



Malawians see inequalities but say federalism is not the answer

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 356 | Joseph J. Chunga and John Abdul

Summary

In September 2019, a bill was tabled in Malawi Parliament proposing a constitutional change from a unitary to a federal system of government (Nyale, 2019). The bill was referred to the Legal Affairs Committee of the House for further scrutiny and is expected to be back on the floor for deliberation once the committee prepares its report. This follows a similar attempt in 2018, when the motion was defeated after intense debate characterized by sharp divisions along regional lines as most members from the Northern and Central regions supported the bill while those from the Southern region opposed it (Khamula, 2018; Kapulula, 2018).

Proponents of the proposed change argue that the government, which has been led by presidents from the Southern region since Malawi's return to democracy in 1994, has neglected the other two regions, especially the North, in terms of infrastructure development and social services. They accuse the government of nepotism in appointments to state institutions and of adopting discriminatory policies such as a quota system for selecting students into public colleges and universities. A movement comprising religious leaders, civil society organizations, and academics in northern Malawi called the Forum for the Advancement of Federal System and Rural Development has been championing the cause through marches, petitions, and public statements (Moyo, 2015). According to the legislator who tabled the bill in 2019, Yereimiya Chihana, a federal system of government would help rectify the inequitable distribution of resources and development (Khamula, 2019) by giving regional governments political and financial decision-making powers currently controlled by the central government.

Opponents of the proposed bill argue that federalism is a recipe for further tribal cleavages. The ruling party accuses the opposition of being bad losers and resorting to divisive politics as a way of gaining political power (Mponda, 2019).

As the debate rages on and Parliament continues to process the bill, findings from an Afrobarometer survey in November-December 2019 show that most Malawians – even a majority of residents in the Northern region – reject federalism as a remedy for resource and development inequalities. At the same time, more than half of all Malawians say that their respective ethnic groups are treated unfairly by the government and that communities that don't vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences in terms of public services and development projects.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in November-December 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys in Malawi were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

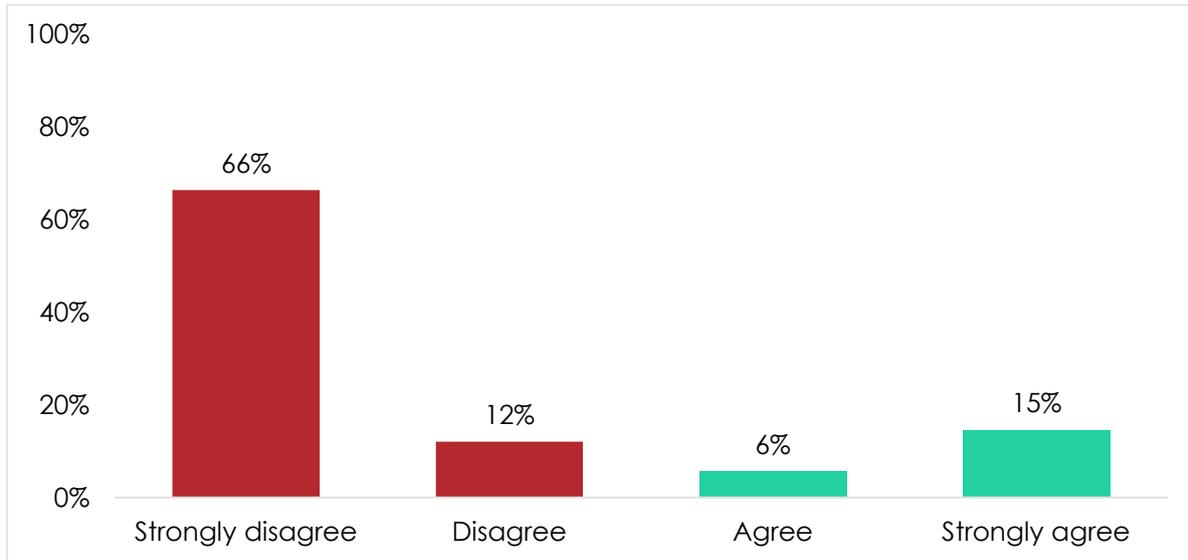
- Malawians overwhelmingly (78%) reject a proposal to adopt a federal system of government as a way to ensure equitable distribution of development resources. Although there are significant differences across regions and party affiliations, majority opposition to the proposal cuts across these divides.
- More than half (51%) of Malawians say their respective ethnic groups are treated unfairly by the government – a perception that is considerably more common in the North (65%) and Center (62%) than in the South (35%). Support for federalism is 11 percentage points higher among respondents who feel their ethnic group suffers unfair treatment.
- Fully half (51%) of Malawians say there are more factors that divide them than unite them as a people. When it comes to ethnic vs. national identity, the largest number (50%) identify equally with both, while smaller proportions identify predominantly or only with their ethnic group (17%) or with their nation (33%).
 - Citizens who see their ethnic group as treated unfairly are more likely to identify predominantly or only with their ethnic group (21%) than are citizens who report no unfair treatment (14%).
 - Federalism is more popular among Malawians who identify predominantly or only with their ethnic group (29%) than among those who identify predominantly or exclusively as Malawians (17%).
- About six out of 10 Malawians (59%) believe that communities that do not vote for the ruling party “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects. This view is more widely shared in the Northern (76%) and Central (64%) regions than in the Southern region (47%).
 - Support for federalism is about twice as high among citizens who say that such communities are “often” or “always” sanctioned (30%) than among those who say this “never” happens (16%).

Support for change from unitary to federal system of government

The idea of adopting a federal system of government as an alternative to the current unitary system is overwhelmingly rejected by Malawians: More than three-fourths (78%) disagree with the proposal, including 66% who “strongly disagree.” Only 21% of respondents support the proposed constitutional change (Figure 1).

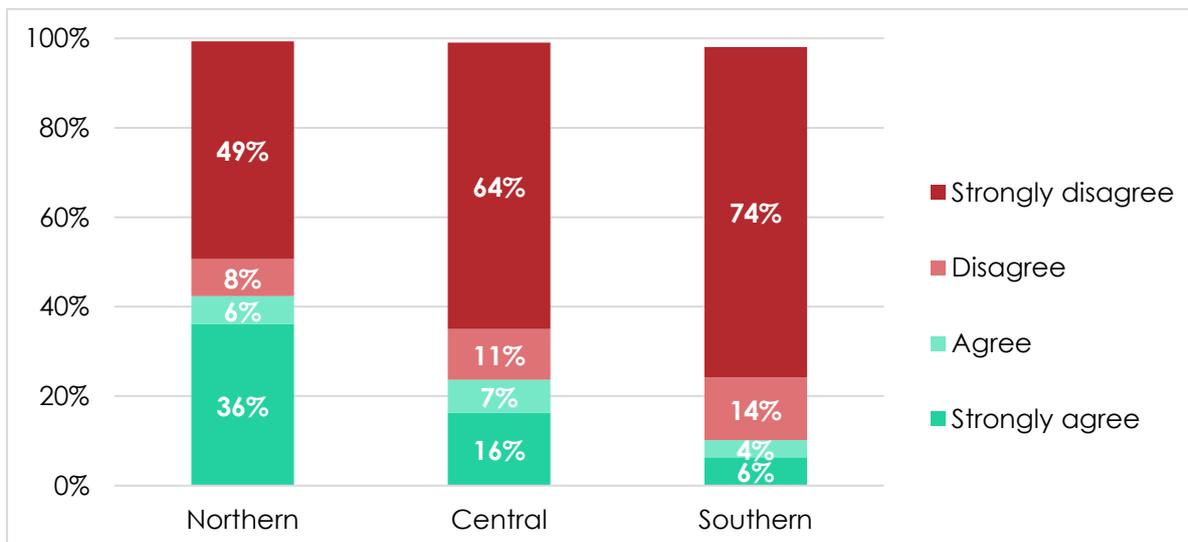
Even though most Malawians disagree with the proposed change, there are noticeable geographical differences. About 42% of respondents in the Northern region say they support the idea of federalism – more than four times as many as in the Southern region (10%) and almost double the proportion in the Central region (23%) (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Should Malawi adopt a federal system of government? | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, do you agree or disagree that Malawi should adopt a federal system of government for equitable development?

Figure 2: Should Malawi adopt a federal system of government? | by region | Malawi | 2019

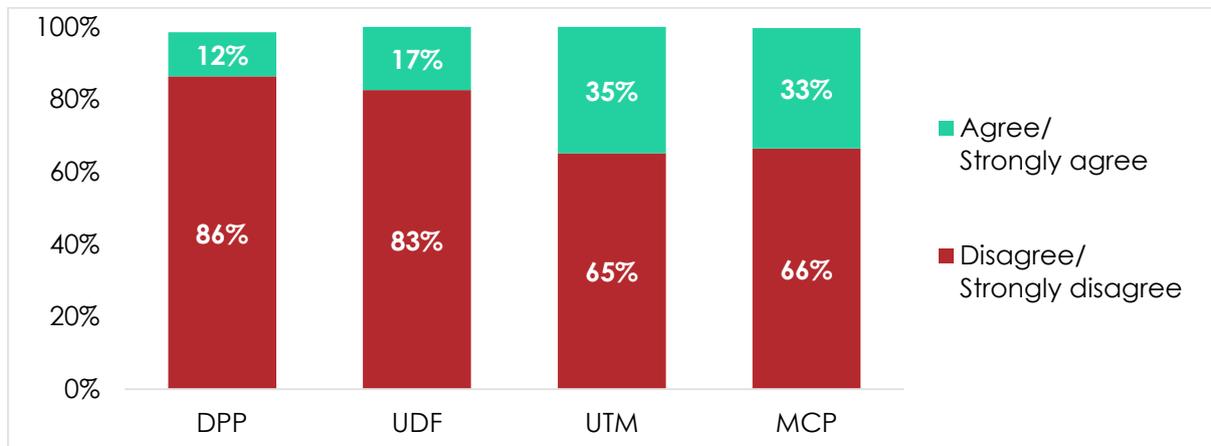


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, do you agree or disagree that Malawi should adopt a federal system of government for equitable development?

Across political party affiliations,¹ more than six in 10 followers of each of the four most popular parties disagree with the suggested change. The levels of support, however, show significant differences. While fewer than one in five sympathizers of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (12%) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) (17%) subscribe to the proposal, at least one-third of adherents of the opposition Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (33%) and UTM (35%) support federalism (Figure 3).

¹ Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Figure 3: Should Malawi adopt a federal system of government? | by party affiliation
 | Malawi | 2019

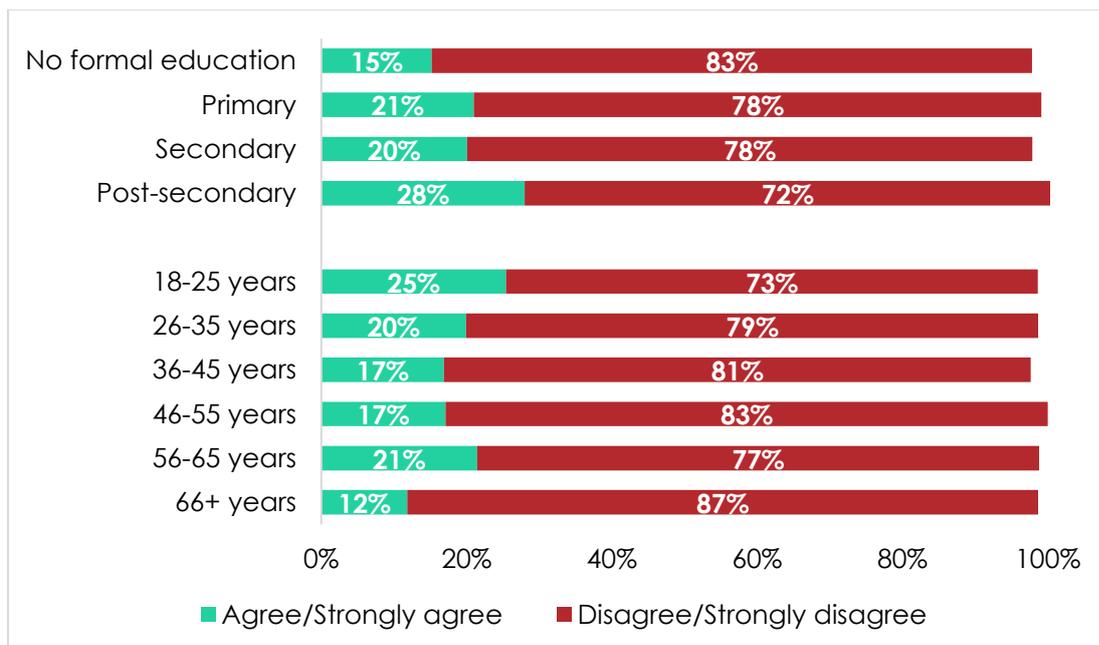


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, do you agree or disagree that Malawi should adopt a federal system of government for equitable development?

As the debate continues, it has been argued that many Malawians don't appreciate the complexities of the proposed federal system because of low levels of literacy, and that proponents of the motion should have done more civic education instead of attempting to rush the change through Parliament (Chiuta, 2019). But while the most-educated Malawians are indeed more likely to support federalism (28%) than their less-educated counterparts (15%-20%), they still overwhelmingly reject the idea (72%) (Figure 4).

The picture looks similar when responses are analyzed by age group. Although support for federalism is highest among the youngest respondents (25% of 18- to 25-year-olds), a large majority (73%) still oppose the idea.

Figure 4: Should Malawi adopt a federal system of government? | by education level and age
 | Malawi | 2019



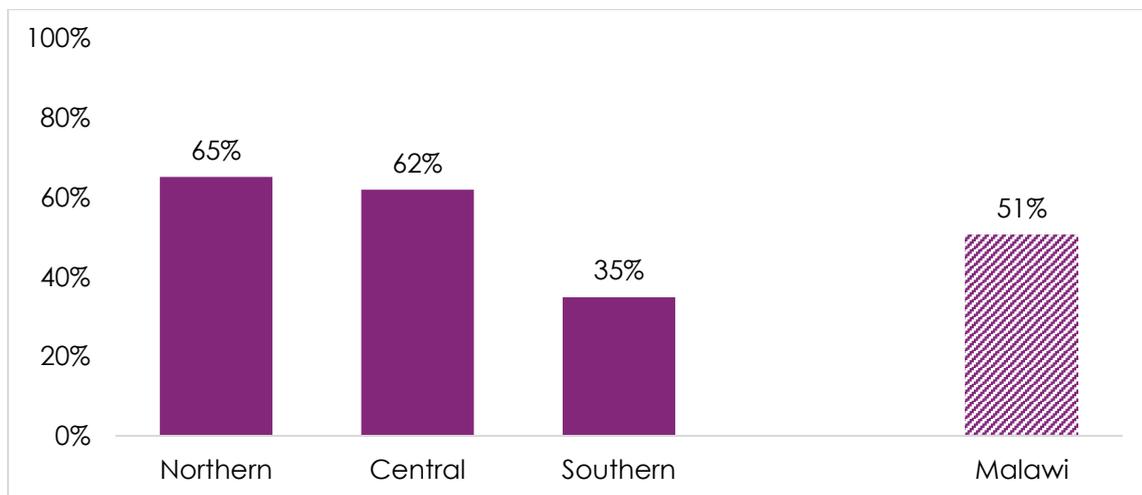
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, do you agree or disagree that Malawi should adopt a federal system of government for equitable development?

Are ethnic groups treated unfairly by the government?

One of the arguments advanced by pro-federalism leaders is that the government discriminates against certain groups of Malawians (Kondowe, 2020). Survey findings show that more than half (51%) of Malawians say the government “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” treats their ethnic group unfairly. Residents in the Northern (65%) and Central (62%) regions are almost twice as likely to feel their ethnic groups are treated unfairly as their counterparts in the Southern region (35%) (Figure 5).

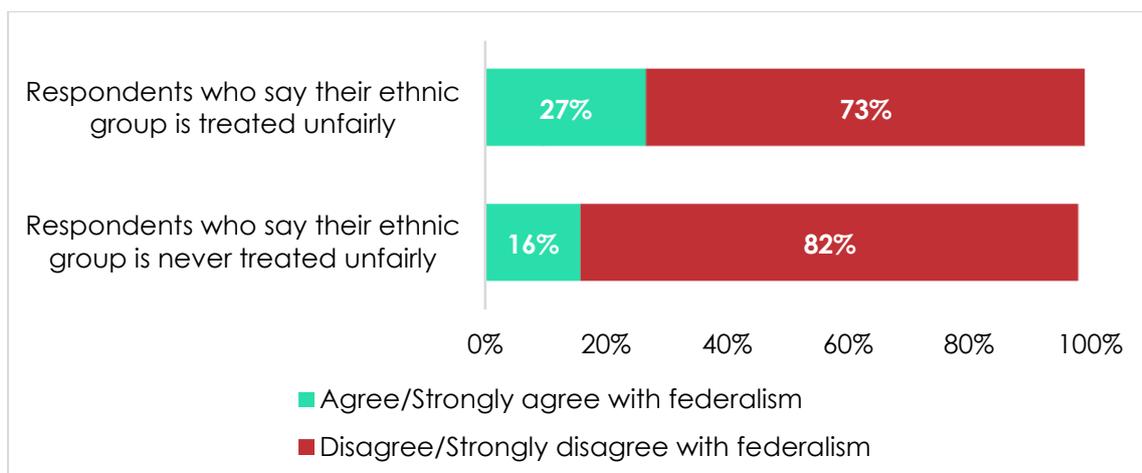
Respondents who say their ethnic group is treated unfairly by the government are almost twice as likely to support federalism as those who report no unfair treatment (27% vs. 16%). Still, even among those who see unfair treatment of their ethnic group, almost three-fourths (73%) reject the proposed constitutional change (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Ethnic group treated unfairly by government | by region | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government? (% who say “sometimes,” “often,” or “always”)

Figure 6: Support for federalism | by views on whether ethnic group is treated unfairly | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

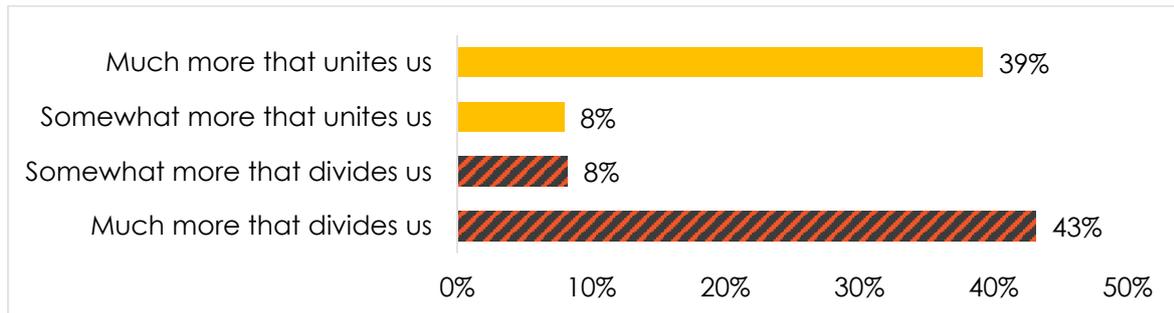
In your opinion, do you agree or disagree that Malawi should adopt a federal system of government for equitable development?

Ethnic vs. national identity

The debate about federalism raises broader questions about ethnic vs. national identity. How do Malawians feel about national unity? To what extent is the perception of unfair treatment by government related to people's identification as Malawian? Are those who feel more ethnic than Malawian more likely to support the idea of federalism?

Afrobarometer asked respondents whether, given the country's diversity in terms of religions, ethnic groups, political parties, and economic and social backgrounds, they think there is more that unites Malawians or more that divides them. More than half (51%) of respondents say there are more factors that divide them than unite them as one people (Figure 7).

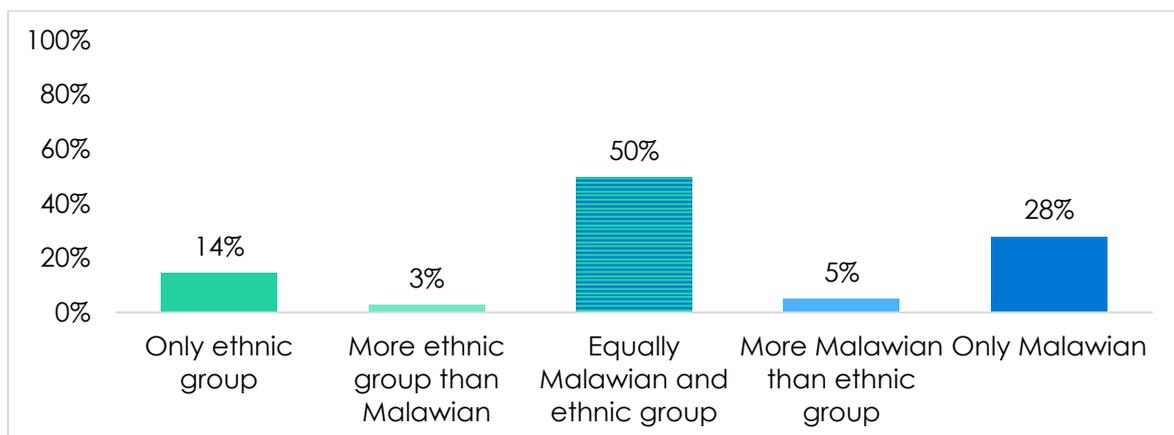
Figure 7: A people united or divided? | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Malawians are very diverse. They come from different religions, ethnic groups, political parties, and economic and social backgrounds. Overall, would you say that there is more that unites all Malawians as one people, or more that divides them?

When asked whether they identify more strongly as Malawians or as members of their ethnic group, by far the most frequent response is that they embrace both identities equally (50%). Only 17% identify more strongly with their ethnic group (including 14% who say they identify only with their ethnic group), while one-third (33%) say they identify more strongly with the national label than with their ethnic group (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Ethnic vs. national identity | Malawi | 2019

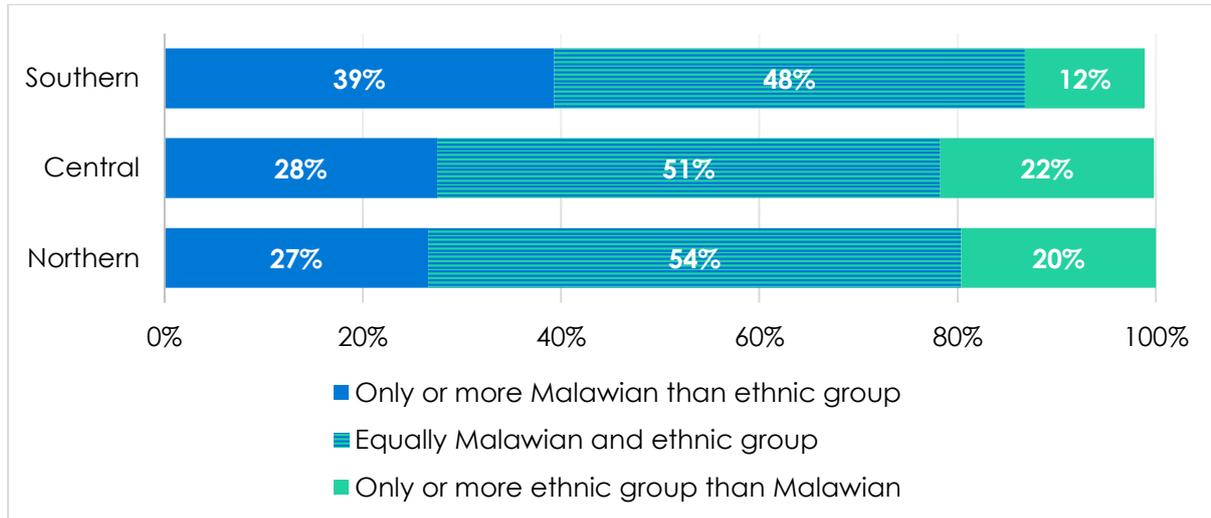


Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Malawian and being a _____ [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

- I feel only Malawian.
- I feel more Malawian than ___ [ethnic group].
- I feel equally Malawian and ___ [ethnic group].
- I feel more ___ [ethnic group] than Malawian.
- I feel only ___ [ethnic group].

Southerners are more likely to identify only or more strongly as Malawians (39%) than are residents in the Central (28%) and Northern (27%) regions (Figure 9).

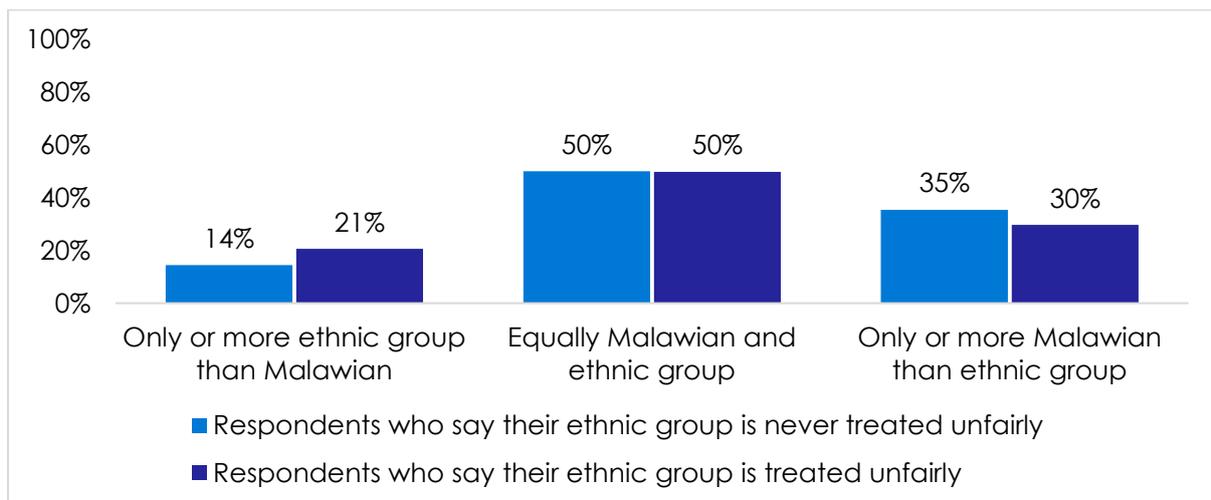
Figure 9: Ethnic vs. national identity | by region | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Malawian and being a _____ [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

These responses suggest that identification in national vs. ethnic terms may be associated with one's view of unfair treatment by the government. Among those who say their ethnic group is treated unfairly, 21% identify exclusively or more with their ethnic group, vs. just 14% of those who report no unfair treatment. Similarly, those who see unfair treatment are less likely to identify as only or more Malawian compared to those who see their ethnic group as always treated fairly (30% vs. 35%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Ethnic vs. national identity | by views on unfair treatment of ethnic group | Malawi | 2019



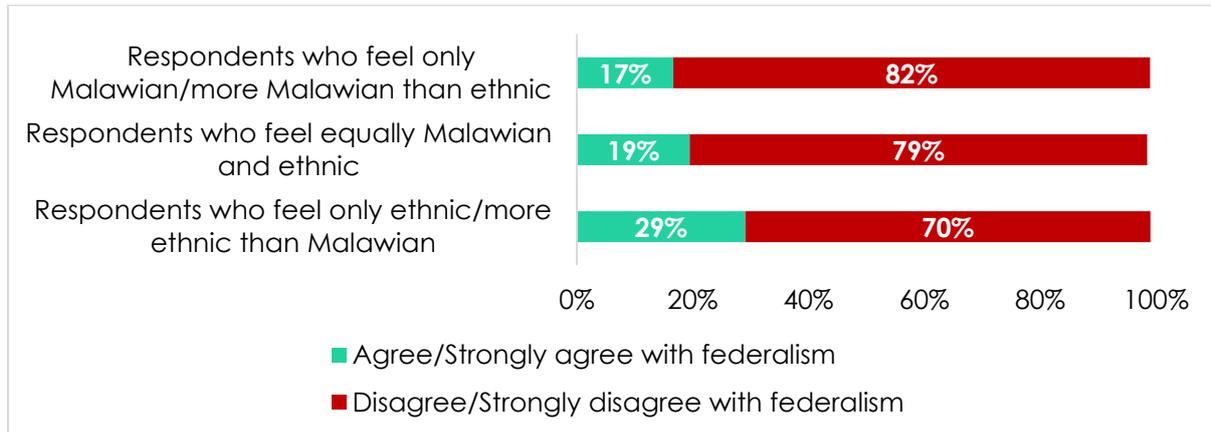
Respondents were asked:

How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Malawian and being a _____ [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Linking national vs. ethnic identification to support for federalism suggests a discernible pattern. Support for federalism is lower among Malawians who identify more with their nation than among those who identify more with their ethnic group. Only 17% of respondents who say they feel only Malawian or more Malawian support federalism compared to 29% of those who feel only or more of their ethnic group (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Support for federalism | by ethnic vs. national identity | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

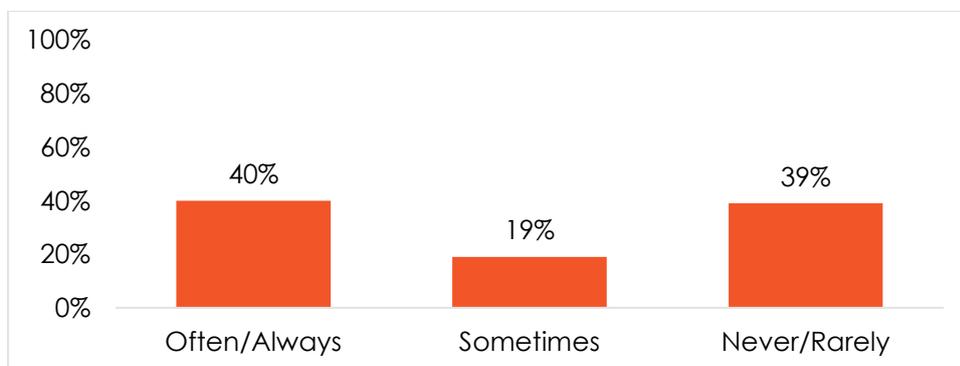
Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Malawian and being a _____ [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

In your opinion, do you agree or disagree that Malawi should adopt a federal system of government for equitable development?

Marginalization of pro-opposition communities

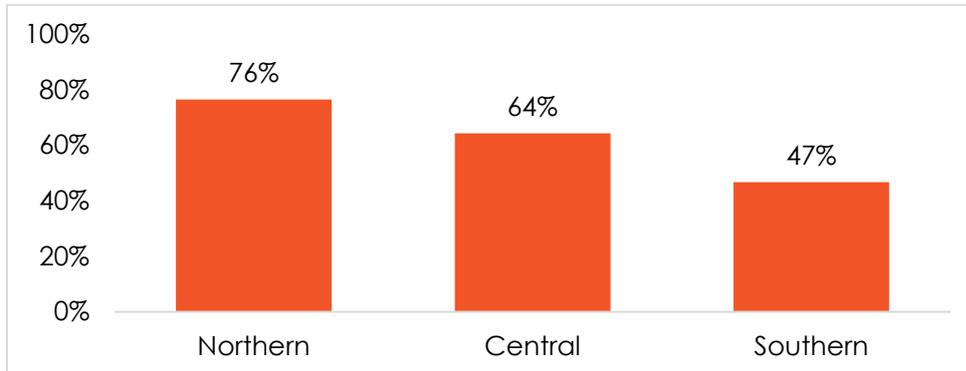
Findings presented above show that support for federalism is higher among opposition-party supporters than among adherents of the ruling party (Figure 3). Could this be because pro-opposition areas are discriminated against in some way? Afrobarometer asked respondents, "How often do you think that communities that do not vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects?" About six out of 10 Malawians (59%) say this happens "sometimes," "often," or "always" (Figure 12). The Northern region registers the highest proportion of respondents who hold this view (76%, compared to 47% in the South) (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Do communities that don't vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences? | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: How often do you think that communities that do not vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects?

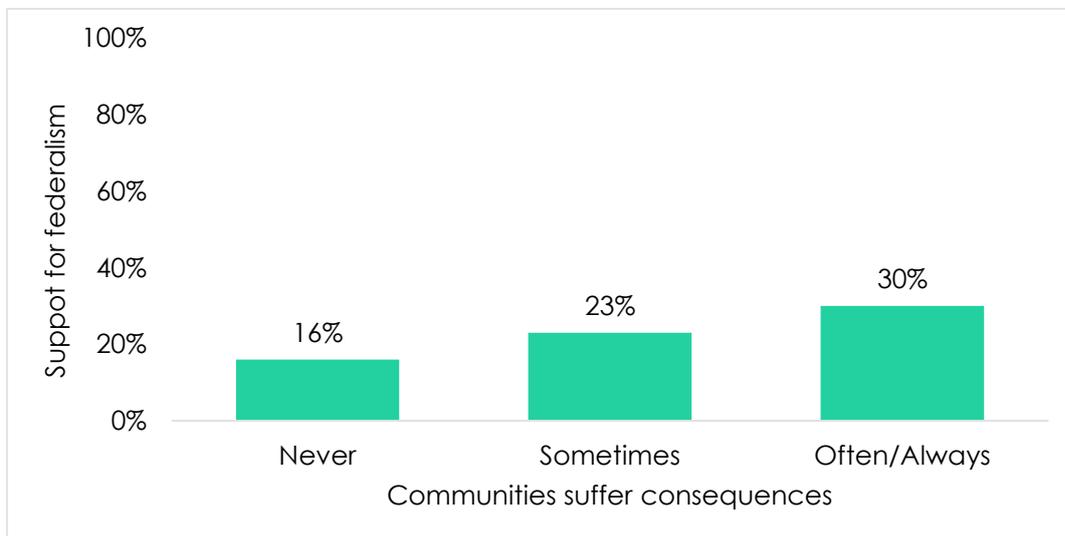
Figure 13: Communities that don't vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences | by region | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: How often do you think that communities that do not vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects?

Survey responses show that the more people believe that opposition-supporting communities are victimized for their choice, the more they are inclined to support federalism. Among those who say opposition communities never suffer negative consequences, only 16% favour the federalism proposal. In contrast, almost twice as many (30%) of respondents who believe that opposition-supporting communities face negative consequences support adoption of a federal system of government (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Support for federalism | by perceptions of how often communities that don't vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

How often do you think that communities that do not vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects? In your opinion, do you agree or disagree that Malawi should adopt a federal system of government for equitable development?

Conclusion

After gaining independence, some African countries considered federalism as a possible “means of catering for competing and conflicting aspirations for autonomy within their territories” (Berhane & Tefera, 2018, p. 106) and managing social and political conflicts within

a democratic system (Dixon, Levy, & Tushmet, 2019). As Fessha (2002) observes, though for the most part “strangled at birth,” the idea of federalism began re-entering the political scene in several African countries around the turn of the century.

As Malawi debates the possibility of abandoning a unitary system that has existed since the dissolution of the Central African Federation in 1963 (Cohen, 2017), these survey findings suggest that Malawians feel more divided than united. There are serious concerns about the marginalization of certain groups and areas, in part because of their ethnic identity and association with the political opposition.

Overall, the findings suggest that grounds advanced by Malawian federalists are generally recognized by the wider population. But the proposed solution – federalism – is not supported. One may wish to explore why people do not think the remedy lies in federalism. What is clear, for now, is that there is a need for mechanisms to address the grievances within the unitary system of government.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 356 | 24 April 2020