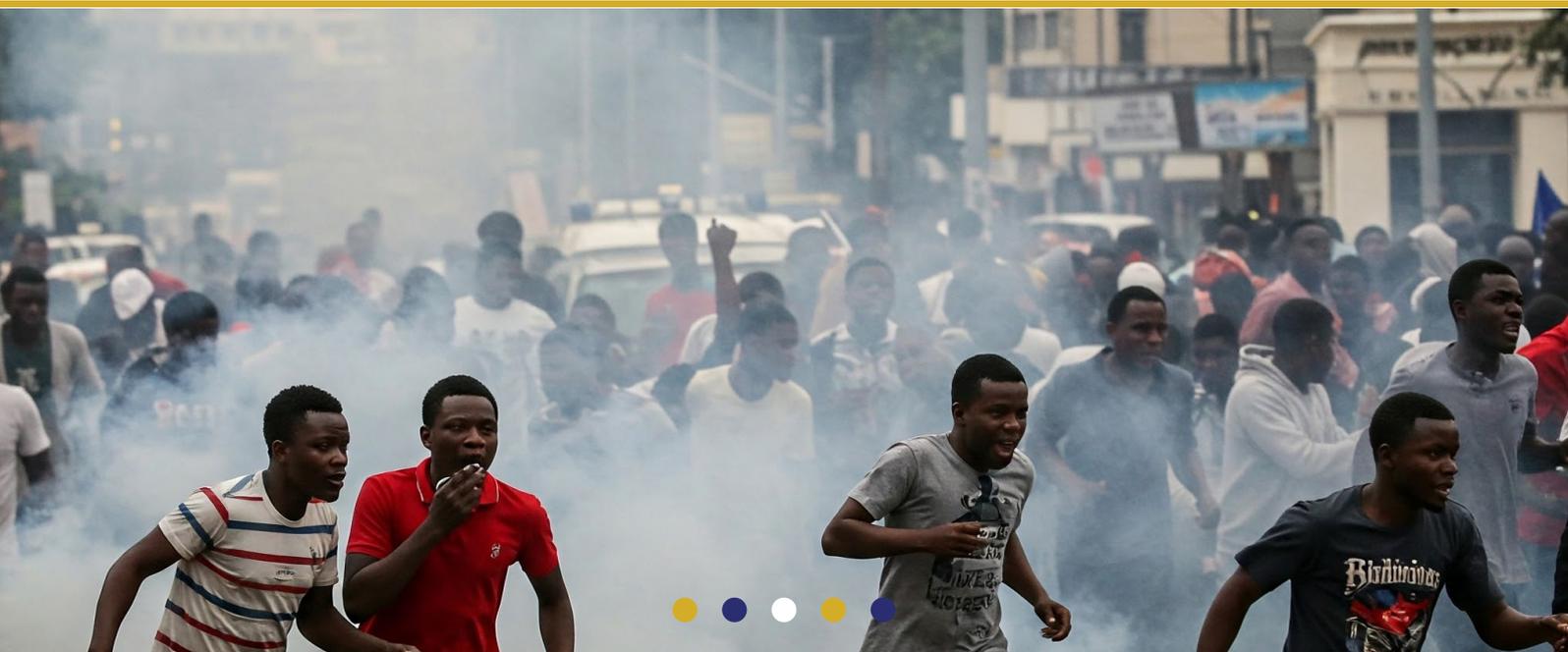


"Kuyenda Okwiyakwiya": The Notion of Siege Mentality and its Role in inter-Party Political Violence in Malawi



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ABSTRACT

Although Malawi has historically been regarded as a stronghold of peace and political stability, recent trends point out a disturbing deterioration in peacefulness, noticeable by a rise in inter-party-political violence outside the conventionally studied electoral periods. Whereas current studies have largely concentrated on episodic electoral violence, there remains a significant gap in understanding the deep-seated socio-structural features that uphold and intensify political conflict. Consequently, drawing mainly from a qualitative research design, this study problematizes the predominant notion that political violence in Malawi is merely an electoral occurrence, arguing instead that the siege mentality—a collective sense of threat and encirclement among political actors—might be a vital driver of inter-party hostilities. Siege mentality nurtures a zero-sum perception of political competition, in which parties interpret rivals as existential threats rather than legitimate adversaries, in so doing prolonging cycles of antagonism and retribution. The paper finds that the siege mentality is a prevalent feature of Malawian political parties, revealing itself in an excessive quest for enhanced internal cohesion and aggressive reaction to perceived external threats. The paper also introduces metaphorically the notion of *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* which exemplifies the non-linear narrative of the interplay between proactive and defensive political tension and

aggression in Malawi. Given the rising signs of waning peace, a thorough examination of this underlying dynamic is of the essence for generating more robust and sustainable conflict mitigation strategies. Additionally, this study contributes to the continuing wider scholarly debate on political violence by suggesting an innovative perspective on the role of siege mentality in sustaining inter-party hostilities beyond electoral periods.

Keywords: Kuyenda okwiyakwiya, Malawi, Siege mentality, Interparty, Political violence

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Many indicators and studies have consistently indicated that Malawi is comparatively a peaceful country with lower levels of politically motivated violence. For instance, Chingaipe et al (2016:iii) mention that "The numbers of reported cases of inter-party electoral conflict and violence have been decreasing from the 1999 general election to subsequent general elections until 2014, suggesting that the spirit of political tolerance among political parties was gaining depth". This study mainly considered patterns of electoral violence in Malawi by drawing insights from election observers, media coverage, and official records from the police and electoral commission. Henry in his study of 2023 also argues that "Malawi as a unique African case in which the prevalence and magnitude of electoral violence have decreased since the first post-single-party election" (Henry 2023:14). According to the Global Peace Index¹ (GPI). Malawi has always remained within the "Medium" peace grouping, echoing relative stability in its overall peacefulness. GPI measures the nation's peacefulness; each country is given a score or 1 to 5 where 1 represents a higher level of peace and 5 is very low. Malawi's score over the years has always been below 2.

However, this peace is currently under threat (Chingaipe et al 2016; MPUC 2024; Henry 2023). For instance, from being ranked as the third most peaceful country in Africa and number 40 in the world in 2019, the country has slipped down to position 15 in Africa and 79 in the world. Specifically, MPUC (2024:7) observes that "Malawi's position in the global negative peace ranking has worsened

¹ Global Peace Index (GPI) is a report produced by the Australia-based NGO Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) which measures the relative position of nations' and regions' peacefulness. The GPI (Global Peace Index) is developed in consultation with an international panel of peace experts from peace institutes and think tanks (IEP 2024).

over the last five years (2019-2024)" and this decline reflects "growing concerns about the sustainability of peace and stability". Over the years, cases of violence have steady increased and in November 2024, former presidents of Malawi collectively condemned these incidents and Malawi Law Society wrote "The Malawi Law Society has noted *growing incidents of violence or intended violence reflected in wielding of panga knives and other dangerous weapons by alleged political party zealots*" (Press Release, Malawi Law Society, 25th November, 2024). MPUC further identifies some of the evolving dangers to the country's peace and unity as comprised of:

- (a) political transitions and pressures, (b) violations of civil liberties and political rights, (c) socio-economic challenges and the strain on development rights, and (d) the limited political and economic opportunities for women and youth (MPUC 2024:7).

In other words, the past five years have shown that Malawi's peace is under serious threat and quick action needs to be done to reverse the situation for the better. Afrobarometer data from 2008 to 2024 shows that the percentage of individuals who fear political violence or intimidation during election campaigns has significantly grown from 2017 (27%) to the 2024 (38%). Comparing the data with Malawi's neighbors: Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia, Malawi's increase in percentage is quite noticeable (see Figure 1 below).

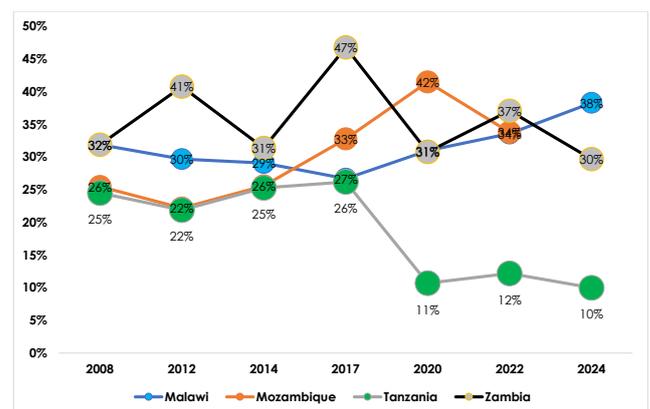


Figure 1: Fear of political violence or intimidation during election campaigns

Question: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

Source: Afrobarometer surveys (2008 to 2024)

Although the Afrobarometer survey question was specific to election campaign scenario, it does reflect the general political atmosphere. There is intensified competition and increased polarisation. The Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) Executive Director Michael Kaiyatsa citing recent cases of political violence in the country said that

As the stakes get higher, political groups are increasingly using violence to gain or maintain power. Additionally, impunity for past incidents and weak law enforcement have created an environment where perpetrators feel emboldened, knowing they are unlikely to face serious consequences. Recent incidents of political violence, coupled with the lack of accountability for those responsible, are only deepening the cycle of impunity (*The Nation*, 4th December 2024).

To sum it all, although Malawi has historically been regarded as a stronghold of peace and political stability, recent trends point out a disturbing deterioration in peacefulness, noticeable by a rise in inter-party-political violence outside the conventionally studied electoral periods. Whereas current studies have largely concentrated on episodic electoral violence, there remains a significant gap in understanding the deep-seated socio-structural features that uphold and intensify political conflict. Consequently, this study problematizes the predominant notion that political violence in Malawi is merely an electoral occurrence, arguing instead that the siege mentality—a collective sense of threat and encirclement among political actors (Bar-Tal 2011)—might be a vital driver of inter-party hostilities. Siege mentality nurtures a zero-sum perception of political competition, in which parties interpret rivals as existential threats rather than legitimate adversaries, in so doing prolonging cycles of antagonism and retribution. The paper also introduces metaphorically the notion of *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* exemplifies the non-linear narrative of the interplay between proactive and defensive political tension and aggression. Given the rising signs of waning peace, a thorough examination of this underlying dynamic is of the essence for generating a more robust and sustainable conflict mitigation strategies. Additionally, this study seeks to contribute to the continuing wider scholarly debate on political violence by suggesting an innovative perspective on the role of siege mentality in sustaining inter-party hostilities beyond electoral periods.

Political violence is a complicated concept hence difficult to define (Miller 2022). Probably it is better to first define violence itself. Citing the WHO report,

Krug et al (2002:5) provides a widely held definition of violence as “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” This definition is widely regarded as a more concise explanation of violence because it is much broader and includes several key elements beyond physical harm. Building on this understanding of violence, political violence can be understood as a form of violence (physical or psychological) which is executed in order to accomplish political goals (Bardall et al 2020). This is the definition that this study has adopted. Although the paper has also discussed the psychological elements of violence it is not the aim of this paper to emphasize this element of violence. According to Bardall et al (2020:919) “regardless of what perpetrators use political violence to accomplish—for example, manipulating election outcomes or fighting to liberate oppressed people—the attacks themselves remain intentionally disruptive”. In other words, the key element of political violence is that it is almost always intentional and this makes political violence a unique for on violence.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design, supplemented by secondary data sources to augment its findings. Primary data was collected through key informant interviews done between November 2024 and February 2025. Interviewees were purposively identified to warrant varied and knowledgeable viewpoints, including senior political party officials—of four political parties represented in parliament—Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), United Democratic Front (UDF) and United Transformation Movement (UTM) (10), officers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (8), academics (3), senior law enforcement officers (3) and government officials (8). The selection conditions concentrated on individuals with direct or expert knowledge relevant to the study’s themes. Secondary data was drawn from newspaper articles and publicly available survey data, such as Afrobarometer reports, to provide contextual background and triangulate findings. This mixed approach enabled a robust and systematic examination of the undercurrents under investigation, balancing in-depth qualitative perspectives with wider background trends.

Data analysis for this study followed a thematic approach to identify and interpret patterns and

meanings within the qualitative data. Thematic analysis was carried out to consolidate the data into comprehensible themes that tackled the research objectives. Secondary data from newspaper articles and Afrobarometer surveys were analyzed using content analysis as well as basic frequencies and cross tabulations, focusing on trends and narratives that supplemented the primary data. This triangulation of sources enhanced the validity and depth of the findings, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study.

3.0 THE NOTION OF "KUYENDA OKWIYAKWIYA" IN MALAWIAN CONTEXT

The notion of *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* (Chichewa phrase literally translated as walking while angry or moving about with anger or a temper) has not yet been captured or discussed in academic literature in Malawi. However, it is prevalent in social media and informal chats. Metaphorically it encapsulates the emotive and mental distress predominant in social-political settings.

It expresses a sense of being evidently hurt or irritated, frequently accompanied by an edgy or disturbed outlook. This behavior may perhaps be in response to an apparent complaint, incitement, or an emotionally charged state of affairs. The phrase has been applied in personal relationships, political or social context. At the heart of this phrase is the alleged explanation for underlying or visible form of conflict, tension and violence. In other words, the phrase is attributed to tension or violence that emerge not due to the immediate provocation but an accumulation of several unrelated grievances which suddenly explode in a particular instance. In political setting, it is often used to explain: planned movements, such as protests, strikes, or marches, where partakers vent their anger or dissatisfaction over professed injustices, governance failures, or unfulfilled promises as well as socio-economic conditions.

In the context of political violence, it may be regarded as a representation of political irritation which doesn't follow a particular logical explanation of the actual source of provocation since the sources are numerous and multifaceted. In other words, *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* exemplifies the non-linear narrative of the interplay between proactive and defensive political tension and aggression. The psychological impact of this notion is substantial when applied in the context of siege mentality as explained below. In other words, the siege mentality provides a conducive environment in which *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* thrives

hence antagonism and disruptive rhetoric extend interparty hostilities and make peaceful resolution elusive. Ultimately, the metaphor highlights the recurring nature of political edginess and violence.

The concept is however not completely new in the field of political science. It falls within the emotional aspects of political behavior, especially anger and its role in political dynamics. The concept of *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* depicts how political violence and agitation can appear from the buildup of frustrations within a socio-political atmosphere. Anger, as discussed by Pierce (2021), is not merely an emotional reaction but a rallying influence that forms political behavior, frequently pushing persons near action when they feel injustice or incompetence in governance. Akdemir (2021) likewise contends that anger, contrasting from fear or anxiety, leads to more instant, provoking reactions, making it a crucial driver of political decision-making and collective action. Bettarelli, Close, and Van Haute (2022) emphasize that whereas anger can promote political protests, it does not at all times give rise to violence, demonstrating that its effects are molded by wider political and institutional settings. At the same time, Tanesini (2021) cautions that anger can be intentionally swayed in public discourse, with political actors fueling frustrations to rally support or rationalize aggression. While Mayer and Nguyen (2021) associate anger to reactionary political leanings, mostly in relation to narcissism and populism; thus their emphasis on individual psychological personalities contrasts from wider structural or collective descriptions of political anger. On the whole, *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* bring into line existing research on emotions in politics, stressing how anger builds up over time and can be evident in both constructive and destructive ways, dependent on how it is directed.

4.0 SIEGE MENTALITY: DEFINITION, ITS SOCIAL ROLE AND CONSEQUENCES

Kim (2016: 223-224) points out that there is no common definition of a "siege mentality" in scholarly writings but it is a critical concept which needs to be analyzed in order to understand causes and nature of conflicts. An Israeli researcher Daniel Bar-Tal is generally regarded as the 'father' of this concept. According to Bar-Tal, a siege mentality is "a belief held by group members stating that the rest of the world has highly negative behavioral intentions toward them" (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992a: 49). The siege mentality can produce positive and negative consequences such as social cohesion and lack of trust or rigidity respectively.

According to Gold (2021), Kim (2016) and Bar-Tal (2011), just like any other beliefs, the siege mentality serves certain social roles. Soral et al (2018: 372) explains that "can be understood as one of the ways individuals use to manage their everyday fears and restore feelings of control and certainty." Siege beliefs also support establishment of a strong social identity and culture; promotes the quest for liberty and self-reliance; facilitates mobilization of individuals and encouraging unity within the group. Another advantage is that since "a group under besieged consciousness feels self-righteousness and superiority over other groups" (Kim 2016:225), this belief prepares the group members to feel confident and motivated when embarking on an activity. According to Kim (2016: 225) leadership plays a critical role in establishing the siege mentality. Other causes include historical experiences and previous community mistreatment. For instance, "the Israeli Jewish group validate their siege mentality based on their experiences of the Holocaust and the Israeli-Arab conflict" (Kim 2016:225)

According to Brennan (2021:1) when the siege mentality is applied in the field of politics it ensures that political leaders intentionally use it in order to gain or maintain their hold on to power. Specifically, "they typically present people outside of their region as those who want to harm them, and the leader becomes the only thing standing between the people and assured destruction. It's a philosophy sometimes relied on by authoritarian leaders" (Brennan 2021: 1). In this case, if perpetually used, the siege mentality can steadily drain the capability of the leader's followers from regarding a person external to their group in a positive way. Thus, the siege mentality is "socially and politically determined" (Sram & Dulic 2015:399). It is not a surprise therefore that conspiracy theories gain more weight in an environment where the siege mentality reigns hence people easily believe what they are told without questions. In other words, people develop what is known as "a collective conspiracy mentality" which Soral et al (2018: 372) describe as

a collective mental state in which other groups, nations, or institutions are viewed as ill-intended and willing to conspire against the in-group. This state is instigated by salient historical representations of one's own group (e.g., nation), viewing the in-group as a victim of others. It is boosted by a special kind of defensive in-group identity—collective narcissism. Finally, it bears negative consequences for inter-group relations (Soral et al 2018: 372).

Soral et al (2018: 372) further argue that since conspiracy theories are easily believed without any critical analysis, this leads to situations whereby clandestine activities are justified and encouraged. In this context, "group members are often involved in clandestine actions directed against enemy groups, and expect that the enemy groups will act the same way. Thus, group members may cast unjustified accusations of alleged hostile plots" (Soral et al 2018: 372). These actions thus eliminate the rational approach of assessing the situation. In this case, some members of the group may actually not need approval from their leaders to take some action because based on the believed conspiracy theories, they assume whatever they do is already approved and supported. Irrespective of whether substantiated or not, "conspiracy theories are one of the main determinants of inter-group relations, peaceful or violent...One common thread is that they usually touch on how people perceive members of other groups" (Soral et al 2018: 372).

Gold (2021: 144) explains that the siege beliefs have emotive and social consequences that can have grave implications for the citizens. The vulnerable community with siege beliefs advances harmful attitudes toward other communities, and this may be associated with notions of xenophobia, chauvinism and intolerance. The community turn out to be exceptionally sensitive to any information or opinions communicated by other groups and any such communication from other groups is construed as negative intents. This emerging sensitivity is founded on a prevailing social political scenario of mistrust and suspicion that group members sense concerning other groups (who are perceived as perpetually holding negative intentions). Soral et al (2018: 374) states that "Endorsement of conspiracy theories correlates positively with symptoms of paranoia, such as self-centered thought, suspiciousness, and assumptions of ill will and hostility". A group under the siege mentality may quickly mobilize and act in an extreme and unacceptable manner without serious consideration of the social, moral or legal implications of their actions. In other words, it "encourages people to conform and follow orders" (Brooks 2017: 1). More importantly, sometimes the belief in siege mentality may be too extreme that the leadership may lose control of the situation as the followers feel whatever they do has already been endorsed since it fulfils what has already been propagated.

The siege mentality also tolerates the leader's socially unacceptable conduct. When a group is in existential threat it is not worried about the leader's character

such as “humility, sexual morality, honesty and basic decency” (Brooks 2017: 2). A siege mentality thrives on overgeneralization in the context of “They are all out to get us” and as Brooks (2017: 4) argues, “from this flows a deep sense of pessimism. Things are bad now. Our enemies are growing stronger. And things are about to get worse. The siege mentality floats on apocalyptic fear”.

5.0 INTER-PARTY POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN AFRICA: PROBLEMS, CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Inter-party political violence has over the years appeared as an enduring problem in most African countries hence weakening democratic progression, eroding social unity, and extending a series of instability. Derived from several academic sources, this section explores the main problems associated with inter-party political violence, their root causes, effects, links to siege mentality, and possible solutions (See appendix 1 for a summary table).

Generally, electoral disputes and fraud are a prime initial cause of inter-party violence, and this is heightened by views of unfairness and tampering with in electoral procedures. Collier and Vicente (2012) contend that questionable electoral practices raise distrust, inciting political parties to take the route of violence as a way of protesting the electoral results. Likewise, political exclusion entrenched in historical marginalization and inequalities in distribution of political power worsens hostilities. Cheeseman (2015) underscores that communities marginalized from political control frequently feel governance constructions as illegitimate, encouraging isolation and reciprocal violence.

Related to the above point, ethnic and regional differences are profoundly entrenched in Africa’s colonial past and post-independence political structures. It is not the aim of this paper to extensively discuss the role of ethnic and regional differences. Suffice to mention that Horowitz (1985), explains that most of the ethnic identities in Africa have undergone the process of politicization hence ethnic identities are regarded as a zero-sum contest,

thus political wins are seen as existential risks by opposing camps. This could probably be the main explanation of why ethnic differences escalate into political violence in most African countries. Additionally, fragile institutions, as explained by Diamond (2008), are unsuccessful at mediating disputes, in the process giving chance to violence to thrive unhindered. Institutions such as Police are in most African countries heavily politicized yet at the same time they are expected to play a key role in dealing with violence cases. They are generally blamed of being biased in favour of the ruling party. Leadership manipulation further complicates these problems, mainly political leaders tend to magnify external fears to enhance their power and silence opposition (van de Walle, 2003). Thus, narratives of political leaders play a critical role in shaping the behavior of their followers. Lastly, the fight for state resources and media polarization deepen disagreements- the fight to dominate state resources is probably a major underlying motive (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Tayeabwa, 2020).

The effects of inter-party political violence are generally extensive and very destructive. Electoral disagreements frequently lead to loss of life, damage of assets, injury of the masses and declining legitimacy of electoral systems. Political marginalization promotes a series of citizen isolation and suspicion, extending societal fragmentation. Ethnic and regional differences extend societal polarity, whereas fragile institutions propagate impunity, reduce citizen trust in governance systems.

These effects jointly weaken the pace of democratic progress and development across the continent. They generate a response loop where violence turns out to be regularized as a tool for attaining political aims, prolonging the very circumstances that nurture the siege mentality.

According to Engel (2025) violent crisis dominate in Africa and they are more associated with political governance issues (see Figure 2 below). The trend has been more pronounced since 2006.

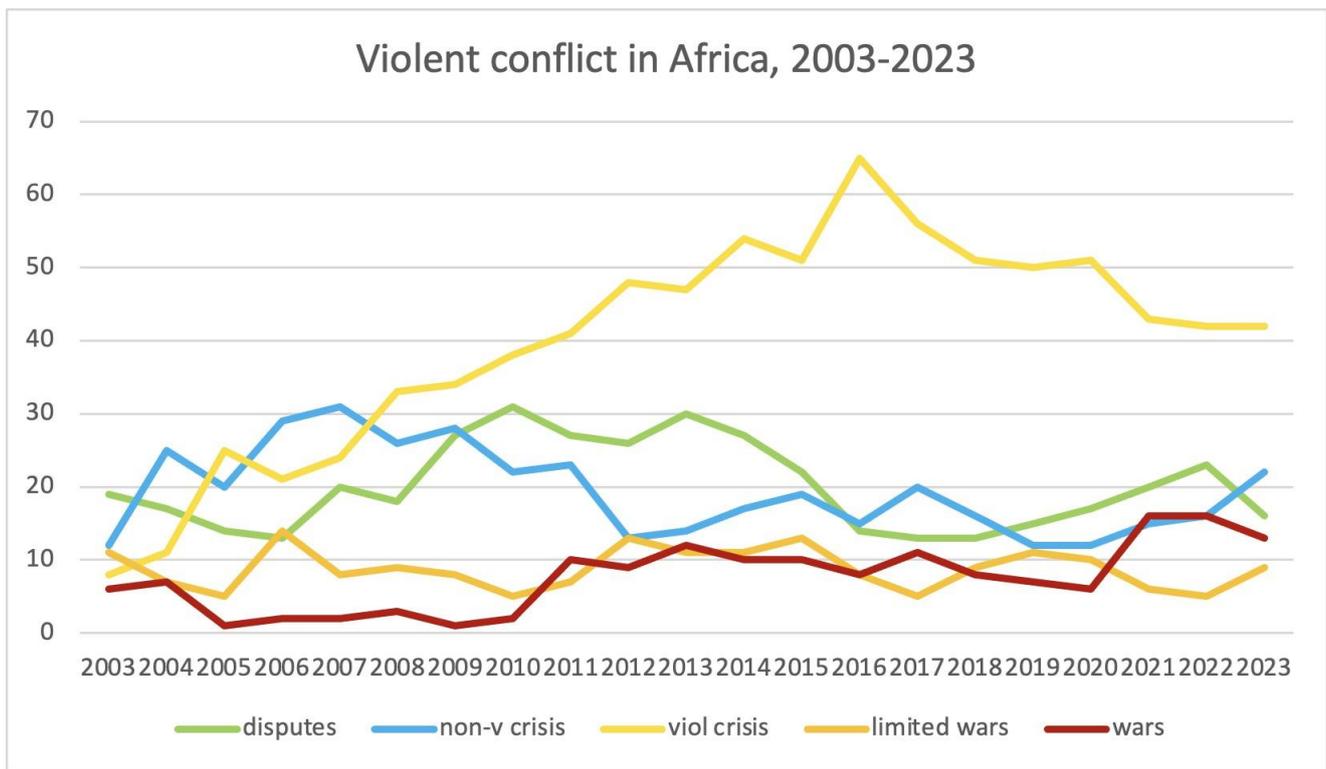


Figure 2: Violent Conflicts in Africa (2003 to 2023)

Source: Engel (2025), based on Heidelberg Conflict Barometer (2004–2024).

The peak of violent crises was in 2016 when it reached as high as 65% of conflicts in Africa but has over the years gone down to around 42% in 2023. Nevertheless, the 42% is still a concern for national states in Africa and needs to be reduced further.

6.0 SIEGE MENTALITY VERSUS INTER-PARTY POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

Even though currently there is a dearth of studies which link the siege mentality to political violence, the psychological structures —perceived threats, group cohesion, and defensive aggression—offers a compelling description for such disputes in an African context of political systems. Van de Walle (2003), Tayeabwa (2020), Bekoe (2023), Cheeseman and Fisher (2022), Kivu and Orji (2023) and Konde (2023) emphasizes the role of alleged threats in determining political parties' underlying choice of unethical electoral tactics, this implies that political parties weaponize fear to strengthen their control over the masses. This is the hallmark of siege mentality's link to inter party conflicts.

The significant parallel throughout these studies is their acknowledgement of structural and systemic factors—such as resource competition, weak institutions, and elite-driven manipulation—as

primary causes of inter-party violence. Despite some commonalities, they take different perspectives in relation to emphasis: Van de Walle stresses institutional frameworks such as presidentialism, whereas Cheeseman and Fisher focus on coalitional undercurrents. Tayeabwa uses the media perspective arguments which is contrary from Bekoe's focus on election-specific tactics and recurring features. In general, Kivu and Orji assume a resource-based viewpoint, while Konde pursues a psychological approach, stressing the role of threat perception. Collectively, these studies offer a multi-layered appreciation of interparty violence, merging institutional, economic, psychological, and sociopolitical perspectives.

Although Van de Walle (2003), Tayeabwa (2020), Bekoe (2023), Cheeseman and Fisher (2022), Kivu and Orji (2023) and Konde (2023) do not necessarily link the siege mentality notion to political violence, their research results expose nuances of this psychological condition shaping party behaviors and disputes. Van de Walle (2003) suggests a siege mentality in patronage-dominated party systems, in this case political parties tend to adopt strategies of aggressively defending themselves in order to secure public resources within a zero-sum presidential framework. In this case, the electoral system which

ultimately affects the party system as well, may contribute to the extent to which the siege mentality may be influential or not. Tayeebwa (2020) explains siege mentality in media story lines, and he argues that these may amplify emotional state of threat by circulating conflict-ridden rhetoric, intensifying hostilities amongst political blocs. The case of Rwandan genocide can be one example where the media intensified the hatred among the citizenry. Bekoe (2023) implicitly links siege mentality to electoral violence. He explains that political parties, dreading electoral defeat and marginalization, rally youth militias and take part in violent schemes to guard their way into power. In this case the siege mentality becomes a tool of political mobilization. Those being mobilized are unlikely to question the direction provided by leadership hence it is an efficient and effective means of achieving immediate political goals. Cheeseman and Fisher (2022) emphasize the unstable political alliances in countries like Kenya and Nigeria, where parties' suspicion and dread of duplicity reflect a siege mentality, frequently ensuing in violent fragmentation. Alliances or coalitions are generally difficult to maintain over a longer period of time especially when the siege mentality dominates the stakeholders' perspectives. It is not a surprise therefore that most alliances or coalitions are often times short-lived. Likewise, Kivu and Orji (2023) establish how resource competition deepens inter-party conflicts, with parties regarding being in charge of resources as indispensable for their continued existence. Konde (2023) unequivocally ties siege mentality to threat-driven party undercurrents, illustrating how fear-based approaches heighten interparty clashes.

Thus, based on the discussion above, it can safely be concluded that the siege mentality traverses several facets —psychological, institutional, economic, and sociopolitical—frequently functioning in spaces where they overlap. Psychologically, it generates defensive and antagonistic political party conducts entrenched in professed existential fears. Institutionally, siege mentality is revealed in zero-sum political structures, such as presidentialism, that amplify the risks of defeat in an election. Economically, it reinforces the fight for access to resources because parties that are defeated fear being marginalized from essential economic prospects. Socio-politically, it explains the inflammatory or provocative rhetoric, alliance instability, and ethnic divisions that amplify conflicts. These facets are intertwined; for example, institutional fragility aggravate resource competition (economic), which in turn stimulates psychological fears of marginalization, ultimately fortifying socio-political tensions. Consequently, siege mentality is

not restricted to one facet but somewhat functions as a cross-cutting occurrence that deepens inter-party political violence through its interface with structural and systemic influences.

Dealing with the problem of inter-party violence and siege mentality necessitates a wide-ranging and multi-dimensional method.

Firstly, there is a need to reform electoral procedures to improve transparency and accountability which are essential elements in any successful democratic electoral practices. Collier and Vicente (2012) are in favour of unbiased audits and oversight processes to reestablish confidence in electoral systems. Secondly, it is essential to encourage inclusive governance arrangements and proportional representation to deal with the problem of some factions feeling that they are politically marginalized (Cheeseman, 2015). Strategies designed at nurturing national identity over ethnic attachments, as recommended by Horowitz (1985), can ease ethnic and regional rifts.

Building capacity of governance bodies so that they are more efficient is likewise essential. Diamond (2008) emphasizes the significance of independent judiciary systems and dispute resolution institutions to arbitrate conflicts objectively. Leadership accountability that may be safeguarded through constitutional amendments can limit the manipulation of siege narratives (van de Walle, 2003). Collier and Hoeffler (2004) and Tayeebwa (2020) claim that transparent resource management strategies and building capacity of media to become more responsible can deal with the damaging outcomes of fighting for resources and media polarity.

7.0 MALAWI'S SOCIAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT: A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS FROM 1964 TO THE PRESENT

Since gaining independence from the British in 1964, Malawi has gone through several major political transformations, as well as the consolidation of one-party rule, democratic transition, and evolving governance structures.

In the immediate post-independence period, Malawi embraced a Westminster-style parliamentary system with Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda as the first Prime Minister. Nevertheless, political tensions arose a few months afterwards in what is popularly known as the 1964 Cabinet Crisis. Some key ministers who had been in the forefront to fight for Malawi's political freedom were either dismissed or resigned and the major reasons were ideological and policy

differences between the ministers and the Prime Minister (Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2010). There were even cases of physical violence outside parliament when one of Kamuzu Banda's supporters, Gwanda Chakuamba was seriously injured after being beaten by those who opposed him (Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2010).

Although Malawi was in all practical terms a one-party state since independence, it officially became a one-party state in 1966 led by the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and later in 1971 Kamuzu Banda was declared "President for Life" (Kayuni, 2024). This thirty-year period from 1964 to 1994 was noticeable with dictatorial rule, clampdown on opposition, and centralized economic policies (Lwanda 2024). Political rivals had to deal with detention without trial, exile, or simply disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Regardless of these political issues, Kamuzu Banda's regime received international support, mainly from the West, owing to his strong anti-communist standpoint during the Cold War (Lwanda 2024).

After the end of the cold war, in the early 1990s Malawi witnessed an increased pressure for political transformation, mainly motivated by internal disgruntlement and external demands for democratization. Specifically, by the end of 1993, Malawi faced severe economic challenges, including an inflation rate of approximately 22% (Ihonvberé 1997). Crime, unemployment, and hunger escalated, exacerbated by Structural Adjustment Programmes advocated by the World Bank and IMF, which further impoverished already struggling nations like Malawi. On March 8, 1992, Malawi's eight Catholic bishops issued a landmark pastoral letter titled *Living Our Faith*. This letter criticized Banda's regime for corruption, human rights abuses, and repression, highlighting "growing anger and resentment" among the populace. It also decried the erosion of academic freedom, censorship, and monopolization of mass media, which stifled dissent. The letter sparked nationwide protests, marking a turning point as Malawians began to see the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) as fallible (Mitchell, 2002). Civil society organizations and NGOs emerged as key players in protecting human rights and fostering development (Lwanda & Chanika 2017). The situation led to a 1993 referendum in which a majority of Malawians voted for a multiparty system of governance (Englund 2002).

Multiparty elections were held in 1994 and Kamuzu Banda who led the MCP was defeated and Bakili Muluzi of the United Democratic Front

(UDF) became president thus leading in a new era of political governance in the country (Patel & Wahman 2015). Muluzi's regime (1994–2004) witnessed implementation of several political and economic reforms, as well as the liberalization of the economy and better freedom of press. Nevertheless, his regime was also tainted with serious allegations of corruption and several efforts to prolong his term of office beyond what was constitutionally provided (VonDoepp, 2020). Bingu wa Mutharika was elected in 2004, initially under the ticket of UDF but formed his own party the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) after some disagreements with the former president who was still controlling the party as its chairperson. Bingu at first fostered economic growth and development but later displayed dictatorial inclinations, leading to demonstrations against his regime as well as pulling out of donor support (VonDoepp 2020). His unexpected death in 2012 led to the ascension of Vice President Joyce Banda who became Malawi's first female president. Before Bingu's death, she had fallen out with him and formed People's Party (PP) thus in practical terms the PP became the ruling party. In her brief tenure, she faced serious corruption scandals popularly called 'Cashgate' scandal² (Tenthani and Chinsinga 2016).

The 2014 elections witnessed the coming back of the DPP under Peter Mutharika (Bingu's younger brother). His government witnessed allegations of electoral fraud and governance failures leading to the cancellation in 2019 of the election results by the Constitutional Court— a very rare occurrence in Africa (Dionne 2024). Lazarus Chakwera of MCP became victorious in the 2020 fresh elections (he led an opposition alliance called Tonse Alliance) and this brought to prominence Malawi's sustained democratic resilience (Dionne 2024).

In a nut shell, Malawi's political history echoes a path from dictatorial regime to an emerging democracy. Whereas challenges such as corruption, governance

² The Cashgate scandal was one of the biggest corruption scandals that Malawi had ever faced and it involved the extensive plundering of public funds by government officials and well-connected business individuals. It was uncovered in 2013 and had serious political, economic, and governance consequences. It was aided by vulnerabilities in the government's Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS), which permitted dubious payments to be made to businesses that had not delivered any goods or services. These businesses were actually connected to government officials and politicians. The cashgate scandal eroded public trust in the government (Chirwa 2023).

inadequacies, and economic uncertainty continue, the resilience of democratic institutions offers confidence for future political stability (VonDoepp 2020; Dionne 2024). More importantly, ongoing reform initiatives and citizen engagement continue to offer key inputs in determining Malawi's democratic future.

8.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: SIEGE MENTALITY AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN MALAWIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

8.1 Manifestations of Siege Mentality in Malawian Political Parties

The study shows that the siege mentality is a prevalent feature of Malawian political parties, revealing itself in an excessive quest for enhanced internal cohesion and aggressive reaction to perceived external threats. Participants emphasized that party leaders regularly frame rival parties, some civil society activists, and even independent media as enemies look for an opportunity to disrupt their political base. One key informant, a senior party strategist, noted:

In our political party, we are regularly reminded that our rivals and specific civil society organizations are occupied day and night to humiliate us. This narrative is deeply entrenched in our political culture, making us view any critique as an existential threat. The consequence is a condition where party members feel vindicated in responding antagonistically to alleged attacks, whether verbal or physical.

Another senior party official said that:

The political atmosphere in Malawi looks similar to a combat zone. Our political party is always under criticism— this is mainly from contending political parties, the media, and even some NGOs. The issue is that it is not simply about competition any longer; it is mainly about our survival. Due to this situation, every resolution we formulate is influenced by this endless awareness of being encircled by adversaries who expect us to fail.

The findings imply that this form of siege mentality nurtures an inward-looking party philosophy in which disagreement is deterred, and party followers are anticipated to display staunch allegiance. The psychological fortification of 'us versus them' idea was apparent throughout several political parties, buttressing the notion that political survival hinges on the capability to nullify external and internal threats.

Konde (2023) claims that electoral competition in Africa frequently nurtures a threat-driven political

culture, in this case, political parties give precedence to internal unity to survive perceived external threats. This aligns with the findings in Malawi, where political parties display a siege mentality, forcefully protecting their internal formations whereas approving antagonistic attitudes against rivals. Likewise, Bar-Tal (2004) labels siege mentality as a shared conviction that outward forces are hostile and present an existential threat, strengthening internal cohesion but also validating antagonism. This dynamic is apparent in Malawian party politics, where internal unity is preserved over a deep-seated in-group identity, but dissidents or those opposing are considered as existential threats, leading to amplified political violence and exclusionary habits.

Nevertheless, although Bekoe (2023) emphasizes electoral violence as a familiar consequence of political contestation in Africa, his focus on external rivalry as the prime cause of violence contrasts from the Malawian case, where intra-party scuffles also show a noteworthy role. Malawian political parties not merely participate in violent hostilities with adversaries but also restrain internal opposition to sustain control, indicating that siege mentality goes beyond inter-party rivalry to intra-party governance. This departure proposes that though external threats influence party undercurrents, internal conflicts within parties in Malawi are correspondingly vital in understanding their hostile political approaches.

Additionally, party leaders make use of language and narratives that emphasize a sense of perpetual struggle, often evoking historical injustices and unproven conspiracies designed at diminishing their party's influence. Such kind of rhetoric is frequently magnified through political rallies, social media podiums, and party-affiliated media outlets. A party youth coordinator observed:

We are always advised that our rivals are not just competing with us but are enthusiastically conniving to pull apart our party. This automatically makes us perceive them as enemies rather than political opponents. You will agree with me that you would do the same... Even when they comment on national issues, we directly or indirectly believe they have hidden motives. This mindset is so strong that we sometimes do not even question whether the threats they warn us about are real.

Furthermore, the study observed that siege mentality goes further than political rhetoric into ordinary party operations. Decision-making procedures within political parties are repeatedly influenced by the perceived necessity to neutralize external threats instead of the democratic ideologies or policy

concerns. The consequences are a perpetual pressure on upholding party unity at all costs, even if it implies stifling internal critique or endorsing conformism over essential debate.

The findings of this paper support some of the existing literature in showing that political leaders' narratives play a critical part in promoting a siege mentality within political parties in Malawi. Mukunto (2024) highlights how bad governance and political competition promote violence, stressing that leaders regularly frame political struggles in existential terms, which can inflame antagonism. This confirms the claim that Malawian political leaders compose narratives that depict their parties as under siege, strengthening internal cohesion while vindicating aggression in relation to professed opponents. Likewise, Ismail and Olonisakin (2021) contend that narratives of victimhood and marginalization can rally youth participation in violence, a phenomenon apparent in Malawi where party leaders use rhetoric to frame opponents as threats. Kleinfeld (2021) further establishes how leaders' rhetoric can intensify political violence, but their focus on the United States suggests variances in institutional settings and conflict dynamics. While these studies verify that leadership narratives influence political violence, the Malawian case exceptionally exemplifies how siege mentality is refined not only against external opponents but also within parties to suppress dissent and consolidate power.

In addition, the siege mentality in Malawian political parties is manifest in their reactions to election results and legal wrangles. Losing parties normally claim that electoral results were influenced by external factors, further strengthening the narrative that they are continuously under attack. Such allegations regularly threaten post-election peace initiatives, as party factions—having previously assumed the certainty that their political survival is at risk—resort to demonstrations, hostilities, and, in some cases, physical assaults on adversaries.

The study also observed that siege mentality displays itself in how parties manage their alliances and relations with other political entities. Whereas alliances/coalitions are occasionally established for strategic electoral functions, they are actually momentary due to underlying mistrusts among coalition/alliance partners. A political analyst noted:

Even when parties come together to form alliances, the underlying suspicion persists. Each party distrusts the other of having concealed agendas, which makes collaboration problematic. The moment one party senses its concerns

are being put aside, the alliance collapses, strengthening the belief that no one outside the party can be fully trusted.

Cheeseman and Fisher (2022) scrutinize how political alliances in Kenya and Nigeria are repeatedly fragile and susceptible to violence owing to underlying mistrust and rivalry amongst alliance partners. Their results align with this paper's contention that in Malawi, political parties display a siege mentality that makes alliances challenging. The authors prove that alliance partners often view each other as prospective rivals rather than dependable partners, leading to internal strains and conflicts that weaken alliance stability (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2022). Likewise, in Malawi, political parties approach alliances with distrust, dreading intrusion or betrayal, which deteriorates their success and sustainability. Nevertheless, whereas Cheeseman and Fisher (2022) stress that alliances break down mainly owing to elite competition and fights over resource distribution, the Malawian case proposes that siege mentality—intensely entrenched through party narratives—plays an added dominant role. This means that even when establishing alliances seems tactically advantageous, parties remain suspicious of full collaboration, often leading to uncertainty or ultimate disintegration.

To sum-up, siege mentality in Malawian political parties manifests in several key ways: heightened internal cohesion at the expense of democratic debate, hostility toward perceived external threats, suppression of dissent within party structures, reliance on divisive political rhetoric, and a tendency to interpret political competition as existential conflict rather than a democratic process. These manifestations jointly promote a political atmosphere in which hostility is normalized, political violence is rationalized, and the probabilities for national stability and democratic governance are weakened.

8.2 'Kuyenda Okwiyakwiya': The Emotional Component of Siege Mentality

A significant evolving theme from the study is the notion of *kuyenda okwiyakwiya*, which study participants explained as a state of unceasing political tension stimulated by alleged injustices and threats. The phrase, literally interpreted as 'walking while angry,' condenses the emotional foundations of siege mentality, where political actors persist in a state of a delicate higher level of readiness to respond, often violently. This notion characterizes the transformation of political cause of distress into a continuing emotional condition that effects both individual and collective behavior.

One former government official explained:

In Malawian politics, anger is not just a personal emotion; it is a collective force. When party leaders constantly tell their supporters that they are under attack, that the system is rigged against them, it creates an environment where members are always ready for confrontation. *Kuyenda okwiyakwiya* is about more than just being angry—it is about carrying that anger everywhere, into every political rally, every community meeting, and every electoral process.

This insight underlines the part of emotional mobilization in nourishing political violence. The study noted that party leaders enthusiastically use this emotive state to uphold domination over their followers, ensuring that they continue to be engaged and on the alert against alleged threats. The psychological acclimatization contained in *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* is bolstered through party slogans, chants, and media depictions that underscore victimhood and the need for endurance.

Besides, research participants stated that *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* manifests in the everyday language and activities of party members. This emotional force advances an environment where resentment towards professed enemies is normalized, and antagonistic reactions are seen as acceptable. A senior political journalist noted:

The language used in political speeches, especially during rallies, is designed to provoke emotional responses. Leaders remind supporters of past injustices, real or imagined, and tell them they must always be ready to fight back. This creates a situation where anger becomes a permanent condition, shaping how party members interact with others in their communities.

However, while acknowledging the adversarial utterances of political leaders as contributing to the *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* notion, a senior law enforcement officer also attributed it to the failure to deliver on campaign promises.

The wide gap or better still, huge discrepancies between what the politicians promised during campaign and what they actually deliver on the ground... This fuels anger and loss of trust among the citizenry. It becomes more frustrating especially when they are falsely promised accessibility of affordable basic necessities like food, and medical supplies. It is therefore not surprising hearing people say *tikuyenda okwiyakwiya*.

According to some participants, another reason for the emergence of *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* notion is

selective and biased approach to law enforcement related to politically motivated issues. As one law enforcement officer explained, a view shared by others, the attacks and disruptions that took place at Mbowe filling station in Lilongwe by people suspected to be MCP supporters on DPP supporters who organized voters sensitization tour is a case in point. The participant explained that "Police did literally nothing despite the overwhelming evidence of the identities of the perpetrators of such uncivil behavior". The similar incident happened in Nsundwe, where the illegal roadblocks were mounted by suspected MCP supporters to disrupt the DPP rally in Mchinji, again the Police did nothing. The machete wielding thugs disrupted the peaceful elections related demonstrations in Lilongwe in presence of the Police.

These incidents are however not new in the current political setting. During DPP era, there were overzealous youth brandishing machetes in the streets of Blantyre city to threaten the peaceful demonstrators and the police did nothing. This incident was captured in one of the papers as follows:

Machete (panga)-carrying ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Youth Cadets plied the streets of Blantyre in open trucks Tuesday threatening "to deal" with anybody opposing government only hours after two vehicles belonging to an independent private radio station were smashed and set alight by masked men ahead of Wednesday's scheduled nationwide demonstration against government (*Maravipost* 19th July 2011).

Concerning biased law enforcement, the major argument is that individuals feel frustrated with the system meant to protect them when they don't receive adequate attention and this psychologically leads to an accumulation of anger and frustration that ultimately gets unleashed in form of violence. Thus, *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* epitomizes an essential emotional element of siege mentality that propagates political violence in Malawi. By nurturing a sense of perpetual grievance and agitation, this emotional condition guarantees that political tensions persist and become impervious to resolution. Having an insight in the role of emotional conditioning or acclimatization in Malawian politics is crucial for coming up with interventions intended at boosting political stability and democratic consolidation.

The findings of this study reinforce some of the results from existing literature. For example, Pierce (2021) shows that anger is an influential driver of political action, frequently exploited by political actors to form public opinion and stimulate policy

debate. In the same way, Akdemir (2021) stresses how anger leads to instant and aggressive political behavior, aligning with this study's reflection that political leaders in Malawi exploit this emotion to rally support. Furthermore, Bettarelli, Close, and Van Haute (2022) highlight that anger-driven protest conduct is not characteristically negative, signifying that *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* can also function as a device for political expression rather than just violence. Additionally, Tanesini (2021) cautions that anger in public debate can be manipulated, strengthening this paper's argument that leaders intentionally utilize *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* for political advantage. These insights corroborate the study's findings at the same time as also stressing important distinctions in how anger functions in diverse political settings.

8.3 The Role of Party Leaders in Perpetuating Siege Mentality

As indirectly discussed above, findings show that party leaders strategically deploy siege mentality to strengthen their power and preserve political supremacy. By constructing an image that political opposition within the party is an existential hazard, leaders generate an atmosphere where any internal dissent is likened to treachery.

Related to the above discussion, leadership plays a key role in the spread of siege mentality, a development that this study refers to as *Threat Amplification Dynamics*. Most respondents mentioned that in public, party leaders frequently seem to be reconciliatory and encouraging unity but in private meetings they generally intensify opinions of external threats. This is mainly for them to enhance power and establish their support base. By projecting an image that they themselves are defenders of the party, party leaders generate a figurative connection with members, where devotion to the leader turn out to be identical with allegiance to the party.

This calculated amplification assists in two ways: it subdues internal discord while at the same time vindicating antagonistic activities against rivals. Nevertheless, this tactic can have harmful consequences. Leaders who flourish on siege narratives are encouraged to sustain them, even at the cost of political stability. This feedback loop enshrined in leadership approaches guarantees that the observation of threat continues to be dominant in political party tactics, prolonging a series of antagonism and distrust. One party official explained that:

Our party leaders continuously remind us of the threats we face—such as election results manipulation to slander operations—and they use these fears to defend their choices. Every now and then it looks like they intentionally amplify these threats to make us feel united and trustworthy. They place themselves as our protectors, and interrogating their decision-making is perceived as tantamount to weakening our cover.

Thus, through party leadership, the siege mentality is sometimes used to mobilize support. According to one key informant, media outbursts are often utilized condemning various acts of violence faced by a party from rival camps to generate some support and blacklist the other party as a violent party not good enough in democratic dispensation. One NGO official stated that "*Its hard to end electoral violence in Malawi, I think the leadership is not ready to address this, if they were ready this could have been resolved by now*" (NGO officer, Lilongwe, November 2024).

During the 2009 campaign period, the ruling party led by President Bakili Muluzi heavily used media to peddle a political narrative of painting the rival MCP as a violent party citing historical violent events that took place during the one party MCP led era (1964-1994). Through radio and TV magazine programs such as *Mizwanyana* and *Makiyolobasi* among others, the government media was a powerful tool to drive home labelling (violence as a major characteristic of the MCP then).

The issue of political leaders' utterances fueling violence was also highlighted by the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) Executive Director Michael Kaiyatsa who stated that

Politicians often fuel violence by using *divisive rhetoric* and exploiting economic disparities to rally support. Frustration over poverty and inequality makes people, especially the youth, more vulnerable to manipulation. Meanwhile, social media amplifies this division by spreading misinformation, *hate speech*, and *inflammatory content* that *fuels anger* and leads to violence. Together, these factors create a volatile mix that accelerates political violence, making it harder to foster peace and stability (*The Nation*, 4th December 2024; Emphasis added).

A civil society activist elaborated on this point:

Several party leaders flourish on encouraging a siege mentality because it keeps their supporters

unified and worried of outward influences. When a leader communicates to his supporters that they are encircled by enemies, it turns out to be uncomplicated to require complete allegiance. Those who question leadership pronouncements are blamed of being sellouts. This mindset ensures that power remains centralized, with little room for internal democracy.

Another significant finding is that party leaders use selective rewards and punishments to strengthen the siege mentality. Those who 'play the game' to the leader's narrative are rewarded with promotions, financial incentives, or public recognition, while those who utter dissention face relegation, segregation, or in extreme cases, warnings of violence. This approach dampens objective and rational thinking and cements the leader's authority. A political analyst explained:

In various political parties, allegiance is cherished above competence. If you demonstrate independent reasoning, you are seen as a risk to the party's unity. It is not surprising therefore that leaders take this to their advantage and offer opportunities for progression those who completely approve of their view points, even if they are clearly in the wrong.

Thus, party leaders play a critical role in spreading siege mentality by framing political contest as an existential fight, fabricating narratives of victimhood, rewarding loyalty over competence, and escalating tensions during electoral periods. Their strategies generate a political culture where violence is regularized, opposition is within and outside is demonized, and democratic values are weakened. Dealing with the role of party leadership in nourishing siege mentality is vital for encouraging political stability and diminishing violence in Malawi's political environment.

8.4 Impact of Siege Mentality on Democratic Processes and Political Stability

A noteworthy worry mentioned by participants is the detrimental consequence of siege mentality on Malawi's democratic establishments and political stability. The study found that a deep-rooted siege mentality deters political dialogue, diminishes prospects for bipartisan collaboration, and

nurtures a succession of antagonism that weakens governance. One academic specializing in political science observed: "In a democracy, there should be space for constructive debate and compromise. But in Malawi, the major political culture is one where the rival parties are viewed as an enemy rather than a competitor".

This opinion aligns with wider scholarly deliberations on the risks of excessive partisanship and conflict-driven politics. The study noted that siege mentality has a significant potential of leading towards legislative gridlock, as political parties rebuff attempts to cooperate on policy matters for fear of appearing weak or transferring legitimacy to their rivals. A former parliamentary staffer noted:

When political parties function in a siege mode, legislative discussions become antagonistic, and the focus shifts from policymaking to political point-scoring. This atmosphere suffocates meaningful legislative advancement because every decision is seen through the lens of party loyalty rather than national interest.

The fears of political violence are perceived as real as a certain party official stated that:

Political climate is not conducive now, we are receiving reports that some parties are procuring guns, others trained as police officers in Israel which is creating political fear, and this is giving an impression that the opposition may not have a good space to freely participate in the forthcoming election.

Besides, siege mentality wears down public trust in democratic institutions. Persistent claims of conspiracy and external interference by political leaders make citizens distrustful of the integrity of the judiciary, electoral commission, and law enforcement agencies. This deficiency of trust encourages a cycle of political volatility; thus, complaints are resolved through protests, violence, or extra-legal processes instead of institutional mechanisms.

Figure 3 shows Afrobarometer survey data from 2002 to 2024 highlighting percentage of Malawians who do not trust key democratic institutions over the years.

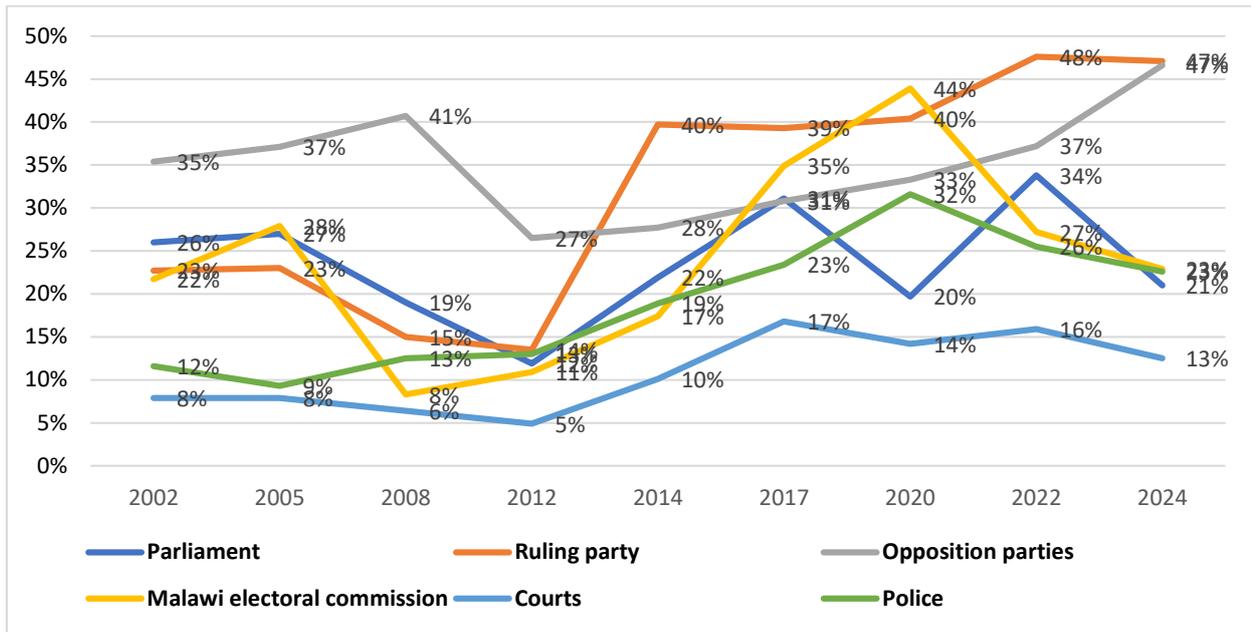


Figure 3: Trust in Parliament, Ruling Party, Opposition Parties, Courts, MEC & Police | Afrobarometer Survey 2002-2024 | Response of ‘Not at all Trust’

Question: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (Response: Not at all)

Source: Afrobarometer surveys (2002 to 2024)

While the long-term trend in Afrobarometer survey data from 2002 to 2024 offers empirical evidence of deteriorating trust in key governance institutions, the results can't be solely attributed to the siege mentality. Nevertheless, the data somehow aligns with the qualitative results which argued that the siege mentality has significantly contributed to the declining trust. In other words, the Afrobarometer data shows support for the assertion that siege mentality (among other factors) as reinforced within political parties has furthered decreasing trust in key democratic establishments. Whereas there are short-term variations, the overall trajectory exposes a descending trend in trust throughout most establishments, buttressing anxieties about institutional legitimacy and political stability.

Specifically, trust in political parties has progressively deteriorated, mostly for opposition parties. In 2002, 35% of respondents stated complete distrust in opposition parties, a figure that rose to 47% by 2024. Likewise, distrust in the ruling party soared from 23% in 2002 to 47% in 2024. This shows that both ruling and opposition parties have progressively been perceived as untrustworthy, probably due to among other things the relentless accusations of political sabotage and external conspiracies, which are characteristics of siege mentality.

Even though trust in institutions such as the police, courts, and the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) seems to have increased somewhat in 2024 compared to 2022, the long-term trajectory indicates a wider deterioration. For example, distrust in the MEC was only 8% in 2008 but climbed to 44% by 2020 before slightly declining to 23% in 2024. Similarly, distrust in the courts, which stood at 5% in 2012, increased to 17% in 2017 and remained above 10% thereafter. The police followed a similar inclination, with distrust increasing from 12% in 2002 to a peak of 32% in 2020, before slightly declining to 23% in 2024.

These trends imply that while current improvements in trust levels (for Police, MEC and Courts) may possibly echo momentary institutional endeavors at reform, they do not wipe out the long-term harm exacted by political parties' siege mentality. The continual weakening in trust across years highlights how engrained narratives of political persecution, electoral fraud, and judicial bias have systematically eroded belief in establishments intended to safeguard democracy. By positioning the argument within this wider historical viewpoint, it turns out to be evident that siege mentality is not just a rhetorical strategy but an aspect that has had long-term effects for the legitimacy of Malawi's democratic institutions.

Dealing with this matter entails nurturing a political culture that gives precedence to dialogue over confrontation, reinforces democratic institutions, and confronts the narratives of perpetual victimhood promoted by political elites. Without these efforts, Malawi take the risk of engraining a cycle of political

violence that undermines both governance and national unity.

8.5 Policies, Structures, Mechanisms for Peace and their Capacity to Deal with Siege Mentality

Officially, Malawi acknowledges the role of peace in national development. The Malawi 2063 is the overarching plan for development of the country and it has identified three pillars for transformation of the country which are Agricultural Productivity and Commercialization, Industrialization and Urbanization. It also has seven enablers and one of them, Enabler 2, is "Effective Governance Systems and Institutions". Under this enabler, the document discusses "Sustainable Peace and Security". The document says:

We, therefore, aspire to maintain a peaceful Malawi that attracts and retains investors; provides access to justice and effective remedies, including alternative dispute resolution mechanisms; and ensures efficient, effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. The promotion of unity, inclusive wealth creation, self-reliance and equitable sharing of resources guided by evidence-based planning shall be the hallmark of our peaceful and secure nation (NPC 2020:32).

Based on this vision, the country has several institutions and practices which are meant to enhance peace in the country thus also curbing the influence of siege mentality as well. Below is an analysis of these selected institutions and an assessment of the extent to which these may effectively address the issue of siege mentality.

8.5.1 Malawi's Peace and Unity Policy and its Implementation

In Malawi, the first ever National Peace Policy (NPP) was introduced in 2017 with an aim of strengthening capacities to deal with threats of peace now and in the future in a collaborative manner. The policy conforms to section 13 of the constitution of the republic of Malawi as well as government strategies and policies. Dzinesa (2022: 68) examines this peace policy extensively and argues that "The case of Malawi presents an opportunity for building integrated local, national, regional, continental and international peace architectures". Before the NPP was introduced, Malawi's peace efforts were deemed to be disjointed among several state and non-state actors, missing an integrated framework for pre-emptive conflict prevention and resolution. Specifically, the violent political clashes in July 2011, led to the death of 19 demonstrators and the incident underscored the absences of these uncoordinated endeavors. As a reaction to this development, United Nations'

preventive diplomacy organized a national dialogue which ended up in embracing of the NPP. Thus, the policy works as the basis for an interconnected National Peace Architecture (NPA) - which is defined as a dynamic network of mutually dependent structures, instruments, resources, values, and skills aimed at conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The NPP is applied collaboratively by state and non-state actors, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The process of implementation is aligned with regional, continental, and international peacebuilding tools. Dzinesa (2022) points out that Malawi's approach poses as a good example for incorporating local, national, regional, and international peace architectures.

Though the Malawi National Peace Architecture (NPA) is an excellent initiative, it demonstrates that, as outlined in the National Peace Policy (NPP), it does have numerous crucial weak points that may deter its usefulness. It may be argued that it is too early to assess it in some areas however, the said weak points are based on its design as well as the social-political context of Malawi. Based on the views of research participants and literature review, the following are some of the observed weaknesses:

Firstly, one clear shortfall is institutional weakness and coordination complications, as the NPA depends on several stakeholders, including government institutions, civil society, and international partners who have multiple interests. This leads to inefficiencies and bureaucratized bottlenecks. For instance, most government programmes under local government decentralization depend on effective coordination of numerous stakeholders and the outcome has so far not been encouraging. *Secondly*, and more importantly, the achievement of the policy is very much reliant on political will hence dearth of continuous steadfastness from the government could weaken its implementation. In general, commitment may come in when government specifically sees its major immediate positive outcome. Issues of peace are normally not appreciated until when something negative happens and normally it is already too late at that time. So far, the commitment from government on full implementation of the NPA has been wanting. *Thirdly*, and related to the previous point, is the issue of resource constraints. Resource constraints stand as a considerable threat because the NPA is worryingly dependent on donor funding, predominantly from establishments like the UNDP. Taking into consideration the current debate on donor fatigue, the long-term sustainability of NPA is uncertain if or when donor funding reduces. *Fourthly*, although the NPP's goal is to synchronize peace endeavors, fragmentation and duplication

of responsibilities among diverse stakeholders can lead to inefficiencies and conflicts over mandate and authority. *Fifthly*, another critical shortfall is the nonexistence of a robust legal framework to enforce the obligations or stipulations of the NPP hence making it difficult to guarantee permanence and formal accountability. Notwithstanding the stress on inclusivity, the level of community engagement remains grossly limited, hence this negatively affects the feeling of local ownership of peace efforts and hamper grassroots participation. Furthermore, the NPP does not effectively address the structural causes of conflict, such as socio-economic disparities, governance shortfalls, and political exclusion, ultimately focusing instead on conflict resolution rather than prevention. *Finally*, there is a risk that peace organizations instituted under the NPA could be manipulated for selfish political gains instead of operating as neutral entities for actual conflict resolution.

All in all, these weaknesses stress the necessity for robust institutional frameworks, better financial independence, and enhanced grassroots participation to guarantee the long-term achievement of Malawi's peace architecture.

8.5.2 Malawi Peace and Unity Commission (MPUC)

The establishment of the Malawi Peace and Unity Commission (MPUC) in 2023, is a great stride in dealing with political violence. The MPUC is an independent, non-partisan, and impartial statutory body which was established under the Peace and Unity Act (No. 16 of 2022) and the National Peace Policy of 2017. Its primary mandate is to promote national unity, advance peacebuilding efforts, and facilitate conflict prevention, management, and resolution mechanisms across Malawi. This is the case because the commission is given the responsibility of preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. Some of the functions of the commission include; harmonizing and coordinating efforts in conflict prevention, management and resolution for purposes of building sustainable peace, provide guidance on conflict prevention, management and resolution to the government and other entities as well as promoting understanding of values of diversity, trust, tolerance, confidence building, negotiation, mediation, dialogue and conciliation (Malawi Peace and Unity Commission 2022). A robust commission which is not politicized, the one that has adequate resources has the ability to deal with conflicts before they escalate into violence.

Following a decentralized system, on top there is the Malawi Peace and Unity Commission (MPUC)

and this is followed by the District Peace and Unity Committees (DPUCs) while at the grassroots there is the Area Peace and Unity Committees (APUCs)³.

Although the commission is new hence too early to assess, it is likely to encounter complications in dealing with deeply rooted issues such as political patronage, tribalism, and regionalism, which have traditionally continued to impend national unity and peace (Nice Trust 2024). The advent of political party strongholds and 'no-go' zones worsens these tensions and since they are now fast becoming an acceptable practice, it will be very difficult for the MPUC to effectively facilitate inclusivity and dialogue in Malawi's political culture. Political party strongholds can be described as "regions where a particular political party enjoys overwhelming support, often to the exclusion of other parties. These strongholds create a polarized political landscape, where the focus is more on party loyalty than on national unity and common good" (Nice Trust 2024). Since this has become a culture, it takes time to effectively deal with it yet the stakeholders expect quick results from the commission.

Furthermore, the commission has not done a good job to demonstrate visibility when it matters. The commission's ability to engage successfully with local communities and civil society organizations is decisive. So far, it has yet to gain respect of key stakeholders. Gift Trapence, Chairperson of Human Rights Defenders Coalition "accused the commission of sleeping on the job". Specifically, he stated that:

The commission has failed Malawians because it is too quiet on the issue of political violence that has been happening in the country. We are going towards elections and we cannot keep on watching people fighting. This is the time for the commission to stand up and condemn the violence and also engage stakeholders to prevent more fighting (*The Times*, 27th November 2024)

A certain law enforcement officer stated that:

MPUC has an excellent intention but it is a white elephant. Both the peace policy and Act are succinct in their discussion of the roles of MPUC. However, taking cognizant of the fact that the commissioners are appointed by the state President who is also the President of the political Party, they haven't been on top of things in condemning myriad political violence that have taken place in Lilongwe, Dowa and various parts of the country...DPUCs are at

³ According to *MPUC Strategic Plan (2024-2029)*, by "October 2024, nine DPUCs have been successfully established in the districts of Karonga, Kasungu, Mangochi, Salima, Nkhata Bay, Nsanje, Machinga, Mulanje, and Thyolo".

infancy stage. Therefore, their impact is almost negligible.

The perceived failure of the Malawi Peace and Unity Commission (MPUC) to establish credibility and effectively engage key stakeholders, by defaults, intensifies siege mentality among political actors, fueling interparty violence. Its inability to gain public confidence means that rival political groups perceive it as either ineffective or biased, reinforcing their sense of threat and encirclement.

8.5.3 *Multiparty Liaison Committees (MPLCs)*

The Multiparty Liaison Committees (MPLCs) are actually conflict-resolution structures meant to encourage peaceful political engagement, mostly during elections period. MPLCs work as podiums for dialogue among political parties, electoral stakeholders, and security agencies to deal with disputes and avoid electoral violence.

These committees' function at national, district, and constituency levels and normally comprise of representatives from political parties, The Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), The Malawi Police Service, traditional and religious leaders and civil society organizations (CSOs)

Some studies have found that MPLCs have influenced to a decrease in electoral violence by promoting communication between political rivals. However, their success is occasionally weakened by partisan interests within the committees when certain individuals give precedence to party loyalty over impartiality. Also, there is limited enforcement power, as these committees mostly depend on persuading instead of legal mandate. Another weakness is inconsistent engagement, specifically outside election periods.

These weaknesses are aptly summarized as follows:

However, MPLCs lack uniformity of approach in their operations and their reporting mechanism to the MEC is rather weak. Furthermore, the decisions of the MPLCs are effective only at the local level but are sometimes resisted or ignored by party officials at higher levels i.e. regional and national levels. MPLCs, however, lie dormant for most of the electoral cycle and become alive only in the election years (Chingaipe et al 2016: page 25)

One interview participant explained that "MPLCs are existing on the paper. Actually, they are almost nonexistent on some districts like Nsanje".

It is worth mentioning that the role of traditional leaders in the committee has also been questioned

by other observers. For instance, Henry (2023:10) argues that "Traditional leaders are also often primary actors of electoral violence and malpractices. During the referendum in 1993 and the 1994 and 1999 general elections, chiefs were implicated in electoral fraud and malpractices, including assaulting rival party supporters".

The presence of traditional leaders is probably its weakest link. There are reports of some traditional leaders being in the fore front in reinforcing the siege mentality by uttering divisive statements which gave the impression to their subjects that they need to support specific political candidates or face hardship as a community. A PAS Department survey conducted in 2017 showed that the majority of Malawians feel the major roles of their traditional leaders in a community is mobilization for development (50%) and custodians of culture (19%). Serving the role of political conflict mediation was not mentioned as one of their major roles. Actually, the role of traditional leaders in politically related activities was not supported.

Although traditional leaders are officially supposed to be political neutral, nearly a third of Malawians (31%) said in a 2017 survey that their traditional leaders heads are political party supporters (PAS 2017). Among people who claimed that their traditional leaders belong to a political party, 62% said their leader supports the ruling party while 38% said they support opposition parties. Robinson (2024) cites the case of some contemporary traditional chieftaincies which were reinvented from scratch. Her study shows that such traditional leaders are mainly supported and recognized by those who support the political party which was behind the establishment of those leaders.

As already mentioned above, regardless of these challenges, MPLCs continue to play a critical element of Malawi's electoral conflict management system, helping to uphold democratic stability.

8.5.4 *National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) Trust*

Established in 1999, the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) Trust is a public institution in Malawi committed to three pillars which are civic and voter education, peacebuilding, and election observation and monitoring (NICE 2017). It achieves this through increasing citizen participation in democratic processes. It works countrywide, offering non-partisan communication on elections, human rights, and governance issues. More importantly, NICE engages communities through grassroots

structures, media campaigns, and capacity-building programs to empower citizens with knowledge about their rights and responsibilities (NICE 2017). It promotes discussion between the government and the public to reinforce democratic accountability and social unity. In other words, peace building is one of its underlying key responsibilities.

NICE is generally regarded as a success story or a model for civic education and promotion of a positive democratic culture in a country (Henry 2023; Chingaipe et al 2016; Taylor 2018). With close to 25 years of operation in the country, NICE has been in the forefront of the democratization process.

Henry (2023:13) aptly summarizes the success of NICE by arguing that:

NICE has contributed significantly to embracing the democratic political culture in Malawi, ...NICE's effectiveness is credited mainly to institutionalisation, coverage, and operation methodology. It operates continuously and permanently. It covers the entire country... Its activities have continuity, impacting people's behaviour towards engagement in democratic processes. Most importantly, it operates independently of the government.

However, based on the interviews conducted, NICE Trust faces several challenges that hinder its effectiveness in promoting civic education and democracy in Malawi. One of the challenges it faces

inadequate funding, which constrains its capacity to reach all communities, especially rural areas, with critical civic education activities. Furthermore, *threat* of political interference occasionally may modify its procedures, as some politicians interpret its operations as a hindrance to their power. Additionally, low literacy levels makes it problematic for certain citizens to fully grasp democratic principles and governance issues. Also, limited access to digital platforms in distant areas limits NICE's capability to use modern technology for civic education. Notwithstanding these challenges, NICE remains a critical player in empowering Malawians with knowledge about their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society.

9.0 TOWARDS THE AGITATION-VICTIMIZATION-VIOLENCE NEXUS MODEL

Based on the interview results as well as analysis of secondary data, this study formulated its own *Agitation-Victimization-Violence Nexus* model which basically explores the linkage between the *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* and siege mentality notions to inter-party political conflict. The Table 1 below features the interrelated undercurrents between *kuyenda okwiyakwiya* (agitation), siege mentality, and inter-party political violence, explaining how emotional states, perceptions of threat, and behaviors sustain the cycle of conflict.

Table 1: Linking *Kuyenda Okwiyakwiya* with Siege Mentality and Inter-party Political Violence

Aspect	Kuyenda Okwiyakwiya (Agitation)	Siege Mentality	Inter-party Political Violence
1-Emotional State	Restlessness and visible anger	Feeling surrounded or under attack	Hostility and emotional agitation toward rival parties
2-Perceived Threats	Reacting to perceived grievances or provocations	Belief in existential threats to identity or party	Fear or mistrust of rival parties escalates to violence
3-Behavior	Erratic, reactionary actions	Defensive, reactionary, and confrontational behaviors	Aggressive rhetoric, marches, or physical confrontations
4-Symbol of Mobilization	Displays of anger as a call to action	Rallying supporters to "defend" the party	Protests, riots, or retaliatory attacks on rival groups
5-Leadership Dynamics	Leaders exhibiting frustration and impulsive actions	Leaders heightening fears of external threats	Incitement of supporters to act violently or defensively
6-Party Dynamics	Restless interactions, internal and external confrontations	Heightened factionalism and a zero-sum game mentality	Factional conflicts, leading to clashes with opponents
7-Impact on Supporters	Increased agitation and emotional mobilization	Deepening polarization and hostility toward opponents	Organized violence, clashes, or retaliatory behavior
8-Outcome	Escalation of conflict or tension	Reinforcement of hostile "us vs. them" mentality	Cyclical violence and breakdown of dialogue

Kuyenda okwiyakwiya echoes agitation and irritation motivated by alleged complaints or incitements, preceding to unpredictable and reactionary conducts. This emotional and behavioral distress frequently turns out to be a forerunner to a siege mentality, where individuals or groups sense being encircled or under attack, identifying existential risks to their identity or political party. This defensive attitude reveals itself in aggressive conducts and rhetoric calculated to bring together supporters against alleged opponents.

As these undercurrents deepen, inter-party political violence develops, exemplified by antagonistic skirmishes such as protests, marches, or physical hostilities. Political leaders play a vital role in intensifying these hostilities, whether through reckless conducts, intensifying fears, or directly stirring followers. The outcome is unfathomable polarity and factionalism inside and amongst political parties, nurturing a zero-sum mentality that systematically cements cycles of violence and takes away prospects for productive negotiation or compromise. Consequently, the table above reveals how these three phenomena strengthen one another.

10.0 CONCLUSION

Malawi's political history is imbued with several episodes of inter-party political tensions manifested through physical confrontations, rhetorical as violent propaganda advocacy through various mechanisms. In other words, manifestations of siege mentality are pervasive and acute. The study has found that these political grievances have shaped the political landscape and shaped perceived siege mentality between political parties especially parties in government and those on the opposing side. Historical legacy of the one-party system where silencing of dissenting views and banning of political parties continue to dictate mental construction of siege mentality in the post one party era, political dispensation, ruling parties during the democratic era have often utilized several tactics to silence dissenting views. The historical legacy of one-party era continues to resurface 30 years after the dawn of multiparty democracy. Furthermore, the violent episodes which were often unresolved during the previous regimes continue.

Addressing the problem of siege mentality in inter-party political violence in Malawi requires a multi-pronged approach that fosters trust, dialogue, and institutional credibility. Here are some practical solutions: First, strengthening the Malawi Peace and Unity Commission (MPUC)- The MPUC must aggressively involve all political stakeholders and

demonstrate impartiality to build public confidence. This consists of, but not limited to, releasing well-timed and resolute responses to political violence and facilitating mediation between conflicting parties.

Secondly, persistent civic and political education- Public education campaigns such as those organized by NICE on democratic tolerance, peaceful contest, and national unity can help to demolish the narratives that encourage siege mentality. This should target both political elites and grassroots supporters. However, these efforts need to be more common, focused and persistent to guarantee better results.

Thirdly, strengthening law enforcement and accountability- Political violence needs to be confronted with unbiased law enforcement. Authorities should ensure that those who provoke violence, irrespective of party affiliation should not avoid the legal consequences to discourage future occurrences.

Fourthly, enhance media responsibility and regulation- Political rhetoric in the media frequently exacerbates tensions. Training journalists on conflict-sensitive reporting and restraining provocative political messaging can help diminish perceptions of existential threats among political actors.

Finally, improve early warning and rapid response mechanisms- Instituting systems to monitor political tensions and respond rapidly to signs of intensifying violence can help diminish conflicts before they escalate out of control.

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- Appendix 1:** Summary of interparty political violence in Africa, with special attention on the main problems, their root causes, effects, links to siege mentality

Main Problems	Root Causes	Effects	Link to Siege Mentality	Possible Solutions
Electoral Disputes and Fraud (Collier & Vicente, 2012)	Manipulation of electoral processes, lack of trust in electoral commissions, and disputed results.	Escalation of violence, destruction of property, loss of life, and undermined electoral legitimacy.	Parties perceive the electoral process as rigged, fostering a "survivalist mindset" and justifying aggression.	Reform electoral systems to ensure transparency, strengthen oversight by independent bodies, and foster trust in institutions through civic education.
Political Exclusion (Cheeseman, 2015)	Marginalization of certain ethnic, regional, or political groups in governance and decision-making.	Alienation, protests, and retaliatory violence against the ruling party or other groups.	Excluded groups feel under siege, reinforcing in-group solidarity and hostility toward dominant parties.	Promote inclusive governance structures, ensure proportional representation in decision-making, and implement affirmative policies to reduce exclusion.

Ethnic and Regional Divisions (Horowitz, 1985)	Historical grievances, politicization of ethnic identities, and unequal resource distribution.	Ethnic-based violence, deepened mistrust, and fragmentation of national unity.	Siege mentality heightens as parties align with ethnic groups, perceiving threats from rival ethnic coalitions.	Promote national identity over ethnic affiliations, encourage cross-ethnic political coalitions, and address historical grievances through truth and reconciliation mechanisms.
Weak Institutions (Diamond, 2008)	Lack of independent and effective institutions to mediate political disputes or enforce the rule of law.	Impunity for violence, erosion of democracy, and diminished trust in governance structures.	Weak institutions allow siege narratives to flourish, as parties rely on self-defense mechanisms rather than legal redress.	Strengthen institutional independence, enhance the judiciary's capacity to address political disputes, and establish non-partisan conflict resolution mechanisms.
Leadership Manipulation (van de Walle, 2003)	Leaders amplify external threats to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and mobilize supporters.	Increased political polarization, escalation of interparty hostilities, and cycles of violence.	Leaders intentionally invoke siege mentality to strengthen their grip on power, fostering mistrust and aggression.	Develop leadership accountability through constitutional reforms, empower civil society to hold leaders accountable, and promote ethical leadership training.
Resource Competition (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004)	Competition over control of state resources and patronage networks.	Heightened interparty conflicts, corruption, and deepened economic inequality.	Parties view access to resources as existential, reinforcing the siege mentality of either winning or losing everything.	Introduce transparent resource management policies, reduce patronage politics, and diversify economic opportunities to reduce dependence on state control.
Media Polarization (Tayeabwa, 2020)	Politicization of media outlets and the spread of disinformation during elections and political campaigns.	Amplification of divisions, erosion of trust in media, and incitement of violence.	Media narratives often reinforce siege mentality by exaggerating threats posed by opposing parties.	Promote media neutrality, enforce strict penalties for spreading hate speech, and invest in media literacy campaigns to help citizens identify bias and misinformation.