reforms cannot be successfully implemented in the absence of data that is deemed credible by the eyes of all stakeholders who often have fundamentally competing interests (Ibid, 2019). These concepts need to be clear enough in any attempt to face a reform especially in southern Africa. A Political will from ruling government is significant for a successful land reform.

### **Does Malawi Need a Land Reform?**

Scholars agree that landholdings in southern Malawi have been dwindling. This has in part been caused by increase in population; and also highly skewed land ownership and usage. As Demographic Health Data (DHS) indicates, many Malawians are young. With the slow expansion of the manufacturing and service industry, it has not been easy for them to attain non-agricultural jobs. For this reason, many rural Malawians continue to have a special

<sup>1</sup> In the CBRLDP, the idea was that those people that are relocated from Thyolo and Mulanje to Balaka and Mangochi districts surrender their small parcels of land to those that stayed behind. When the returnees came back, they were claiming their surrendered land back, causing further land conflicts.

<sup>2</sup> During the colonial era, Britain ruled Malawi. During this time, local chiefs were given a small token like a bag of salt, wine or a roll of cloth to give white settlers huge thatches of Land. With the help of the Rhodesia Government, the colonial settlers converted the customary land to freehold.

‘dependency on and attachment to land...’ It is for this reason that policies concerning land in Malawi should transcend a mere popular lip service to convince land-poor voters; but thorough enough to address the route and procedure on how a successful land reform might be done. Poor need land more than the rich.

### **Malawian Political Parties, 2019 Manifestos and Land Reform Policies**

Land in southern Malawi is one of the highly politicized topics. When it comes to political parties (both in ruling and opposition), its all rhetoric in order to get legitimacy to rule. Once voted into power, all the promises on restitution are no longer fulfilled. This has happened since 1994 to date. Political cadres vying for political office from ward councilors to presidents have been using the same tactics over and over again to get votes from the unsuspecting poor in the area. What many studies have not done is to scrutinize the philosophy of Malawi’s main political party manifestos towards land question in southern Malawi.

The researcher interviewed political party leaders, read party manifestos for the 2019 tripartite elections to understand better about party views on land conflicts between peasants and estates in Thyolo and Mulanje. The researcher also analyzed how feasible are the aspirations of the said parties in solving the long-time land question in Thyolo and Mulanje.

### **The United Democratic Front (UDF)**

The United Democratic Front was the first political party to rule Malawi after the MCP one party rule. UDF under its president and founder Bakili Muluzi ruled Malawi from 1994-2004. The current president of UDF (by the time the thesis was written) was Atupele Muluzi, son of founder Bakili Muluzi. The 2019 UDF manifesto was silent on what it would do in case it was ushered into power after the May 21 elections in 2019.

### **United Transformation Movement (UTM)**

Despite the fact that the UTM manifesto is silent on land reforms in Thyolo and Mulanje, its presidential aspirant for the 2019 general elections held many rallies in Thyolo and Mulanje promising land reforms. Dr Saulos Chilima, UTM presidential candidate had this to say in Bvumbwe when he had a campaign rally as quoted in one online local newspaper:

*“Front-runner in next months tripartite elections, the UTM, says its administration will stimulate land reforms in the Southern region where many Malawians are turning into tenants in their own land. UTM President Dr Saulos Chilima made the pledge yesterday during a rally at Bvumbwe in Thyolo district where ordinary locals have been at constant loggerheads with huge tea estate owners over the issue of land. According to Chilima, land is very important aspect in the UTM’s agenda to transform the country’s Agriculture.*

*People of Bvumbwe and many other parts of the southern region are very hardworking farmers. However, for sometime now their potential has considerably declined basically because there is no land for them to work on. When we get your mandate on May 21 we will effect reforms to free up land for local Malawians. Chilima said to loud cheers from the crowd... (Maravi Post, 2019).”*

Based on the above-mentioned remarks, I argue that it is really a commendable and bold to talk about land reform in Thyolo and Mulanje. However, the researcher highlights some key issues on the way the quest for land reform was being pursued by the opposition party UTM:

- i. The UTM does not explain how it will free up land from the estate owners to the land hunger in southern Malawi. This is a very critical issue to solve this land question. There are the peasants and the estate owners. The latter is mostly the winner of the status quo. It has used all mechanisms possible to further alienate peasants from the land. Since this notion is unavailable in the UTM manifesto, it is quite difficult to deduce where the freed up land is the ‘idle’ land from the estates, or the land being covered by tea and macadamia nuts in Thyolo and Mulanje.
- ii. The UTM claims it puts land as an important aspect in the UTM’s agenda, but its conspicuously missing in its blueprint, governing plan, rendering the people of Mulanje and Thyolo with no paperwork to follow-up on the progress if UTM is given the mandate to rule. Governments of ruling parties have come and go; with little to mention on the progress on land reform in Thyolo and Mulanje. From MCP government that emphasized on dual agriculture (estate and smallholder) to the current DPP government. The people of Thyolo and Mulanje are now aware that the state would not assist, and resort to encroachment. One peasant notes *“party politics in this country only need us to vote for them. They promise us to reconstitute land to the people. When in power all is no longer implemented. That is the main reason why me and my fellow villagers decided a decade ago to go ourselves and start cultivating in the idle land. If we wait for any politician or party, we will die of hunger. We are tired of empty promises for restitution.”*

We can see that the people are aware that party politics is just there to hoodwink peasants as if they are fighting together for the land. In natural sense, the peasants are on their own. Some will argue that the UTM might choose to put the issue in its manifesto but not implement it. This line of

argument follows that Malawi is a poor country, and we have had different parties ruling it with very brilliant manifestos. After being ushered into power all the promises are never fulfilled. The poor get poorer, the selected and connected few to the politicians get richer and richer.

However, this sounds a fair assessment, but the people of Thyolo and Mulanje deserve leaders who have done some homework on how land can be freed from the estates. What direction can it take? Willing seller willing buyer like the CBRLDP? Would it be in form of restitution? The whole tea estates or only unused land in the estates? How will the UTM make sure that all landless would have access to the land if the reform is effected? What will the UTM government deal with the external forces that shapes the contested land in Thyolo and Mulanje? How much land do the estates own in this area? How much is under cultivation? All these would need to be thought through. It was a campaign period, talk is cheap but all these need a through analysis.

- iii. The UTM need to dig deep into the land issue in Thyolo and Mulanje, engage with experts to be at par or close to solving the issue. For instance, local social movement PLO did a great move to sensitize people around the area that politicians are there just to win votes, and that alone (as people) they can retake the land. Though not through PLO, individual farmers have managed to encroach and cultivate on estate land for close to a decade now (some farmers its now two decades). Empirical evidence is available.
- iv. Most huge estates in Thyolo and Mulanje are owned by white Malawians, land was obtained fraudulently and the tenure deed are all freehold. As discussed in chapter 2, this was colonial land grab. What steps will the UTM government follow to solve the long-standing land question?
- v. Huge thatches of land owned by the estates in Thyolo and Mulanje have been idle for more than 4 decades. The estates keep this land not to use for tea or mainly for collateral. The estates are able to collect loans from banks putting the land as collateral hence they cannot just give it back to the landless poor without huge resistance. The UTM also has to know that the estate owners are wealth and connected, both at local and international levels.
- vi. There is Zimbophobia among many Malawian elite who can help the poor to reshape the power in land ownership especially in Thyolo and Mulanje. In most circumstances the land question in Thyolo and Mulanje is talked, there are always people preaching how Zimbabwe struggled (was struggling) economically when it effected its ambitious and successful land reform in 1980s. I would argue though that the conditions in which Zimbabwe was and Malawi are really different. In southern Malawi, huge areas of land in the estates remain unused, and the peasants are demanding the same. This would not directly affect the tea economy (tea production, value chains, contribution to GDP) among many others.
- vii. Too much donor meddling in the land issues, incomplete decolonization of Malawi from its former british colonies

In light of this, it is not just the populism employed by the UTM in the land issues in Thyolo and Mulanje, but also lack of its inclusion in the manifesto, and the step-by-step procedure on how land will be freed from the estates to the land-poor in Thyolo and Mulanje.

### **The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)**

The Democratic Progressive Party is the ruling party, since May 2014. It initially started ruling in 2005 after its founder Professor Bingu Wa Mutharika resigned from UDF and formed his own party after winning on UDF ticket in 2004.

#### **The DPP Manifesto on Malawian Land Question**

The manifesto is quoted as saying ‘...for the poor who have no land or ability to farm government will give them social cash transfer. This will give the recipients choice to spend the cash on food or any other activity that will give them livelihood.’ **Page 28.** Members of the DPP including the president himself Peter Wa Mutharika had conducted numerous political campaigns promising peasants that they will re-distribute land after being re-elected into power. During the 2019 tripartite elections, the DPP was the ruling party, with all the resources to bring all stakeholders at one place and re-think the course and direction of land question in Thyolo and Mulanje

- i. One would argue that why would a ruling party choose to give people in Thyolo and Mulanje ‘money’ and not the ‘land’? does this imply that it has failed to solve the land question?
- ii. The DPP does not stipulate how much money will be given to the peasants. Is the money enough to purchase land from anywhere away from the plantations.
- iii. Giving people money each and every year, I argue that it might not be sustainable. All know that Malawi is a youth population. This means that many would prefer jobs whether on the farm or industries for livelihoods. Governments can provide an environment where its people are able to economically prosper. The rich does not necessarily need land. The poor needs land. If given land, (which is lying idle anyway) we argue that they can be able to cultivate, get their own money and support all the necessary livelihood

- activities.
- iv. Poverty levels in Malawi are high; with almost 52% of its 17 million Malawians in poverty (HIS, 2016). The Malawi government claims to give poor money. Causes of poverty are numerous; so are the solutions to the same. However, empowering the poor should actually start from giving them means of production. Teaching the poor to fish, rather than giving them fish might be the way to go. The DPP might need to go back to the drawing board and learn major performers in poverty reduction to see how they managed. They might not copy all methods but try to learn the useful lessons and modify them to fit the Malawi context.
  - v. The issue about giving the able-bodied landless poor some money would be adequate if substantiated with giving the poor land (land reform/ restitution) and a starter pack for the farmers to be able to cultivate, buy inputs, livestock and all necessary requirements needed to farming. This would give true meaning and pathway to teach the villagers a sense of independence.
  - vi. I argue to let the landless poor to sweat for their efforts so that they will be able to independently sustain their livelihoods standards whether this government continue to rule or not
  - vii. The land, if restitution is done, can be the wealth of the beneficiary families. Can be transferred from one generation to the other and create room for breaking poverty cycle among the rural dwellers in Thyolo and Mulanje
  - viii. I argue that the mere mention of handouts by the DPP leaves out a crucial group of even the new land occupants in the estate lands. This research has found out that even the people who have been able to encroach land from the estates face numerous problems, chief among them being security of tenure. They are uncertainties involved in encroaching the estate lands. For instance, they are unable to invest irrigation equipment in the estate land. This translates that they are unable to grow more than one crop in a year. They only rely on rain-fed agriculture, which is prone to weather and climatic hazards. With their security of tenure threatened, they cannot utilize the land to its full potential. I argue therefore that just mentioning about social cash transfer in the ruling DPP manifesto is not only a threat to the landless poor, but also those that are cultivation n the estate land for over a decade now.

As seen from the explanation above, the ruling DPP was not ready to solve to land question in Thyolo and Mulanje. Neither its written manifesto nor campaign messages outlined what kind of reform; how it can occur and in Thyolo and Mulanje. This implies that the status quo would continue to prevail, benefiting the estate owners even if the DPP gets fresh mandate to rule from 2019-2024. I argue that social cash transfers might not assist in any way to deal with the land-poverty in Thyolo and Mulanje. I argue that empowerment of the poor should start with providing the same with means of production (principally land and capital) for the said empowerment to be sustainable for generations and break poverty cycles.

### **The Malawi Congress Party (MCP)**

For MCP, it tackles the matter at length. Apart from promising the people of Thyolo and Mulanje land re-distribution, the MCP also tackles foreigners buying huge patches of land in cities and towns.

On its page 28, the MCP Official Blueprint says it will only ‘...review land act to ensure that access to land benefits Malawians and not foreigners who are acquiring land fraudulently....’

The MCP, though close to tackle the Malawi’s Land Question leaves behind the people of Thyolo and Mulanje in 3 ways:

- i. Many estate owners are Malawians with British background. This research has found out that there is ‘Zimbabwephobia’ among many elites. The British still controls land ownership decisions in Thyolo and Mulanje. What the MCP is saying might as well be the same song as other parties just to get votes from unsuspecting voters.
- ii. It’s a colonial land question. The MCP is geared to deal with the statues to deal with people “currently obtaining land fraudulently.’ This does not however explain further how the colonial land question in Thyolo and Mulanje will be solved. I argue that the whole MCP statement on land governance when ushered into power leaves out this whole contentious issue in Thyolo and Mulanje as this land was obtained “fraudulently” in the 1890s.
- iii. The land owned by the estates in Thyolo and Mulanje is under freehold. This translates that the estate owners are free to sale it to whosoever want at will. The MCP need not only to include the Thyolo/Mulanje into its agenda; and also explain how it has planned to free up whether ‘used’ or ‘unused’ land from the estates to the peasants in southern Malawi.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that almost all the political parties that participated in the 2019 Malawi tripartite elections had an idea that there is need for a reform especially in the tea growing areas of Thyolo and Mulanje. While the DPP chooses to give people with no land money for their livelihood, the UDF was silent on the issue. The MCP and

UTM claim to deal with the problem by freeing up land in Thyolo and Mulanje without explaining the nitty-gritties. Based on the manifestos of the four major political parties, one would argue that the land-poor in Thyolo and Mulanje need to wait longer as none of the major parties portrayed distinctive solution to the land woes in the area. In simple terms, no political party was explaining the type of land reform that can be done in Thyolo and Mulanje. None of the parties were clear on whether it would be restitution, redistribution or tenure reform that might work in the area. In addition, there was little or no reference to the past attempts for reform, like the CBRLDP where scholars argue it was a flop while international organizations like the World Bank flags it as a success story. The lack of how land will be freed for the locals cast more doubts on solving the land question in Malawi. There was no explanation on how different stakeholders perceive the issue of land reform in area.

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