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The joys and pitfalls of doing historical institutionalist research in Malawi

Abstract

This paper presents my experiences of conducting historically grounded institutionalist research in Malawi. By highlighting the challenges and the joys encountered, I hope to contribute to the endeavours of other researchers working in the framework of historical institutionalism and elite theory, especially in respect of what to expect and therefore how to plan fieldwork in Malawi or other developing countries in Africa.

1 Introduction: Research Concerns and Empirical Approach

My thesis is entitled *'The Politics of Institutional Formation, Maintenance and Change: An Historical Analysis of State-Business Relations in Malawi, 1890-2004'.* As can be discerned from the title, the objective is to analyse how political processes, including power configurations at state level, have historically shaped the institutional and organisational patterns of state-business relations (SBRs) as the state and its politics evolved from colonialism to post-independence authoritarianism and then to multiparty democracy[1]. My fieldwork had two components. The first was concerned with collecting and analysing primary and secondary documents that I deemed to be of importance to the study. The second one involved conducting in-depth interviews with key informants, mostly business and state elites, retired or still in service. In this paper I discuss my experiences of undertaking this work.

My field work began on 8th March and ended on 30th July 2009 – about five months of a mixed bag of joys, frustrations, hopes, despair, uncertainty and enthusiasm. I had planned, optimistically, for a period of exclusive access to the 'top dogs' and 'fat cats' of Malawian society. In the event, many of them made me feel worthwhile while a few appeared to work rather hard at projecting their snobbish elitism and viewed my work with diplomatic contempt. Humility, persistence, professionalism and political sensitivity were the arsenal that opened my way into corporate boardrooms and loosened the tongues of political powerhouses.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows: In section 2, I discuss my experiences with general logistical issues focussing on transport, health and communication. Section 3 is concerned with experiences related to collecting documents and doing document analysis. The main issues are to do with negotiating access to documents and the problem of 'missing documents'. Section 4 is concerned with arranging and doing key

[1] The colonial era spanned the period from 1891, when a Protectorate was declared over Nyasaland, to 1964 when Nyasaland attained Independence and became Malawi. A one-party authoritarian state was instituted in 1966 and lasted until 1993 when Malawians voted for multiparty democracy in a referendum. For the era of multiparty democracy, I am concerned primarily with its first decade up to 2004.

informant interviews. Section 5 concludes the paper by highlighting the joys and pitfalls of my fieldwork experiences.

2 General logistical Issues

Transport

The public transport system in Malawi, especially in the cities where I had to do most of my empirical work**,** is organised in a manner that is not conducive to a researcher with limited time, fixed appointments with elites and little money to spend. The most common means of transport within town are minibuses. They are the most inefficient means for anyone wishing to keep time for appointments. The most frustrating elements were:

- They are not time-tabled in any way. For purposes of economic efficiency, the bus leaves only when it is full. Consequently, I would spend up to an hour or more in a stationary bus waiting for it to fill up in order to travel to the other side of town.
- They stopped virtually anywhere to pick up new passengers or drop off others, regardless of whether there was a bus stage or not.
- They frequently diverted from normal routes in search of potential passengers.

In addition to the annoyances mentioned above, I found minibuses to be an expensive means of travel for a researcher who has several appointments in different places within the town. Fares are fixed for the entire journey. Passengers pay a full cost for the entire journey regardless of their pick-up or drop-off points. There are no receipts or tickets and every minibus operates like 'a sole trader'. Thus for a series of timed appointments in a single day, I had to pay as many 'full fares' as the number of times I got onto a minibus. This is the mode of transport I used for one week in Lilongwe in the second week of March when I was trying to set up some interviews. None of my potential respondents were expecting me so the delays annoyed nobody except me and taught me lessons that were worthwhile for the actual interview logistics. Thus I found minibuses to be neither convenient not cost-effective.

Except for a few recent exceptions, long distance public transport is similarly organised. There are no time tables[2], and journeys that begin in the afternoon are sometimes abandoned mid-way. For example, on the 17th March, 2009 I left Lilongwe for Zomba, the University town and old colonial seat of government where the Malawi National archives are housed. It was going to be my base for the fieldwork. At Lilongwe bus station, I sat in the bus from around 1:30 pm, listening to loud gospel music as passengers slowly trickled in. We were ready to leave only after 3:30pm when every seat had been occupied. The journey was expected to last about five hours but I was not in Zomba until 9:15pm. After about two-thirds of the journey had been covered, there were less than ten passengers going all the way to Zomba. Suddenly the operators found the bus too big and the remainder of the journey to be not cost-effective. Instead of handing over proceeding passengers to another operator (which I was told is the usual practice), we had to change into a smaller minibus run by the same operators. Waiting for the minibus to arrive, offloading and re-loading took up to 45 minutes. I learned on that day that long distance travel by public transport would take up a whole day and that the best time to undertake such a journey would always be early in the morning.

There are alternatives to public transport but they are not cost-effective for a poorly-funded student researcher. The first is to use taxis for local travel within the cities. While these would save on time, the fares are high and often have to be negotiated as the

[2] Except for AXA bus services which are increasingly operating on the lines of scheduled coach services in the UK. But they have only a few coaches so their frequency is very low.

taxis are not metered. There is also a security risk with taxis as they are not properly identified (they are not painted in any identifiable colour as in other countries) and**,** apparently, anyone can operate a taxi at their own convenience. The second is to hire a car from a registered car hire company but the cost implications are huge. Thus the public transport system was not going to work to my advantage in doing the study and the conventional alternatives were not realistic due to a very tight budget. However, my transport woes were resolved when Dr. and Mrs Chinsinga (who provided me with a home in Zomba) also granted me generous use of one of their vehicles[3]. All I had to do was to juggle my finances and plan my activities to maximise the budget for gasoline. It could not have been any better.

Health

Although I slept under a treated mosquito net, I was downed twice with malaria, each attack lasting at least one week. A clinical officer informed me that in the 15 months I had been away two important things had happened: I had lost my immunity against malaria and that plasmodium - the malaria-causing microbe - had mutated and become resistant to conventional malaria treatment. A new experimental drug, popularly called LA, was being used to treat malaria in conjunction with quinine. The treatment would put me off work for a good two weeks because of side-effects. I objected. The limited time for field work that I had at my disposal would not permit the luxury of such a long bed rest. I had to get treatment with fewer side effects that would allow me to work on my research, however slowly. I got a new prescription for an even rarer drug and at a higher price. The advice was that I should have taken anti-malaria drugs on arrival to begin to build natural body immunity.

I spent the first two months shuffling through old and dusty documents at the national archives. It was a health risk. I inhaled a lot of impurities and consequently suffered from recurrent flu and persistent headaches. In the course of work, I regularly became thirsty and my eyes got irritated. I survived this ordeal by drinking lots of water, taking paracetamol on a daily basis and taking 'fresh air breaks' after every two hours in the search room. There were no viable alternatives to this. It had to be endured.

Communication

Communication - especially by telephone - was a very costly item during my research. There is one fixed line company and two mobile phone service providers. In Malawi, calling across the networks is most expensive and often the mobile networks are congested and getting through was sometimes difficult. Most of my respondents were not listed in the ordinary telephone directory. So the first challenge was to get their contact numbers. To do this I had to call up a few reliable people to ask for contacts – often mobile numbers. I observed that many people have at least two contact numbers from the two mobile service providers. The most frustrating thing was that some respondents changed their contact numbers regularly when it suited them. For instance, in a space of two weeks I liaised with one potential respondent on four separate mobile numbers, each of which I had to get from someone else. I later travelled to one of his businesses and his manager called him on yet another number!

Access to the internet was erratic, especially in the early days of my fieldwork. One major problem was the frequent power blackouts arising from the inability of the electricity company (state-owned) to generate and supply sufficient power all day every day. Frequent load-shedding meant that the internet café, close to the national archives, was often without power and therefore not functioning. However, the department of Political & Administrative Studies at Chancellor College granted me office space and access to the internet. I was therefore able to work there at night after the national

[3] Dr. Blessings Chinsinga is my relation (cousin) and a senior colleague in the department of Political & Administrative Studies at Chancellor College, University of Malawi.

archives had closed at 5pm and hence access the internet for free. However, the internet on campus was not always up and running and was often painfully slow. Neither was it possible to access journals electronically from the University of York website.

With hindsight, I now know that getting in touch with potential respondents was more difficult and more expensive than securing an appointment for interview. Given the infrastructural condition of the country and the quality of services in so far as communication is concerned, this is an item that requires adequate budget provision. Because my respondents were only reachable on private numbers or by tracking them down and visiting them in person, I had to deal with many 'gatekeepers' and all this scaled up the costs of the research in monetary terms but also time.

3 Collecting documents and doing document Analysis

For an historical institutionalist study, identifying documents and assessing their content was the most fundamental component of my fieldwork. Not only did this exercise provide me with the material I needed but it also helped me to identify some key informants and also some issues to follow up in the interviews. My earmarked sources of documents included the following:

- The Malawi National Archives in Zomba
- The Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (MCCCI) in Blantyre.
- Chancellor College Library (*Malawiana* Collection) in Zomba
- The National Statistics Office (NSO) in Zomba
- The Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in Lilongwe
- The National Assembly Library in Lilongwe
- Ministry of Economic Planning & Development in Lilongwe
- Ministry of Trade, Industry and Private Sector Development in Lilongwe
- Malawi Investment Promotion Agency (MIPA) in Lilongwe

The most difficult aspect of this component of my work was negotiating access to primary documents. Except for the National Archives, it was impossible to have sight of any primary documents (official correspondence and other records on file) from the other organisations. However, they freely gave of their published documents whenever they were available. Under the rules and regulations, primary documents that had not been deposited in the National Archives were closed off from any externals except when ordered by courts of law. Even when deposited with the National Archives, under the Malawi law, the primary documents are not ordinarily open to the public until 20 years after the date the file was closed. Under this law, the latest documents to which I had unrestricted access were those which had been closed in 1987. Thus my interests in the colonial period (1890-1963) and also the first 23 years of the one party state (1964-1987) were not hampered at all by this legal requirement. But documents relating to the last seven years of the one party state (1988-1994), as well as the entire first decade of multiparty democracy (1994-2004), were 'under key and lock'. This represented a serious gap in data for my study. I had either to modify the parameters of my study or rely on less reliable sources of data for these periods or negotiate for access to the documents. I chose the last option because I later learned from the archivist that access could be granted if the depositors of the documents allowed it. I therefore had to negotiate with the different organisations, mostly government departments and agencies. The process was unnecessarily protracted not because it had many stages but rather due to bureaucratic hurdles:

- To access the archives I had to submit an application letter spelling out my intentions and the purpose of the study, naming at least three referees, and had to enclose a copy of my curriculum vitae and one reference letter supporting the

application. I was further required to pay research fees pegged at $100 for foreign-based researchers and MK600 for resident researchers. I fitted in both categories and argued that I was more of the latter. The Head of the Department of Political and Administrative studies at Chancellor College provided a reference letter. The application package was then sent to the Ministry Headquarters in Lilongwe for processing and approval. In the meantime the Director of Archives allowed me to begin my work. The formal and positive response from the Minister of Tourism and Culture was not received until three weeks later.

- The process of identifying documents of interest was slow because the national archives still uses a manual system consisting of several inventories for public archives and historical manuscripts and a card catalogue for published sources or other library holdings. I went through the different inventories identifying sets of documents and the specific items within those sets that I wanted to look at. I searched the manual catalogue 'by subject'. To do this effectively, I had to use all my knowledge of the colonial and one party period to think of subject heads that would yield documents with content of interest to my study. The assistants were most helpful in this and from their own understanding of my research, they were able to suggest other materials that they knew were in their library but were not catalogued. I then developed a list of the files and documents that I deemed of interest.
- Although the items are boxed together, the procedure required filling in requisition forms for each single item in the box. The assistants would then disappear into the repositories, look for the boxes and pull out the specific item requested. Not only was this procedure time wasting, it also denied me the opportunity to look at the contents of other boxes whose titles were not as appealing at first sight. In fact, it was often the case that titles of files as indicated in the inventories and catalogue were only broadly indicative (and sometimes misleading) of the content of the files. One then had to flip through each item in the selected box to judge its utility to the study – but this required filling in as many requisition forms as there were items in each box!
- For the period between 1987 and 2004, I had to apply and negotiate for access from depositors of documents. Since the postal system is known for its inefficiencies (missing mail and habitual late deliveries), it meant hand delivery of letters to government departments and ministries and numerous follow-up phone calls. Towards the end of June I got clearance to access the records. Access was granted on the basis of the understanding and my undertaking that the information was strictly for academic purposes only. This was heart-warming for me and I regarded it as a break through. However, there were not as many records as I had hoped that were deposited with the National archives.
- A new hurdle that arose with respect to the documents covering this period was that the documents were unprocessed. They were not yet 'public archives'. They were not listed in the inventories or in the catalogue. They were parked in cartons and kept in different warehouses within Zomba. To identify cartons of interest, I used delivery notes which, in the parlance of the archivists, are called 'transmittal lists' i.e. listings of boxes delivered to the National archives by an organisation at a certain point in time. The boxes were identified only by number but the transmittal lists indicated titles of files or other documents in each box. I used the titles to decide which boxes had content of interest to my study. The boxes contained mixed content and I am inclined to say that they were not packed in any organised way. This meant that it was not viable to exclude any boxes and necessitated looking at the listing of contents for each box. A list of boxes of interest was developed which I used to identify the boxes from the different warehouses. The boxes were then brought to the search room and had to be taken back after the search. On a few occasions there was no official vehicle to use for these movements and I had to break off from my search and facilitate movement. The transmittal lists available were those from the Office of the President and Cabinet whose documents included those up to 2003; from the

Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (under various names) and the Ministry of Trade, Commerce and Industry. For these two Ministries, their deposits related mostly to the one party period with a small number of entries for the colonial period. The good thing with requests based on transmittal lists was that they allowed sight of other interesting material contained in the boxes. Thus for the first decade of multiparty democracy, my evidence from official primary documents is limited. However, it is buttressed by data from other sources including newspapers and copies of documents (correspondence) collected from some individuals who also granted me in-depth interviews.

Missing Files, boxes and un-deposited documents

My search for documents revealed that record keeping and management is a serious problem in Malawi and poses a real challenge to systematic historical institutionalist studies. Below are some specific experiences:

- For the public archives and historical manuscripts, some items that I requested were not available in their holding boxes. They either had been misplaced (mis-boxed) when the previous user returned them or they had been taken out of the search/reading room unlawfully. For example, some 'missing files' are recorded to have been retrieved for a client in 2003 and were yet to be returned. Even worse was the fact that the duplicate of the requisition form that was placed in the box when the item was retrieved, did not indicate the name of the client.
- A few boxes that I selected from the transmittal lists were not found in the records room where they were supposed to have been kept. At least three boxes were found to be empty.
- Many organisations (public, private or other) do not regularly deposit their documents with the National Archives. Only occasionally do staff of the National Archives visit organisations to collect documents and closed files. However, the National Archives have serious space and staff limitations. One particular aspect of this laxity that impacted badly on my research is that records and other documents of the Chamber of Commerce were last deposited at the archives in 1967 and most of this related to the colonial period. Since then there has been no other deposit of documents from the Chamber of Commerce. I therefore expected to find more documents at the Chamber itself but there were only a few, secondary documents. Access to the few primary documents was not granted by the Chief Executive Officer of the Chamber. I was informed that documents were periodically destroyed to create space for new ones. Thus in so far as the Chamber of Commerce is concerned in the post-colonial period, my data is drawn from a range of published sources including the Chamber's own magazines, reports and correspondence collected from individuals (including staff and former members of the Council of the Chamber) and newspapers. Two former Presidents (chairmen) and one Deputy filled me in as well as serving members of staff that have been with the chamber for a long time.
- Similarly, in the course of the research I discovered that from 1969 to 1994 there had existed a peak business Association, but only for African businessmen – the African Businessmen Association of Malawi (ABAM) – which was an affiliated member of the Malawi Congress Party and which enjoyed access to Kamuzu Banda. ABAM had an effective policy voice especially in attempts to indigenise Industry and Commerce which had been dominated by whites and Asians during the colonial period. Although it was outspoken, had a secretariat and property and an intimate working relationship with the party, not a single file was deposited at the National Archives. The association became latent in 1994 at the dawn of multiparty democracy. Its key leaders went into mainstream partisan politics and many have since died. No one knows where the records of the association are. Towards the end of July I located the last Executive chairman of

the association who allowed me access to the few documents that he still keeps in his personal library.

Arranging and Conducting in-depth interviews

My targets for in-depth key informant interviews were primarily state and business elites, both retired and those still serving. As the list of respondents developed, two dominant patterns of elite configurations became apparent from the profiles of the respondents, namely *elite interlock*[4] and *elite-inter-changeability*[5]*.* While this was an interesting finding in itself, it enabled comprehensive interviews in which I was able to explore issues, perceptions and attitudes across business, bureaucratic and political domains. Below are highlights of my experiences with respect to elite interviews, the factors that I think contributed to successful interviews and the joys that are directly attributable to the experience of conducting them.

4 Activities and associated challenges

Identifying and tracking down respondents:

From newspapers, various reports and documents and conversations with many people, I developed a list of 50 potential respondents. Using all sources of information available to me, I established contact details for many of them and tried to establish contact by phone, email or visiting in person. For those still in the public limelight contact was made through their offices, aides or business places. The most difficult to trace were those who had retired, were no longer in the public limelight or had settled in the districts away from the main cities. Out of the 50 potential respondents, 15 had died and I had successful interview sessions with 21 of the remaining 35. Five others had in principle agreed to be interviewed but the interviews did not take place because of either logistical problems or snobbish elitism on the part of some respondents as the two cases below on 'cancellation of appointments' illustrate. For the remainder, there was either no concrete response to the request despite my annoying persistence or the request was not a priority for them[6].

Cancellation of appointments:

Some respondents projected good will and easily agreed to be interviewed and quickly fixed dates but they were never available for the interview on the agreed date. A few interviews had to be re-scheduled and were held successfully. However two cases were most frustrating. One of them involved a prominent and senior politician. Appointments were made three times and all of them were cancelled on the day for various reasons. The only good thing is that they were cancelled a few hours before the time. The second case was more frustrating. It involved a CEO of a peak business association. Persuading

[4] This is defined as movement of elites from one power summit (i.e. leadership position in one elite cluster) to another e.g. from a high ranking post in the bureaucracy to one in politics or corporate sector; or from one in the business sector to another in government at a bureaucratic or political level (Dogan,2003).While some of the movements are based on personal relations among the elites, others are based on individual motivations within a broader framework of straddling strategies to accumulate and consolidate economic and political power.

[5] This is defined as a pattern in which elites are able to *move back and forth* between various elite categories e.g. from a position of influence in a business association to a political party or to the bureaucracy *and back* (Dogan, 2003, emphasis mine). In theory, elite inter-changeability differs from elite interlock in that the former presupposes an 'undifferentiated stock of elites'.

[6] A few of my respondents were candidates in the general election of May 2009. When I arrived in the country in March, it was in the midst of the election campaign. A few of them, including the Leader of opposition who was part of the first post-colonial cabinet and a henchman during the one party state**,** agreed to interviews but indicated that it had to be after the elections. Those who won became too busy to grant me an interview. Those who lost were either reminiscing or were busy with court proceedings where they were challenging electoral results. An interview with me did not feature significantly on their agenda at all.

him to respond to the request for interview took more than a month and involved emailing, telephoning and personal visits to his office. When he agreed, appointments were secured and cancelled six times. Reasons included 'other urgent commitments', 'external travel', and 'not ready to talk'. On three occasions, I drove between Zomba and Blantyre for appointments that were then aborted. Not only did this waste my time and money, the re-scheduling also affected arrangements with other respondents. When a seventh appointment was offered, I thanked him and rejected the offer.

Negotiating time slots:

At the time of securing the appointments for interviews, I informed my respondents about the kind of issues I would raise with them and the expected duration of the interview. The menu of issues for discussion depended on the profile of the respondent with respect to my study objectives. A few respondents gave me unlimited time. Many would afford a maximum of one hour or slightly more. The shortest offer was 40 minutes from a man I wanted for two hours! The most gratifying thing is that I was able to interest my respondents in the issues I raised with them so much so that actual interview durations were longer than previously agreed. The minimum duration turned out to be one hour and ten minutes while the maximum was in excess of four hours. I learned progressively that the more the questions were focussed and related directly to their own roles and experiences, the more they got interested. The interview appeared to provide an opportunity either to explain themselves or to correct an apparent misunderstanding in the public domain.

By and large, I regard my fieldwork, especially the interviews, to have been successful. Below I highlight briefly some of the factors that I think contributed to this success.

5 Some factors that made my interviews successful

Building on my previous experiences with elite interviews, I knew that the most important element was for me to project seriousness with my work and respect for the respondents. The respondents should see the importance of the study and the value of their participation. The following aspects of my approach are worthy highlighting:

Formal requests

For all interviews I presented formal written requests on University of York letterheads expressing my intentions, requesting an interview and indicating why I thought the respondent was important to the study. The letters were hand-delivered or sent by email. For interviews that had been secured verbally, I always gave a copy of the formal request to the respondent on the day of the interview. This left them in no doubt of the purposes of the study and the way information was going to be used.

Setting dates

In many cases, especially for busy respondents, I left it to them to suggest a date and time most suitable for them for the interview. I would negotiate only if there was a clash with another interview or the logistics were not workable. Many of them were surprisingly accommodating**.** With this approach, my respondents felt respected for not creating unnecessary urgency for them and for indicating that my interests were subordinate to theirs.

Dress Code

I had learned from my previous research ventures that the elites in Malawi often pre-judge one's seriousness by how one presents oneself in terms of attire. So on each interview day, I looked at the schedule of respondents and decided on my attire. A neck

tie and a jacket were always handy and I had them in the car all the time. For a few respondents, for example, the former Vice President of the country, I had to wear a suit.

Biographical Note

I found that my background as Parliamentary Researcher and, later, Lecturer at the University of Malawi - which I had indicated on the one page synopsis of my study - was useful in securing interviews and in getting respondents to talk with few reservations. It appeared to contribute to the assurances of ethical conduct of the study and that personal interests of the respondents were not at risk.

6 The joys of conducting elite interviews on SBRs

Despite the challenges I have highlighted above, the exercise had its own joys that significantly changed the way I look at several aspects of political and economic life in Malawi and the general perception of elites. Below are five highlights:

Reception and Willingness to talk

Contrary to perceptions that political and business elites often look down upon scholars especially those without a name and with a humble background like me, I was well received into their homes and boardrooms. Many of them showed what I think was a genuine interest in the study. A few asked for a final copy while two volunteered to read my chapters as they get churned so that they could offer comments, suggestions and correct possible factual errors. Despite their tight schedules, my respondents gave generously not just of their time but also tea and snacks!

Willingness to help

Throughout my fieldwork, I experienced considerable willingness from people to help, especially in identifying further potential respondents and providing their contacts (snowballing). Some of my respondents agreed to night-time interviews - not because they had nocturnal working habits but because it was the only time convenient for both of us. The president of the Chamber of Commerce was particularly remarkable and humbling in this regard. The former Vice President of the country came to his office only for my interview despite being unwell. He had asked for a tailored checklist in advance and on the interview day handed me a write-up (in long hand) containing his responses to the issues! He allowed me fifteen minutes to read it before sitting down to do the interview. Similarly, a senior civil servant (Director of Trade) did not have enough time for the interview because of a crowded diary. He was key to my study as he had served in the ministry since 1977. Because of his willingness to talk with me, the interview was held in three separate sessions each lasting half an hour. In between the sessions he attended other scheduled meetings. Such was the level of his commitment.

Networking and knowledge accumulation

The fieldwork has expanded the network of professional colleagues and enabled personal contacts with people I would never get to meet in my life. In addition to this, I know the politics and the economy of my country much better now than before having heard from what I would call the 'movers and shakers'**.**

7 Some Reflections on Methodological Implications

A few methodological implications can be highlighted from the experience presented above[7].

- Empirical historical studies in the institutional tradition require developing sequences of causation and tracing pathways. Gaps in the data as those implied by missing boxes and files have the potential to weaken claims relating to causation or cause disjuncture in the pathways. This implies that there is need for diversifying sources of information in order in order to fill in data gaps and enhance the validity of the evidence.
- Studies covering long periods of time will, of necessity, rely more on availability of documents especially primary records. However, in many developing countries, information management systems are relatively undeveloped. Consequently, record keeping and retrieval systems are the first hurdles to get over. Thus the search for documents requires an eclectic approach in establishing potential custodians of some records which in turn requires more time.
- A combination of historical institutionalism and elite theory in the empirical approach provides an in-built mechanism for validating data, but also complement each other in that elites lead researchers to documents that would have been missed and documents help identify more key informants that can provide more information or clarify certain issues. But a more successful use of this combined approach requires at least two things of the researcher: knowing as much relevant history of the country before embarking on fieldwork and providing enough time for field work.
- Access to information, often has to be negotiated with all sorts of gate keepers. Researchers need to know the rules governing access to information and records for the country of their concern. This is critical for purposes of determining the duration for field work but also for deciding the time-span for the study.
- A key issue to negotiating access to information that is not yet in the public domain is the ability to develop trust with the custodians of the information. Undertaking to adhere to ethical standards is important. Informally, however, developing an 'insider' status as the situation demands can be helpful. It boosts the trust and confidence of respondents and custodians of records but may raise ethical issues.

8 Conclusion

Doing this historical institutionalist study in Malawi was challenged by the paucity of documents or records. While there are several aspects that require improvement in record keeping, management and retrieval, the systems are not completely hopeless although the transaction costs are obviously high. In my present research I got enough material evidence to map out the institutional and organisational patterns of SBRs in Malawi in the context of changing political institutional set-ups.

There are daunting infrastructural challenges especially with respect to transport, telecommunication and energy (electricity) sectors. All these combine to scale up the costs of doing research as time requirements increase and expenses are relatively higher. Despite attitudinal challenges of some respondents, Malawians are generally warm and willing to help especially when researchers demonstrate seriousness in their approach.

Like many other research ventures, my study has data gaps but I am confident that I have enough data to bring out patterns of state-business relations over time and contribute to the broader theoretical objective of the study.

[7] I am grateful to participants at the University of York Politics Research Forum held on 15th September and chaired by Dr. Adrian Leftwich where these issues were raised and discussed.

Reference

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