Do women face a different standard? The interplay of gender and corruption in the 2014 presidential elections in Malawi

Boniface Dulani, Lise Rakner, Lindsay Benstead, Vibeke Wang

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Africa, Elections, Malawi, Corruption, Gender

ABSTRACT

Incumbency advantage and corruption are persistent features of Malawi politics, yet the incumbent Joyce Banda lost the 2014 elections. Drawing on national public opinion surveys and focus groups, we explore why incumbency advantage did not accrue to Banda. We argue that faced with a major corruption scandal, “Cashgate,” Banda paid a heavier price than male incumbents facing corruption scandals before and after her. Her electoral fate is consistent with studies demonstrating that women holding political offices are scrutinized more heavily than men, and when they transgress female gender stereotypes of incorruptibility, they are judged using a higher standard.

Introduction

The comparative literature suggests that individual holding the executive office is overwhelmingly likely to maintain office (Cox & Katz, 1996). Incumbents are assumed to hold direct advantages such as resources attached to the office, as well as more indirect advantages, such as name-recognition. Incumbency advantage is a well-established characteristic for US presidential elections as well as new democracies, including in Sub Sahara Africa (Bleck & Van de Walle, 2019; Cheeseman, 2010). The perks of holding office are believed to translate into the re-election of incumbent presidents. In the literature, incumbency advantages are explained by pointing to neopatrimonial patterns and lingering authoritarian tendencies (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Erdman & Engel, 2007; Hyden, 2005) and semi-authoritarian features (Carothers, 2002; Diamond & Plattner, 2001; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Weak institutions and personalized power limit constraints on the executive and enable incumbents to personalize public funds and construct durable patronage networks that magnify the incumbency advantage (Cheeseman, 2010).

Malawi is no exception. Confirming the expectations in the literature, incumbents in Malawi have been disproportionately advantaged at the polls since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1994. But, in the May 2014 elections, incumbent President Joyce Banda of the People’s Party (PP) lost the presidency after only two years in office. She was replaced by Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), who won the presidential elections with 36% of the vote in a field that featured 12 candidates. Yet, in the case of President Joyce Banda, as well as President Bingu wa Mutharika before her, the incumbency status is more nuanced. Joyce Banda was sworn in as President after Bingu wa Mutharika passed away in April 2012. Banda was his vice-president in the 2009 elections, but their conflict intensified when Peter Mutharika, the president’s brother, became DPP’s presidential candidate for the 2014 elections (Dulani & Dionne, 2014, p. 218). These political events led to Joyce Banda’s expulsion from DPP, and she subsequently formed a new party, the People’s Party (PP) in 2010. In accordance with the constitution, Joyce Banda became president and PP the ruling party after wa Mutharika’s passing, but the party had not contested an election previously (Wang et al., 2020, pp. 127).

In this study, we take as a point of departure the puzzling outcome of the 2014 elections and explore why the incumbency advantage did not accrue to Banda. We focus in particular on gender stereotypes (Rudman & Glick, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002) and argue that, while many leaders...
have been linked to corruption scandals, Banda was punished at the polls, in part, due to her gender.

The 2014 elections in Malawi were contested in the shadow of a major corruption scandal, dubbed locally as “Cashgate.” Described as “the biggest financial scandal in Malawi’s history” (BBC, 2014), Cashgate involved the looting of public resources through the exploitation of weaknesses in the government’s Integrated Financial Management System (IFMIS). Cashgate perpetrators transferred funds from government bank accounts to vendor accounts for goods and services that were never supplied; the transactions were then deleted from the IFMIS system (Baker Tilly, 2014). Coming to light eight months before the May 2014 general elections, the Cashgate scandal became the major talking point of the year’s election campaign, leading numerous commentators to attribute Banda’s eventual election defeat to her government’s inability to fight corruption (Kainja, 2014; Kondowe et al., 2014; Mapondera & Smith, 2014; Dulani & Chunga, 2015; Zimmerman, 2015). Kainja (2014) summed up the election effects of Cashgate on Banda’s re-election chances this way: “[a] cocktail of scandals and high-level corruption in [Banda’s] administration overturned her [election] fortunes.” Zimmerman (2015) echoes this view, arguing that “Cashgate had significantly shifted support away from Joyce Banda in the six months prior to the election” (p. 230). For his part, Jomo (2014) contends that, “Cashgate...was probably the biggest nail to be hammered home into [Joyce Banda’s] political coffin” (Jomo, 2014). Yet, corruption is endemic in Malawi. Estimates by a former Director General of Malawi’s Anti-Corruption Bureau suggest that 30% of the gross annual budget is lost to corruption each year (Kainja, 2016). While Cashgate is the largest corruption scandal to have emerged in Malawi to date, corruption and mismanagement were not unique to Banda’s rule. Presidents before and after her, all male, have been accused of high levels of corruption. Further, Cashgate links back to the 2005 creation of the country’s Integrated Financial Management System. Though it was discovered during Joyce Banda’s tenure, the scandal cannot be solely attributed to her two years in office. After Joyce Banda left office in 2014, her successor, Peter Mutharika, was implicated in several corruption scandals, but still went on to secure a contested victory in the 2019 presidential elections.2

Do these observations suggest a gender bias? Did allegations of corruption hurt Joyce Banda more than they hurt her male predecessors and successors? In this article, we investigate the effects of Cashgate on the 2014 elections, with specific reference to Joyce Banda’s performance. We draw from several national public opinion surveys that were conducted before and after the Cashgate scandal as well as data from focus group discussions conducted in 2016. Based on our analysis of various data sources, we argue that Joyce Banda paid a heavier price because of Cashgate than male incumbents paid for corruption scandals before and after her. Corruption did not seem to affect her predecessors’ and successor’s re-election bids. The electoral fate of Joyce Banda in 2014 is consistent with studies demonstrating that women holding political offices are both more visible and more closely scrutinized than men. Additionally, when they transgress female gender stereotypes of incorruptibility, they are judged more harshly (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2018; Kanter, 1977). Over time, this translates into reduced re-election prospects for the women involved.

Additional explanations for Joyce Banda’s failure to be re-elected must be considered. Her road to the office of president was unorthodox. As Vice President, Joyce Banda formed the People’s Party (PP) in 2011 when she refused to endorse Peter Mutharika, the younger brother of then-president, Bingu wa Mutharika, as the Democratic Progressive Party’s (DPP) successor. When President Bingu wa Mutharika unexpectedly passed away in 2012, Joyce Banda assumed the presidency without having formally contested any elections. Before this, internal friction in DPP and a fall out between Mutharika and Joyce Banda, led to the expulsion, from the party, of her and several of her followers. Although Joyce Banda’s party had governed for two years, it contested elections for the first time in 2014. PP’s short duration, and the fact that she had not been elected President, may have negatively influenced her perceived legitimacy among voters. Future research should consider similar cases and employ observational and experimental methods that may rule out alternative explanations and further strengthen our argument that women leaders face a different standard than men when confronted with allegations of corruption.

Following this introduction, we first review the theoretical literature on gender and corruption. We then present the contextual background to the case of Malawi, with emphasis on the Cashgate corruption scandal as it unfolded during Joyce Banda’s presidency. In section four, we present and discuss the data before a final section considers the implications of our findings for further research on the relationship between gender and corruption.

The relationship between gender and corruption

Two pioneering studies by the World Bank sparked an intense debate regarding the correlation between gender and corruption. They ultimately fostered a consensus that expanding women’s role in government is an effective means of controlling corruption (Transparency International, 2014). Controlling for civil liberties, income, and education, these studies found that lower levels of corruption were associated with higher proportions of women in parliaments (Dollar et al., 2001; Swamy et al., 2001). Swamy et al. (2001) found bribery and corruption to be less severe when women hold a larger share of political seats and senior-level positions in government and bureaucracy. These studies identified a mechanism in which women were considered to be less involved in corruption and, as a result, levels of corruption could be expected to decrease as more women were elected to political positions. From these normatively positive findings, increasing the ratio of women in politics became an important tool to attempt to combat corruption (Dollar et al., 2001; Rothstein, 2016). Summarizing the debate 15 years later, and reviewing the evolving scholarship following the first pioneering studies, Rothstein (2016) argues that while studies have consistently shown that democracy is not a cure for corruption, increased gender equality seems an important factor for corruption control.

By now, the identified correlation between higher proportions of women in legislative bodies and lower levels of corruption is well established.3 Yet, the explanations provided for the strong empirical evidence are not very elaborate and the causal direction of the relationship is still unclear (Bauhr et al., 2018; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2019). Initially, scholars attributed the relationship to essentialist arguments that women are less selfish, more charitable and altruistic, and more risk-averse than men (Dollar et al., 2001; Swamy et al., 2001). Not only are these widely-held gender stereotypes, but there is also experimental evidence showing that women act more ethically and consistently with the public good than men (Rivas, 2012). Yet, others have argued that these arguments are spurious. Some researchers have suggested that the link between gender and corruption is contextual-linked to opportunity structure, culture, and institutions (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2018).

---

2 Malawi went to the polls in May 2019 and Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won his re-election bid with a slim majority (38.57% of the votes against the second candidate (Chakwera) receiving 35.41%). With the support of civil society, the two losing candidates (Chakwera and Chilima) challenged the election results in the Malawi courts. On 3 February 2020, the court nullified the result, identifying significant irregularities in the electoral conduct and ordered a rerun no within six months from the judgment. The court also ruled that the winner had to emerge with a clear majority of at least 50% of the vote. In the June 2020 presidential election Malawi’s Tone Alliance won a comprehensive victory, obtaining 59% of the vote. The governing party, led by President Peter Mutharika, received just 40%.

3 This finding is documented for United States Senators (Stolberg, 2011).
It has been noted that women’s exclusion from tightly-knit, corrupt networks may account for the World Bank’s findings and that, as a result, democracy must address both corruption and gender inequality (Sung, 2003). Grimes and Wångnerud’s (2012) study of political nominations in Mexico finds that women who make it into political office often have different backgrounds than their male counterparts and that comparisons of actions then taken in office are misleading.

Other studies accept that a relationship between electing women and lower corruption exists, but question whether women are inherently more honest or averse to corruption than men. Instead, they argue, the correlation between lower levels of corruption and the gender of the office holder is due to women’s structural marginalization and resulting risk aversion (Esarey & Chirillo, 2013) and the observed relationship is linked to the exclusion of women from clientelistic networks (Goetz, 2007). Tripp (2001), and later Bjarnegård (2013), suggest that female politicians may not be more honest; they simply have less access to the informal, clientelistic networks of their male counterparts. Similarly, Al Hassan-Alolo (2007) relying on primary data from Ghana, finds that women are not less corrupt than men if exposed to political environments characterized by corrupt opportunities. So too, based on data from the World Values Survey, Esarey and Chirillo (2013) question the existence of direct causality between women in office and reduced levels of corruption, arguing that context matters. While a relationship between high numbers of women in political office and reduced levels of corruption holds for democratic countries, that relationship is not present in autocracies. Esarey and Chirillo link this finding to accountability and the presence of credible political institutions. If women are more averse to risk, they argue, women may be less likely to risk illegal acts in the presence of strong accountability institutions (2013, pp. 379–82). Conversely, as women may feel greater pressure to conform to existing political norms about corruption and more vulnerable to punishment for violating political norms, in the absence of legal sanctions and accountability, the positive relationship between the high number of female politicians and lower levels of corruption disappears.

With regard to the developing world, which is often characterized by weak accountability institutions, we know relatively little about how the relationship between gender and corruption unfolds. We do not know whether women—once they enter leadership positions—have a dampening effect on the levels of corruption a dampening effect on the levels of corruption. Studies from the Arab world show that a sizable proportion of the population see women as less corrupt or more corrupt than men. It is only when they are seen as equally prone to corruption as men that they are more likely to be electable (Benstead and Lust, 2018). Yet based on Latinobarometer perception data, Schwindt-Bayer (2010) finds little evidence to suggest that women politicians are perceived as less corrupt. Indeed, in recent years, corruption scandals have plagued the presidencies of Costa Rica’s President Laura Chinchilla (2010–2014) as well as Chile’s Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010; 2014–2018). In August 2016, Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff was impeached due to a highly-publicized corruption scandal involving unauthorized budget reallocations. Similarly, in March 2019, South Korea’s Constitutional Court removed President Park Geun-hye for using her office to enrich a childhood friend and solicit donations from companies in exchange for political favors. Africa’s first female President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia (2006–2018), was similarly accused of countenancing corruption and nepotism during her tenure. Despite initial pledges by the Johnson Sirleaf government to curb graft corrupt networks characterizing the end of her tenure, corruption in Liberia had become widespread and endemic, with some of Johnson Sirleaf’s closest family members (including several of her children that had been given senior government positions) implicated in corruption scandals (Clarke & Azango, 2017). The recent corruption scandals facing female presidents in Africa, Latin America, and Asia as well as the Cashgate scandal in Malawi, have all occurred in countries with long histories of corruption, where male presidents have been associated with corruption scandals at similar or even grander scales. These observations suggest that women leaders—once implicated in acts of corruption—are judged more harshly by voters than their male counterparts.

The influence of candidate gender on voter perceptions of corruption and voting behavior has been discussed extensively in the literature. Research suggests that voters employ gender stereotypes when evaluating female politicians (Eggers et al., 2018)—both in terms of how women are (i.e., descriptive gender stereotypes) as well as how they should behave (i.e., prescriptive gender stereotypes) (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2008). Studies drawing on experimental surveys find that women candidates are evaluated differently from (and often, more negatively than) men on dimensions such as character traits, perceived policy specializations, qualification for office, and electoral viability (Bauer, 2015; Ditonto et al., 2014). Women are typically viewed as being more ethical, honest, compassionate, and concerned with people’s welfare (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men are viewed as strong leaders, assertive, and self-confident. According to gender role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), bias arises when there is a mismatch between gender stereotypes (“gender roles”) and the characteristics of leaders of the past (“leader roles”), who are often men.

These stereotypes are believed to inform voters’ evaluations of female candidates (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Barnes & Beaulieu, 2014; Shames, 2003; Benstead, Jamal & Lust, 2015; Kao & Benstead, 2021). The existence of descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes—that women are nice and honest—may lead voters to respond differently to misconduct by male and female politicians (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2008). This extends to how women are seen—whether they are viewed as honest (i.e., descriptive gender stereotypes) and how they are treated if they accept outside of the social norms for female behavior by engaging in corrupt practices (i.e., prescriptive gender stereotypes).

Findings holding that women politicians face major obstacles when seeking elected office are nested within the context of the Social Relations Approach (SRA). This approach highlights how social relationships create and reproduce systemic differences in the positioning of different groups of people. According to Kabeer and Subrahmanian (1996), social relationships determine who we are, what our roles and responsibilities are, and what claims we can make; they determine our rights and the control that we have over our own lives and those of others. Ultimately, social relations produce cross-cutting inequalities, which ascribe each individual a position in the structure and hierarchy of their society. Gender relations are one type of social relation. Class, race, ethnicity, and many other social relations—including lineage traditions—factor in as well. Ditonto et al. (2014) conclude that voters apply different evaluation standards to women applying for office, searching for cues about whether she has the qualifications to serve in office, how she has done in the past, and how she is expected to do if elected. Voters also hold expectations for the roles that women should hold in society (i.e., as wife and mother and with qualities such as kindness and honesty). This level of scrutiny is missing for men, resulting in relatively more positive evaluations of the performance of male political officeholders. As McDermott (1997) notes, gender operates as a social information cue, leading to more intense scrutiny of female political leaders. Higher levels of scrutiny limit the chances of women in elected office to retain their seats or to move upwardly in political party structures and could also impact parties’ willingness to nominate them (Murray, 2008). Consequently, male officeholders have better prospects for upward career progression than do women. This finding is supported by recent research carried out on Malawian politicians. As a result, they are more likely to be considered as failures than their male counterparts (Institute of Public Opinion and Research [IPOR], 2018).

Thus, the intersection of gender and corruption is complex. Not only might women face bias at the polls, but that bias could increase if they face greater scrutiny. The research on gender and corruption is still inconclusive, especially regarding weakly institutionalized polities in the global south. The election of more women to office cannot be
reliably linked to a reduction in corruption if other elements of a state’s culture and development are not considered. Above all, we have scant empirical evidence on how voters regard male and female politicians when they are linked to acts of corruption. Moving our attention to the weakly institutionalized democratic setting of Malawi, to what extent does gender play a role when voters evaluate politicians’ behavior? Can it be argued that if wrongdoing is revealed, women politicians will be punished more harshly?

The case of Malawi: incumbency advantages and corruption

Since 1994, Malawi has held uninterrupted, multiparty elections every five years with comparatively high participation; the last national elections held in 2014 and 2019 had a turnout rate of 71 and 74%, respectively. When Malawians went to the polls for the presidential elections rerun in 2020, turnout remained high at 65% despite a raging COVID-19 pandemic. Malawi’s elections are generally free, fair, and non-rigged; the last national and parliamentary elections since 1994 have been competitive, if not democratic. Executive powers are strong, and parliamentary oversight is generally weak (Patel, 2015). All presidential and parliamentary elections since 1994 have been competitive, if not democratic. In 2009, Bingu wa Mutharika was re-elected with a large majority and with support from all regions in an election deemed “free and fair” (though not without caveats) by most international observers (Chinsinga et al., 2010). Except for the 2009 elections, presidential elections in the country have been highly competitive, with the results often too close to call. However, by 2010 the democratic system in Malawi was clearly under stress (Svåsand, 2011), and the politics of elections contributed to the evident democratic erosion. Mutharika’s second term in office saw the president adopting an increasingly authoritarian stance and taking greater control over the economy. In 2010–11 this resulted in a foreign exchange crisis: the local currency became overvalued, a parallel foreign exchange market developed, there were shortages in fuel, electricity and consumer goods along with the interruption of bilateral and multilateral aid (Cammack, 2012). The deteriorating political and economic policy situation was followed by significant political developments as the DPP government initiated several reforms with the apparent purpose of changing the political playing field in favor of the incumbent government and in preparation for the 2014 elections. President Bingu wa Mutharika began to promote his brother, Peter Mutharika as his anointed successor over then-Vice President Joyce Banda, further contributing to the tensions within the ruling party. In January of 2011, the divisions in the DPP resulted in Banda’s expulsion from the party. She then went on to found the People’s Party (PP), which included some members from the DPP.

In April 2012, President Bingu wa Mutharika died while in office. Despite initial attempts by the DPP to have Bingu wa Mutharika’s brother and anointed successor Peter succeed him, Vice President Joyce Banda became the new president of Malawi in accordance with constitutional guidelines (Dionne & Dulani, 2013). Joyce Banda’s accession to power was welcomed by local opposition forces and international observers as she reversed some of the controversial economic and political decisions taken by her predecessor. However, she faced serious challenges in the 2014 elections as many of the same players and political dynamics prevailed in these elections (Cammack, 2012; Patel & Wahman, 2015; Resnick, 2012).

Contextualizing Cashgate in the wider corruption discourse in Malawi

While Cashgate has received widespread media attention, both within and outside Malawi, corruption has been a major challenge in Malawi for a long time. Kainja (2016) notes that in the two decades since Malawi ushered in democratic rule, corruption has become almost normalized and that it is expected that when a president is in power, his or her family and home region will benefit.

During the years of authoritarian rule of then-President-for-Life Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1964–1994), corruption was perceived to be highly centralized and limited to a handful of the president’s closest confidants (Anders, 2002; Cammack, 2012; Phiri, 2013). While Hastings Banda was accused of using the state machinery to cement his own political and economic position, he adopted a strict policy against corruption in the wider civil service, so much that, as Cammack (2012) notes, he was able to maintain an efficient, honest and incorruptible administration. The ushering in of democracy in 1994 and the coming to power of a new government led by Bakili Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF) resulted in a new mode of governance, but also led to the flourishing of a culture of corruption (Marmion, 2007; Phiri, 2013). Muluzi, who became Malawi’s first democratically elected president in 1994, was not only accused of indulging in corruption, but also in preceding over a government that made corruption a common and widespread vice (Khembo, 2004). During the 10 years of the Muluzi presidency (1994–2004), corruption flourished, leading commentators to characterize his tenure as “a period of unprecedented illicit accumulation... politicians, entrepreneurs and ordinary public servants engaged in fiscal discipline [and] maladministration” (Phiri, 2013, pp. 8–9). This view is echoed by Cammack (2012, p. 21), who points out that the Muluzi government “oversaw the siphoning of funds from government coffers by senior party people for political and personal ends [and] corruption spiraled out of control.”

The worsening corruption during the Muluzi years is reflected in the available data. Transparency International’s (2020) Corruption Perception Index shows that while the Muluzi administration started off well during his first term in office (1994–1999), in his second term (1999–2004), corruption escalated (Fig. 1).

The Malawi CPI data suggest that corruption remained high after Muluzi left office in 2004. Although Muluzi’s successor, Bingu wa Mutharika, pledged to adopt a “zero tolerance of corruption” (Butty, 2014), the vice continued to flourish, with Malawi recording its lowest CPI score of 2.7 in 2006 and 2007 during his tenure (Transparency International, 2020). This was also reflected in a 2006 Governance and Corruption baseline survey, which found that nearly 9 out of 10 citizens believed corruption to be a serious problem in Malawi and approximately 70% held the view that corruption had gotten much worse in the preceding 10 years (Government of Malawi, 2006, hereafter GOM). Subsequent surveys found that citizens felt that corruption had become worse over time and that it had become a major constraint to Malawi’s development prospects (Chinsinga et al., 2010).

The Cashgate scandal broke out in September 2013, eight months before the general elections. The scandal first came to light when an Accounts Assistant in the Ministry of Energy and Mining, Victor Sithole, was found with large sums of money stashed in his car’s trunk as he left the government’s central offices in the capital, Lilongwe. During the police investigation of the Sithole case, then-Budget Director, Paul Mphwiyo, was shot at the gates of his house on September 13, 2013. Investigations into Mphwiyo’s shooting led to further Cashgate discoveries and arrests. Evidence revealed the systematic plundering of public resources on a grand scale (Baker Tilly, 2014, p.1). President Joyce Banda responded first by reshuffling her Cabinet, dropping the Finance and Justice Ministers, Ken Lipenga and Raphael Kasambara. The Malawi government then sought the help of the British Government to commission and fund a forensic audit of suspected misappropriations from April–September 2013. A British firm, Baker Tilly Business Services Limited, was hired by DFID and given the responsibility of undertaking the forensic audit. The report issued on February 21, 2014 stated that MK13.7 billion of public funds could not be sufficiently accounted for and were suspected to have been embezzled. Table 1 summarizes the Baker Tilly Report findings.

The unraveling of Cashgate led to the arrest of several individuals, including government officials and prominent businesspeople. Those

4 Banda is a common surname in Malawi and there are no family relations between Malawi’s first president Hastings Banda and Joyce Banda.
arrested included senior officials of the People’s Party, including the former Minister of Justice, Raphael Kasambara, who was also implicated in the shooting of Mphwiyo. Other Cashgate suspects included businessman Oswald Lutepo, the PP’s Deputy Director of Recruitment and Sensitization. Lutepo was charged with money laundering and defrauding the government of K4.2 billion. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to serve 11 years in prison.

The May 2014 elections were held in the shadow of Cashgate and not surprisingly, it became a central theme of the campaigns. The four main political parties each focused on ending corruption and prosecuting any perpetrators (Table 2). Of the four main political parties contesting the 2014 elections, two, the Democratic Progressive Party and the United Democratic Front, specifically referenced Cashgate in their anti-corruption platforms.

Arguably, ending corruption is a valence issue shared by all the main Malawian parties and expressed in their party manifestos, i.e. an issue that is uncontroversial and something the electorate agree on. Here, Malawi follows a general electoral pattern on the continent. Bleck and van de Walle (2019) demonstrate that political parties tackle issues in African elections, although they find that political issues generally are discussed through valence appeals rather than by staking out ideological positions. Elischer (2012) study of party manifestos in three African countries finds that programmatic ideas do feature in African politics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cashgate transactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashgate transactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payments with no supporting documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflated procurement prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-corruption platforms in the election manifestos in the 2014 elections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi Congress Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Democratic Front (UDF)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Corruption trends in Malawi, 1998–2019.  
Second, we draw from public opinion survey data from the Afrobarometer, the pan-African network of survey research measuring opinion and attitude on a range of issues including governance and livelihoods (Tsoka & Chunga, 2012). Afrobarometer surveys in Malawi were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014. The first four surveys (1999–2008) were based on nationally representative samples of 1200 respondents, giving a margin of error of +/- 3%. The 2012 and 2014 surveys had sample sizes of 2400 respondents, giving a margin of error of +/- 2% at the 95% confidence interval. We further draw on findings from a survey conducted by the IPOR in 2018, which sought specifically to gauge public perceptions and attitudes towards the participation of women in politics in Malawi. This study had a sample size of 1200 using identical sampling procedures to the Afrobarometer.

Third, complementary data were drawn from studies conducted by the Department of Political and Administrative Studies (PAS) and the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) in 2015 in three districts: Mangochi, Salima, and Rumphi. The sample was randomly drawn, with 597 respondents.

Fourth, 18 focus group discussions were conducted across Malawi’s three geographical regions, as part of the Local Government Performance Index (LGPI) carried out in Malawi in April 2016. The group size was 9–12 people. Using standard focus group methodology we formed groups of people from similar backgrounds; in this study, the groups were male, female, and youth groups in urban and rural areas. Finally, data on elections in Malawi are drawn from the African Elections Database and from the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC).

Corruption and election performance in Malawi

The widespread view that Cashgate made Joyce Banda unelectable would suggest that corruption under her government was so egregious that voters punished her at the ballot box. If true, this would indicate a coming-of-age moment for Malawian democracy, signaling that the Malawi electorate is learning to sanction leaders who are tainted by corruption and related vices. Yet, while Cashgate has certainly been one of the most highly publicized corruption scandals in recent Malawian history, evidence from survey data and corruption indices do not support the view that corruption was at its worst during Joyce Banda’s two years in power. The two previous presidents, Bakili Muluzi and Bingu wa Mutharika, presided over just as much corruption and encountered their own scandals but were not similarly punished at the ballot box (Table 3).

Banda’s successor, Peter Mutharika, was similarly embroiled in several corruption scandals, including one that directly implicated him, yet he faced no electoral sanction.

The case of Bakili Muluzi provides the best example of an incumbent who was not penalized for his corruption scandals. As early as 1994, Muluzi’s opponents cited his previous arrest and imprisonment for public theft in 1968 as a leadership disqualification. The reaction from the Malawian public, however, was to embrace Muluzi with the words, “Bola wakuba yemweyo!,” meaning “Better the thief!” (Lwanda, 1996; Sharr, 2013). Once elected president, Muluzi’s government was dogged by corruption allegations, with several corruption scandals coming to light almost immediately after he came to power (Kayuni & Jamu, 2015). Although numerous corruption accusations were leveled against him, Muluzi won re-election in the 1999 elections with an increased share of the vote while his UDF party increased its share of seats in the new parliament.

The limited effect of corruption on presidential elections before 2014 is further reflected in Bingu wa Mutharika’s election to the Malawi presidency in 2004 and his re-election in 2009. The CPI data show that Malawi’s overall corruption levels had been worsening in the five years before Mutharika won the 2004 elections on a UDF ticket. Yet, Mutharika won the 2004 elections and succeeded Muluzi as president. Malawi’s CPI score was lowest during Mutharika’s first term in office (2004–2009), averaging 2.76 to suggest that corruption was at its worst during this period (Transparency International, 2020). Despite this worsening corruption, however, Mutharika won the 2009 elections with the largest share of the vote (66%) of any president since the reintroduction of democratic politics in 1994.

Joyce Banda’s successor, Peter Mutharika, meanwhile faced multiple corruption scandals before the 2019 elections. Among these was one that came to light in mid-2018 and involved a deposit of around US$4 million into the president’s personal bank account by a businessman who’d been awarded a government contract to supply food rations to the Malawi Police Service (Chikanga, 2018; Chikoko, 2018). While Cashgate implicated Joyce Banda only by association, the police food rations scandal directly implicated President Mutharika. This led several commentators to wrongly speculate that this scandal would hurt Mutharika’s re-election prospects in the 2019 general elections (Chikanga, 2018).

Meanwhile, evidence from public opinion surveys and international indices point to worsening corruption during Peter Mutharika’s first term. Between 2014 and 2019, for example, Malawi’s average Corruption Perception Index score was 3.1. During Joyce Banda’s tenure, it was 3.7. Public opinion survey data from the Afrobarometer in 2017 further showed that nearly three-quarters of Malawians (72%) were of the view that corruption had increased in the preceding year (Chunga & Mazale, 2017).

Although Joyce Banda’s tenure as president was brief, Malawi’s average CPI scores during her presidency were actually the second-best of any Malawian president that sought re-election (Transparency International, 2020). Yet, Muluzi and Bingu wa Mutharika before her were rewarded and re-elected to office, while Banda was voted out of power in the shadow of corruption. Her successor Peter Mutharika, initially won re-election in the 2019 elections, however, he subsequently lost the 2020 re-run, when the two main opposition candidates entered an electoral coalition.

Corruption and voting behavior in Malawi

To understand the extent to which Malawian voters turn their backs against presidents they perceive to be corrupt, we turn to examine data from the Afrobarometer. Specifically, we assess findings from three questions that ask respondents about their perceptions of corruption by the president and officials in his or her office; government’s perceived performance in handling corruption, and whether this leads to a lower likelihood of voting for the incumbent. A preliminary analysis of the Afrobarometer survey data appears to reinforce the belief that Malawians consider corruption to be pervasive and spanning across different governments (Table 4).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election year</th>
<th>Incumbent president</th>
<th>Winning presidential candidate</th>
<th>Share of the vote of winner (%)</th>
<th>Mean CPI scores before elections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Kamuzu Banda (MCP)</td>
<td>Bakili Muluzi (UDF)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Bakili Muluzi (UDF)</td>
<td>Bakili Muluzi (UDF)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Bakili Muluzi (UDF)</td>
<td>Bingu wa Mutharika (UDF)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Bingu wa Mutharika (DPP)</td>
<td>Bingu wa Mutharika (DPP)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Banda (PP)</td>
<td>Peter Mutharika (DPP)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Malawi Electoral Commission; Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI). The CPI score ranges from 0 to 10, with zero reflecting very high corruption and 10 reflecting very clean and no corruption. After 2012, the scale was changed to a 0–100 range. To maintain consistency, our calculations have rescaled the scores after 2012 to the original 0–10 scale (Transparency International, 2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey year</th>
<th>Party in power</th>
<th>Percentage of Malawians holding the view that the President and some officials in his/her office are involved in corruption</th>
<th>Percentage of Malawians holding the view that the government is doing a bad job in handling corruption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>UDF (Muluzi)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>UDF (Muluzi)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>DPP (wa Mutharika)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>DPP (wa Mutharika)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>PP (Banda)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>PP (Banda)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Afrobarometer.

It is worth noting that the 2012 Afrobarometer survey, which was conducted two months after Banda became president, showed a majority of Malawians considered Joyce Banda and officials in her office to be less corrupt. Similarly, a large proportion of Malawians held the view that Joyce Banda’s government was doing a good job in fighting corruption, with slightly less than 3 in 10 Malawians (28%) saying her government was doing a bad job. However, since the survey was conducted only two months into Joyce Banda’s presidency, these views likely reflected people’s expectations of the new government rather than their views of how it was functioning in fact. These figures reinforce the general arguments advanced by Swamy et al. (2001), Dollar et al. (2001), and Rothstein (2016) that suggest that people expect lower levels of corruption with female political leaders in charge. Consistent with the literature once again, however, the table shows that Joyce Banda took a heavier hit once her government was accused of corruption, particularly after the Cashgate scandal broke. After Cashgate, the number of Malawians holding the view that Joyce Banda and officials were involved in corruption doubled from 35% in 2012 to 79% in 2014. Similarly, the proportion of Malawians that considered the Joyce Banda government as doing a poor job fighting corruption more than doubled from 28% in 2012 to 69% in 2014.

A closer analysis of the Afrobarometer survey data suggests that Joyce Banda paid a high penalty for corruption while her two immediate male predecessors were not similarly punished. In 1999, 73% of Malawians considered Muluzi and senior UDF government officials to be corrupt, a figure that is almost identical to the 79% who held the same view about Joyce Banda and officials in her office in 2014. Yet, although both leaders were considered to be almost equally corrupt, Muluzi was re-elected with a 52% vote share in the 1999 elections, while Joyce Banda was voted out in 2014. The same contrasting pattern was repeated in the 2003 and 2014 surveys. The 69% of Malawians who said Banda’s government was doing a poor job in fighting corruption in 2014 was almost identical to the 68% of those who held a similar view about the UDF government in 2003. Yet, despite more than two-thirds of Malawians blaming the UDF government for doing a poor job of fighting corruption, the party’s presidential candidate, Bingu wa Mutharika, won the 2004 elections. As Bingu wa Mutharika was handpicked by the former president Bakili Muluzi, it could be assumed that he was expected to continue the UDF platform. The pattern of Joyce Banda paying a heavier price in elections is reflected yet again in the 2008 and 2014 Afrobarometer surveys. In 2008, over half of Malawians (55%) said they considered wa Mutharika and officials in his office to be corrupt, and yet 66% voted for him in the May 2009 elections (Tsoka & Chunga, 2012).

Additional evidence

The evidence presented above suggests that if corruption impacts voting behavior the same way regardless of the candidate’s gender, both Muluzi and wa Mutharika (and their parties) should have been penalized in 1999, 2004, and again in 2009. Yet, Joyce Banda’s failure to win re-election appears to have been an exception.

While this suggests that Joyce Banda was judged by different standards, we cannot conclude that the observed difference is attributed to gender alone. To better understand the gendered effects of corruption on voting behavior, we examine the voting intentions of those Malawians who said that the president and officials in the presidency are involved in corruption and those who held the view that the government was doing a poor job of fighting corruption. To what extent are those same people willing to vote for an incumbent president and party? To answer this question, we draw from Afrobarometer survey data from pre-election years. Only three Afrobarometer surveys fit this criterion, namely the 2003, 2008, and 2014. The question on voting intentions was not asked in the 2003 survey, leaving only the comparison to the 2008 and 2014 surveys. In 2008, the president was male while in 2014, the president was a woman (see Fig. 2).

Perceptions of corruption in the presidency influenced voter choice much differently between 2008 and 2014. A majority (56%) of Malawians who considered Mutharika and officials in his office to be corrupt were still willing to vote for him if elections were held in 2008. By contrast, only 17% of Malawians who considered Joyce Banda and officials in her office to be corrupt were still willing to vote for her in 2014. This pattern is repeated when comparing the willingness of those who thought the government was doing a poor job of fighting corruption during the Mutharika and Banda presidencies (Fig. 3). Just under half (44%) of Malawians who felt Mutharika’s government was doing a bad job in fighting corruption were still willing to vote for his party in 2008. Only 11% of those who felt Joyce Banda’s government was doing a poor job of fighting corruption expressed willingness to vote for her People’s Party in 2014.

The comparison of how voters responded to corruption in the Mutharika and Banda governments supports the argument that women leaders are judged differently than men when their governments are embroiled in corruption. In the Malawi case, the male president, Mutharika, paid a relatively small price for perceptions of corruption and his government’s failure to fight the vice. By contrast, Joyce Banda, a woman, paid by losing public support for similar corruption allegations, despite Cashgate’s origins dating back to the Mutharika presidency. The Afrobarometer findings suggest that female political leaders, at least in Malawi, are treated differently compared to men when it comes to corruption. Supporting this finding, the PAS/CMI survey conducted in three districts of Malawi in 2015 addressed this question by asking, “In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country’s politics: Female political leaders are judged more negatively than their male counterparts?” Across all three districts, a majority of respondents agreed that women holding political office are indeed judged more negatively compared to men in similar positions (Fig. 4). These findings are further supported by Lora-Kayambazinthu and Kalilombe Shame’s (2016) discourse analysis on the 2014 electoral
campaign where the finding that portrayal of President Joyce Banda undermined her legitimacy to lead the nation, based on her personal trait as a woman (Lora-Kayambazinthu & Kalilombe Shame, 2016). Similarly, Wang et al. (2020, pp. 128-129) suggest that the drop in votes for female candidates is related to changed sentiments towards female leaders after the experience of Joyce Banda. Qualitative interviews with women candidates in the 2014 parliamentary elections suggest that Banda’s rule created a “female politician fatigue” (Wang et al., 2020, p. 129).

The PAS/CMI survey reinforces the argument that female Malawian politicians are often judged more harshly compared to men in similar situations. While a corruption scandal like Cashgate might still have impacted negatively on the re-election prospects of a male candidate, the PAS/CMI study suggests that voters themselves acknowledge that they would judge women leaders more harshly than men. Cashgate might simply have contributed to the arousal of latent hostility towards women in leadership positions. Studies carried out after the 2014 elections reinforce the argument that Cashgate may not have been the sole or main factor explaining Banda’s electoral loss. As part of focus groups conducted in conjunction with the Local Governance Performance Index (LGPI) survey, participants were asked, “If we were to talk of a former Malawi president accused of being corrupt, who is the first person that comes to mind?” The respondents either mentioned Bakili Muluzi (1994–2004) or Joyce Banda (2012–2014). A majority of the male respondents mentioned Joyce Banda, while the women mentioned Joyce Banda and Bakili Muluzi equally. 75% of the youth mentioned Joyce Banda, and the remaining 25% mentioned Bakili Muluzi. Interestingly, no one mentioned the late Bingu wa Mutharika. One reason given by respondents was that one should not speak ill of the dead. Participants were also asked to rate the performance of president Peter Mutharika (2014-2020) and the one preceding him (Joyce Banda). The focus groups were divided on this issue and approximately half the respondents rated Joyce Banda’s performance in office more favorably than the administration of her successor, Peter Mutharika. Considering the diverging views on performance in office and perceptions of corruption levels attached to previous presidents, somewhat surprisingly, in all focus groups the respondents argued that Joyce Banda’s poor performance would affect their willingness to vote for female leaders in the future. Some respondents argued that they would still consider voting for female candidates, but not for the office of president. As argued by one respondent: “Women should not be presidents. They could maybe become vice-presidents, but they cannot be trusted to become presidents.”

A survey carried out by the Institute of Public Opinion and Research in the run-up to the 2019 Malawi general elections bolsters the idea that women candidates face a different standard than men during elections. The IPOR study not only found that a majority of Malawian voters prefer male over female candidates, but it also established that women who seek political office face more obstacles during the election cycles, from the primary elections phase through to the elections themselves.

---

6 The campaign discourse linked her legitimacy to her gender, holding that a woman cannot lead a country (“ng’ombe yayikazi sikoko ngolo”) (2016, p. 57). According to the authors, pictures, Instagram memes and cartoons were used to depict Joyce Banda’s womanhood (p. 67).

7 Focus Group, Youth, Southern Region, January 19, 2016.
Conclusion

Drawing on national public opinion surveys conducted before and after the Cashgate scandal, we find that the incumbent President Joyce Banda may have paid a heavier price for her association with a major corruption scandal than male incumbents before her. Our findings further suggest that in a political context where people expect female leaders to be less corrupt than male leaders, corruption scandals may have a more significant effect on the re-election prospects of female incumbents than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with anecdotal evidence and studies demonstrating that women in elected political office are often judged using a higher standard than men and, consequently, tend to be penalized more than men who behave similarly in office.

We emphasize that our findings are tentative and that more qualitative and experimental analyses are needed to substantiate the claim that women are judged more harshly by voters when linked to acts of corruption. But, we also need to think carefully about the policy implications of our findings. The debate regarding women’s relative propensities to engage in corruption is far from resolved and we need more research to understand women’s true contributions to curbing corruption. If the observed reduction in corruption is due to structural or experimental analyses are needed to substantiate the claim to improve transparency. Our discussion suggests there is likely very little to be gained from assuming that women’s gender somehow guarantees more “moral” behavior. Effective accountability and oversight systems appear to be more important than the gender of public-sector officials. Though increasing women’s political participation remains an important goal on its own, the gender and corruption debate implies that policies that increase women’s roles in organizations and public decision-making and that simultaneously address other determinants of good governance (e.g., transparency, political accountability, separation of powers, or rule of law), might be better able to reduce corruption.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 14002) for funding the 2015 survey in Mangochi, Salima, and Rumphi, as part of the project “Democratization, Political Participation, and Gender in Malawi.” We thank the Swedish Research Council and the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 14003) and Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) at the University of Gothenburg for funding the focus groups.

References


