

China's 'parliament building gift' to Malawi: Exploring its rationale, tensions and asymmetrical gains

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On 26 May 2010 at 2.05 pm, Members of Parliament in Malawi sat down on blue decked seats in their oval-shaped debate chamber resplendent with shiny lights on its dome – the largest in Lilongwe. Visitors looked down from the gallery located just above the members' sitting area. These guests would have cleared security at the imposing reception checkpoint facing the Presidential Way, walked through the semi-circular amphitheatre, jogged up the steep steps of the Roman-style colonnade, passed through security scans at the main building entrance, waited for directions in the large foyer, registered and then taken the steps to the gallery located on the first floor accompanied by smartly dressed protocol officers. On the day, the First Deputy Speaker was presiding and sat in the Speaker's throne facing ruling party members to his right and opposition his left. Behind him, the Malawi coat of arms grafted on the wall augmented the Speaker's presiding authority. Parliament was congregating to debate President Bingu wa Mutharika's State of the Nation Address which had been delivered the previous Friday to coincide with the inauguration of the Chinese government-aided, sprawling new parliament building complex.

In preambles to their floor speeches, parliamentarians from across the political divide, and displaying rare unanimity, were gushing in their appraisal of the building. For example, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Hon Munthali (Karonga South) started the ball rolling when he congratulated President Mutharika 'for making it possible that the New Parliament Building is really built and I am among the first Members of Parliament to occupy it. This will always keep my memories fresh in future'.¹ Not to be outdone, Hon Chitete (Mchinji North East) from the official opposition Malawi Congress

¹ Parliament of Malawi, *Hansard*, 26 May 2010.

Party (MCP) also weighed in: 'Thank you Mr First Deputy Speaker, Sir, for recognizing me to make my contributions to this unique, unforgettable, and remarkable meeting of Parliament ... this magnificent Parliament building reminds me of that of King Solomon in the Bible which was built for the Lord. But this one is constructed for Honourable Members like you and me. Glory be to God'.²

This Chinese-funded and constructed parliament building which so enchanted the Malawi parliamentarians was not an isolated act of benevolence by China, but part of a larger phenomenon across Africa. By the mid-2010s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) had financed the construction and refurbishment of fifteen parliament complexes for African countries (Wang and Wang, 2015). These landmark buildings are delivered in complete aid project form (Cheng and Taylor, 2017) and have reshaped the outlook of African capital cities and restructured how legislatures function and are perceived. The involvement of the PRC and Chinese construction firms in these parliament buildings includes design, construction, furnishing and maintenance. In other words, China is engaged in an enterprise of donating complete parliament buildings to African countries. Upon completion, the PRC sends a senior official to symbolically hand over the building to the beneficiary government.

However, this handover does not mark the total exit of the Chinese in the building. They usually continue to maintain it through subsequent three-year cycle bilateral agreements. This marked interest by China in African parliaments read together with recipient states' unbridled enthusiasm for receiving such symbolic buildings with a central role in national identity formation and articulation as gifts raises new questions critical in understanding contemporary China-Africa relations and the development of representative political institutions in Africa. Within academic literature there is scant reference to Chinese-funded parliament buildings save for their inclusion in the totalising characterisation of 'vanity' construction projects being undertaken by the PRC in the continent (Mohan and Power, 2008; Will, 2012). This scholarship focuses on the motivations of China in dispensing such aid to African countries. Examples include Ali Askouri (2007), Robert Rotberg (2008) and Gernot Pehnelt (2007). While David Shinn (2009) highlights the similarities between US and Chinese interests in aid architecture, Giles Mohan and Marcus Power (2008: 7) contend that China seemed 'happy to work on projects that were effectively inessential monuments to the glory of the African regimes they worked with, reflecting the political or psychological needs of African leaders'. Examples of the 'monuments' they refer to are parliament buildings

2 Ibid.

in the Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Malawi. Their argument centres on African leaders' penchant for commissioning large infrastructural projects for political expediency. A poignant illustration of this profligacy is the construction of mega-sports stadia which Rachel Will argues remain more as white elephants than active symbols of soft power (Will, 2012).

While I agree with their general point that China often funds vanity projects in Africa, this characterisation does not hold for parliament buildings – in three ways. First, parliament buildings, from a conceptual standpoint, are key-point state structures which cannot be reduced to vanity structures as they symbolise the state, the people and the political system (for more on state buildings and statehood see Julia Gallagher et al., 2021). The size and scale of the Chinese-built parliament buildings conform to the standard of structures of this magnitude.³ Second, the buildings are ongoing political concerns as evidenced by their functionality and the direct participation of the PRC in their maintenance. Third, from an institutional angle, the buildings embody a political institution that in theory and performatively imposes restrictions on, rather than embellishes executive authority,⁴ hence, their functioning cannot be attributed merely to the whims of the so-called 'authoritarian' ruling elites (Emmanuel K. Ofori-Sarpong makes a similar argument in Chapter 2 of this collection).

At the time of writing, China was constructing new parliamentary complexes for the Republic of the Congo and Zimbabwe, and also renovating the Gabon building which had been ravaged by fire during anti-government demonstrations in 2016.⁵ I seek to understand the PRC motivation, the rationale for acceptance of such aid by the recipient African states and the implications of this specific type of aid. In this chapter I contribute to this endeavour by drawing on an ethnographic study of the Chinese-funded Malawi parliamentary building in Lilongwe. In it, I conducted participant observation in the parliament for forty-five days where I observed quotidian practices and took pictures in and around the building. I also use data collected in July to August 2019 from interviews with political elites, parliamentary staff bureaucrats, civic society leaders and scholars. Finally, I draw on data from the parliament building press reports, speeches by political elites and parliamentary Hansards.⁶

³ See Hicks (2006); PRC (2019).

⁴ In the separation of powers doctrine, one of the functions of the Legislature (parliament) is to scrutinise the work done by the executive (government).

⁵ I am exploring this further through my PhD research, which looks at two other Chinese-funded and -constructed parliament building projects – in Lesotho and Zimbabwe (Batsani-Ncube, forthcoming).

⁶ Hansards are the verbatim reports of parliamentary proceedings.

In the chapter I argue that China's decision to finance and construct Malawi's parliament building was directly a function of its foreign policy strategy of promoting its One-China principle by severing Taiwan-Malawi relations. As a corollary to the above, the choice of fully financing the construction of the parliament building was also informed by earlier Taiwanese involvement in the project. However, the intense desire by Malawian ruling elites for a purpose-built parliament building was an albatross that weakened Malawi's bargaining power. Specifically, I find that the manner in which the building project was carried out gave disproportionate power to the Chinese side, undermined key in-country institutional arrangements, disregarded in-country skills and sowed seeds of distrust of China's intentions in Malawi.

Evidence from this research puts into context this puzzling Chinese investment in multi-party parliament buildings. I show that this development is actually in line with the PRC's evolving technique of expanding its political outreach by engaging opposition political elites in addition to ruling parties. My findings also lend credence to Mohan and Power's (2008) rumination about the extent of Chinese involvement in internal African politics. This is because its investment in parliament buildings such as the one in Lilongwe has the 'echoes of earlier merchants and imperialists, who insisted their interests were largely commercial, but who ended up becoming more and more mired in internal institutional building and policing' (Mohan and Power, 2008: 37).

I have divided the chapter into four mutually reinforcing sections. First, I foreground the parliament building complex, showing where it is located in Lilongwe, describing its components and weaving in user experience. Second, I show Chinese Government involvement in the parliament building project by tracing the negotiations and consummation of Malawi-China diplomatic relations. Third, I demonstrate the tensions in the construction process. I show how China and its nominated construction firm had *carte blanche* powers in the execution of the project, laying the ground for asymmetrical gains in the relationship. Fourth, I explain factors that led to Malawi political elites to allow China a free hand in the construction of the parliament building. I also discuss its implications in the context of the building's user experience.

'The house that Bingo built': A tour of the parliament building

The new parliament building is strategically located near the Lilongwe City centre area, foregrounding the Government complex (Capital Hill) and adjacent to the Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda Mausoleum and also (since 2015) the President's Hotel and Bingo wa Mutharika Convention Centre (BICC). This location places parliament at the epicentre of Lilongwe. The complex



Figure 3.1 Entrance of the Malawi Parliament building in Lilongwe (Innocent Batsani-Ncube, July 2019).

consists of three constituent parts, namely the reception checkpoint (figure 3.1), the amphitheatre and the main building that houses the debate chamber and offices. The most visible part to the ordinary citizens is the reception checkpoint manned by soldiers and other security personnel to regulate entry and exit. The checkpoint is in front of a well-manicured lawn and flower beds and faces the busy Presidential Way, Lilongwe's main boulevard which takes one to the Kamuzu Presidential Palace to the east and into the residential areas to the west. It is in the form of a flat-roofed structure clad in shiny Chinese grey tiles, with the centre that marks the high point of the roof inscribed with the words 'Parliament Building' in gold and with pillars on each side.

Most ordinary people I engaged in Lilongwe's townships have a mental picture of this reception checkpoint when they speak of the Parliament building's aesthetics because this is what they have seen when passing by the complex. The reception checkpoint point acts as an enabling gate for those with privilege and courage to enter. However, others see it as an inhibiting palisade for most citizens. Conspicuously, the China aid logo is emblazoned outside this entrance wall, signifying in-country acquiescence to the PRC's branding of the parliament building gift for all and sundry to see.

The next constituent part of this complex is the amphitheatre which is designed to host petitions, deputations and public gatherings during important

events such as the official opening of parliament. To capture this representative component, as one walks past the reception checkpoint into the compound, the amphitheatre is heralded by a ground map of Malawi on the left. This map shows that Malawi is divided into three regions (North, Central and South); that the regions are further divided into twenty-eight districts; and that the districts are demarcated into 193 constituencies. Each of these 193 constituencies is represented on the map by one stone brought by the sitting MP at the time of inaugurating the complex. At the centre of the arena stands a bust of Mutharika that was designed and sculpted in China. The amphitheatre stands are decorated with Roman-style colonnades and there is a permanently mounted public address system installed by the Chinese contractors to facilitate the projection of speeches from the main building for people listening outside. This central point also leads one to the pick-up and drop-off zone for members and up a few steps to the security-manned entrance of the main building. This is where the plaque showing that the building was inaugurated by the Malawian President on 21 May 2010 has been placed.

From the colonnades, the next part of the complex is the main building. It is a double-storey structure (plus basement) that houses the debate chamber, members' lounges, offices and printing press. The debate chamber is the centre-piece of the main building. It is a carpeted, oval-shaped auditorium with a dome and has 243 blue-draped members' seats arranged in a horse shoe format, a visitors' gallery on the first floor, and media booths.⁷ The dome is revered in Malawi's political circles and represents an 'inverted calabash'⁸ or a pot⁹ which denotes Malawian hospitality. While the dome gives the chamber a striking aesthetic quality, it is a source of consternation for sitting MPs because of its propensity to leak during the rainy season (Khamula, 2020). The Chinese contractors who still hover around the complex as part of the maintenance agreement between China and Malawi have been mending the dome for the past ten years with no durable success. Abutting the debate chamber are two lounges, one for ordinary Members of Parliament and the other for cabinet ministers.

Apart from the debate chamber, the bulk of functional spaces in the building are reserved for offices. The allocation of office space provides a window to partly understand users' experience. For example, part of the basement with

⁷ The colour of the seats caused friction during the early days of the building because blue is the colour of the ruling DPP. The opposition felt the colours were chosen by the Chinese to glorify the DPP. However, they were not successful in changing the colours as the government would not budge.

⁸ Interview with a former Speaker of Parliament, Lilongwe, 10 July 2019.

⁹ Interview with an architect, Lilongwe, 11 July 2019.

limited aeration inappropriately houses the printing unit. The staffers there contend with health-threatening fumes produced by their heavy-duty printing machines. In mitigation, the parliament provides milk to the printing press staffers. However, their colleagues in the Hansard department with whom they share the basement have not yet benefited from this amelioration.¹⁰ The locus of power in the building is on the second floor. This floor has offices of the presiding officers and senior parliament administrators. The red-carpeted foyer and mini reception manned by security officials is an indicator of the special status of this floor. However, the construction flaws in the building are felt by those in the basement and senior officials alike. For instance, the ceramic floor tiles occasionally become dislodged because of the Chinese contractors' favoured use of cement as opposed to durable tile adhesive mixture. The building is also intermittently enveloped by a foul smell which a presiding officer I spoke to diplomatically referred to as a 'plumbing challenge'.¹¹ According to a parliament technician, the plumbing problem is due to the 'initial poor workmanship' by the Chinese contractor.¹²

Flashback: basis for the shift, the negotiations and China's motivations

The new parliament building was a product of the shift in Malawi's relations from Taiwan to the PRC and a powerful representation of this transition. The shift was a result of two forces: political realism driven by a desire to extract economic benefits from mainland China and President Mutharika's idiosyncratic preferences. The stupendous growth of the PRC as a global player made the switch from Taiwan attractive and inevitable.¹³ President Mutharika coveted the switch because it enabled him to obtain a powerful patron.

Clearly China's rise and political realism played an important role in shaping the shift from Taiwan to the PRC. However, beyond this truism, I also found some localised factors such as Taiwan's association with the previous one-party regime. In Malawi, Taiwan was heavily tainted by its long association with the dictatorial Hastings Banda regime and the prevailing sentiment at the resumption of multi-party politics was in favour of abandoning relations with Taiwan. For example, one civil society leader complained that:

Taiwan was part of supporting the repressive regime. Some of the paramilitary wing of [Banda's] MCP was being trained in Taiwan. So,

¹⁰ Interview with a senior parliament officer, Lilongwe, 8 August 2019.

¹¹ Interview with a parliament presiding officer, Lilongwe, 28 August 2019.

¹² Multiple conversations with parliament technicians, Lilongwe, 5 August 2019.

¹³ Interview with a senior academic, Zomba, 20 August 2019.

it was a country that was associated with negative aspects which defeated the values of democracy that Malawians had strived for.¹⁴

In addition, the feeling of antipathy towards Taiwan in Malawi had gained currency partly due to their low aid levels. For example, Taiwan's support of irrigation projects such as rice in selected parts of the country, constructing a medical facility and providing a handful of educational scholarships, seemed scanty when compared to what the PRC was offering their allies. Some felt that 'even if those were put together [Malawi was] just being manipulated for nothing'.¹⁵ It is within this context that the relations between the PRC and Malawi were mooted, negotiated and consummated.

The initiation of discussions between Malawi and the PRC was a mutual exercise. While the PRC was covertly making approaches to Malawi through back channels, the Government of Malawi itself started seriously considering the switch around 2006, in the middle of Mutharika's first term.¹⁶

The PRC approach in Malawi was in synch with its documented strategy of enticing African countries with huge financial packages in exchange for recognising its One-China principle. Timothy Rich (2009), notes that in 2004, 'China offered Angola an aid package nearly matching an assistance package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but with no constraints and followed this with a US\$9 billion loan in 2006' (Rich, 2009: 16). Rich correctly concludes that this kind of support that he dubs 'the Chinese Marshall Plan' had the effect of transforming the diplomatic battle by raising the cost for recognition. This seemed the case for Malawi's ruling elites who were palpably enchanted by the PRC's manoeuvres, as a former Malawi cabinet minister reminisces:

It began not to make sense to me why we were still having a relationship with Taiwan versus forty-eight countries having relations with Mainland China ... As it turned out I discovered that [in] the relationship before up until that time the presidents before benefited a lot from the relationship with Taiwan personally, not the country.¹⁷

It is in this context that President Mutharika assembled a team of senior government officials led by the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joyce Banda to engage the PRC and weigh the offers being made.¹⁸

¹⁴ Interview with a veteran civic society leader, Lilongwe, 16 July 2019.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview with a former Foreign Minister, Lilongwe, 16 July 2019.

¹⁷ Interview with a former Foreign Affairs minister, Lilongwe, 12 July 2019.

¹⁸ Ibid.

One of the items on the negotiation table was Malawi's request for funding for a new parliament building. This project was at that time being funded by Taiwan and, from 2005 to 2007, Taiwan had only disbursed US\$5 million towards the project.¹⁹ Progress was slow, the political elites were not happy and the parliament operations were in limbo. This background provided the opportunity for the PRC to practically show Malawi that it would not only take over the previous Taiwan-backed project, but better it. In this instance, the PRC tabled a US\$50 million grant which would construct the parliament building within eighteen months. In addition, the PRC indicated to the Malawi authorities its desire to improve the plans, enlarging the building and ensuring that an iconic parliament would be constructed.²⁰ Here a former cabinet minister noted that:

When a decision was made to switch to mainland China, our condition too as Malawi Government was to ask the Chinese Government to take over this project (Parliament Building) which had the initial funding of US\$5 million from Taiwan. The Chinese Government readily accepted and they agreed to look at our drawings, improve on them and construct in the aspect of a grant. So, there was a good amount of grant in that year and we also somehow changed our drawings because now there was money enough to cater for the project.²¹

However, the Taiwanese were not willing to give up their sphere of influence without a fight. At that time, Malawi was their biggest diplomatic partner in Africa and they made sure the PRC efforts were, according to one official, 'all frustrated'.²² This is because 'Taiwan [got] to know and [threw] all sorts of spanners including interfering with the efforts'.²³ This influenced the nature of the discussions between Malawi and the PRC. They were held secretly, centrally controlled and took a conspiratorial character. For example, in the negotiations held in China, members of the Malawi delegation did not travel together but flew to different locations first and found their way to the appointed rendezvous.²⁴ One such incident occurred in December 2007. Mutharika dispatched a delegation of two ministers and Foreign Affairs officials to Beijing to sign a memorandum of understanding as a precursor to the establishment of diplomatic relations.

¹⁹ Interview with a former Speaker of Parliament, Lilongwe, 10 July 2019.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with a former Foreign Affairs minister, Lilongwe, 12 July 2019.

²² Interview with a Foreign Affairs Ministry official, Lilongwe, 16 July 2019.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

When the Taiwanese authorities gathered information about the PRC-Malawi engagement, then Foreign Minister James Huang summoned Malawi's ambassador to Taiwan, Thengo Maloya, who provided a diplomatic double-speak refutation that 'the relationship between Taiwan and Malawi is stable, and I think it's stronger' (Hsiu-chuan, 2007). He further pointed out that 'he was not sure if the two senior ministers were planning to go to Beijing, but he knew for sure that they had not been instructed by Mutharika to do so' (Hsiu-chuan, 2007). However, by the 2008 new year the die was cast. Huang initially made overtures to Malawi by dangling a US\$6 billion package but no response was forthcoming (Wines, 2008). He then made a last-ditch effort of flying to Lilongwe on 2 January to meet Banda and Mutharika in a bid to shore up the relations.

However, Malawi's authorities rebuffed his overtures and refused to meet, forcing him to re-route on 4 January to Swaziland,²⁵ one of Taiwan's longest-standing allies. This left Banda to announce that: 'We have decided to switch from Taiwan to mainland China after careful consideration on the benefits that we will be getting from mainland China' (BBC, 2008). The nature of these negotiations and the agreement thereof has had a legacy in Malawi. In particular, the actual agreement establishing diplomatic relations between Malawi and the PRC remains a secret, not recorded and kept at the Treaty office in the Ministry of Foreign and International Cooperation like other diplomatic agreements. A senior official in the Ministry only recalls seeing the Chinese language version of the agreement in Beijing.²⁶

Upon reflection, the concession to take over the construction of the parliament building provided China with an opportunity to project its influence in Malawi through its parliament. In contemporary Malawian politics, parliament is multi-party in membership and character. This means that one finds the dominant political factions in parliament, making it an important arena to exert influence. Specifically, all four political parties that have alternately governed Malawi, namely the DPP, the MCP, the People's Party (PP) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) have a presence in the Legislature. This is the only place where one can find these political factions together. Having built the country's parliament, China has created a congenial place to meet and cultivate good relations across a range of parties, in the knowledge that future elections may deliver a change of party in charge.²⁷ This reasoning

²⁵ Swaziland is now known as Eswatini.

²⁶ Interview with a Foreign Affairs official, Lilongwe, 16 July 2019.

²⁷ In June 2020, government changed hands from the DPP to an MCP-led coalition government. The Chinese Ambassador was the first to pay a courtesy call on the new President.

is described in broader Chinese-Africa political engagement scholarship. In a study on the Communist Party of China's International Department (CPC-ID)²⁸ David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman (2012) note that the CPC-ID engages both the ruling (*guozhengdang*) and opposition (*fanduidang*) parties. Part of this engagement corresponds with work of the foreign committee of the PRC's Parliament, called the National People's Congress (NPC).²⁹

At least part of the rationale behind Malawi's Chinese-funded parliament building can be understood from the perspective of this work of the NPC. This is given more credence by the fact that at the commissioning of the new parliament building, China deployed as chief guest Li Zhaoxing, the then-chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China (Zhaoxing, 2010). When viewed from this angle, the PRC through the NPC is engaged in forging far-reaching political relationships with diverse Malawian political elites. This strategy protects Chinese interests in Malawi in the long run because it hedges against changes of government or party turnover.

The construction phase: carte blanche powers to Chinese contractors

When China took over the parliament building project, they not only displaced Taiwan, but fundamentally changed the project's local implementation modalities. Malawi's extant institutional framework for public construction projects was truncated, or in some cases blatantly flouted. In particular, China varied the original plan with limited input from the Public Works department, unilaterally appointed a Chinese construction firm and exclusively sourced building materials and key artisans from China. The Chinese side had full control of the labour recruitment, contractor supervision and post-construction maintenance planning.

Their first act was to push out local architects who had designed the building and the local contractors who were at the construction site. The MNA consortium³⁰ of architects who were project consultants, and Terrastone and Deco, the contractors, were all asked to cease operations. The architects were requested to 'hand over every document pertaining to construction of

²⁸ The CPC-ID is an organ that was set up in 1978 to lead the charge of conducting the CPC's political and diplomatic work.

²⁹ The NPC Foreign committee works at 'strengthening and improving the mechanism for regular exchanges with other parliaments and congresses' (see Eisenmann, 2008: 241).

³⁰ The MNA consortium comprised three architectural firms namely MD Initiative, Norman & Dawbarn and ABC Design Associates.

parliament building'.³¹ This included 'the construction drawings and specification [that] the government passed on to the Chinese Government for them to proceed with the construction'.³² When I interviewed players in Malawi's construction industry, I got a sense that as much as they welcomed the Chinese funding, they would have preferred a situation where the original Malawian contractors and consultants were retained in the project.³³

The implication of this approach was that local companies were deprived of the opportunity to participate in the subsequent development of the parliament building project. More regrettably, their initial contribution was expunged from the official Malawi Government literature on the project. This revised history of the parliament building project that emphasises China's role is inconsistent with photographs taken of the site before the Chinese arrived.³⁴

This hostile takeover, ostensibly supported by the government, is still a sore point for concerned parties in Malawi. More importantly it provides a concrete example of Chinese *modus operandi* in delivering their aid. This government support for the removal of Malawian companies from the construction site was a decision that came from the very top echelons of the Malawi Government.³⁵

Civil servants involved in the project welcomed Chinese support but would have preferred to continue with the original guidelines. However, they allege that their advice was not taken on board.³⁶ This led to an acrimonious settlement between the government and the original Malawian contractors. To cap this ignominious exit, the contractors were paid via promissory notes instead of legal tender. One senior architect, who was following the developments, sums up the Chinese takeover:

The sad part is the fact that after the takeover of the Chinese Government, Malawians had very, very minimal participation in the project ... All the architects and engineers, they all came from China. The contractor was also a Chinese company. Materials they came also from China including even the part of the labours or unskilled labour came from China.³⁷

31 Interview with original architect and designer, Lilongwe, 11 July 2019.

32 Ibid.

33 FGD with officials from Malawi Building and Allied Industries, Lilongwe, 12 August 2019.

34 See Victor Ndagha Kaonga's blog of 30 August 2007: <http://ndagha.blogspot.com/2007/08/new-malawis-parliament-building.html> [Accessed 31 January 2022].

35 Interview with former Public Works ministry official, Lilongwe, 25 July 2019.

36 Ibid.

37 Interview with senior architect, Lilongwe, 11 July 2019.

This displacement of local skills and competence, and the use of imported materials, contradicts China's win-win cooperation rhetoric which is deployed to portray its support as different from Western counterparts. The Chinese funding of the parliament building might have been a victory for diplomatic strategy, but it displaced Malawian architects and contractors from the project, causing a direct loss of jobs and the opportunity to be part of shaping an important state building.

The Chinese Government was exclusively in charge of appointing a contractor who in turn procured construction materials and recruited requisite labour. Once the Chinese contractor was appointed, he undertook a complete consolidation of the character of the project as China-driven. The initial plan by the earlier designers to give the parliament a façade which depicted Malawian traditions by integrating locally available materials was abandoned. For example, plans to use local Dedza tiles gave way to Chinese vinyl tiles on the facade. The Chinese-supplied building materials for the project enjoyed duty-free status. This was considered as Malawi's contribution since the financial support was being given as complete grant-aid.

However, the quantification, transportation and accounting of the materials left a lot to be desired and created opportunities for leakages. Speaking to officials in the Customs section of the Malawi Revenue Authority (MRA), I found out that bills of quantities were sometimes written in Chinese so could not be read by Malawian officials. In addition to this complexity, the building material was brought into Malawi in batches and through more than three different ports of entry. This made it challenging to reconcile the submitted bills of quantities, amounts of materials imported and what was actually needed at the construction site. The mid-ranking officers at the MRA told me that, in the absence of a bonded warehouse, it was difficult not to rule out the possibility of leakages in the form of more materials brought into the country under the duty-free dispensation.

Moreover, the contractor-controlled labour recruitment and as a result most of the skilled workers came from China. I spoke to informants working in relevant offices in Public Works³⁸ and Finance ministries³⁹ to get an overview of the process of obtaining authorisation to work in Malawi under this project. The contractor would produce a protocol labour requirement and a list of names of Chinese nationals who needed work visas. These lists were supposed to clearly show the skillset brought by expatriate workers and the duration of their stay. However, it was practically difficult to enforce this provision because over and above the project's 'special status', the protocols and lists were written in

³⁸ Interview with a former Public Works ministry official, Lilongwe, 25 July 2019.

³⁹ Interview with debt and aid official, Lilongwe, 18 July 2019.

Chinese and there was no capacity in the Public Works Office to interpret the documents. The documents would then be sent to the Treasury, a department in the Ministry of Finance, so that a cover note could be appended for final submission to the immigration department which issues work permits. This process did not take place as described since the Public Works Ministry resorted to only asking the contractor to submit estimated numbers of employees they would bring. This loophole resulted in semi-skilled labour being brought from China. An informant who was actively involved in the project pointed out that some of the personnel brought from China were deployed to do menial tasks such as being night watchmen.⁴⁰ Moreover, a conversation I had with local artisans in two different settings, as well as officers from the Public Works Ministry, showed that the Malawian artisans who were recruited for the project were rated as semi-skilled workers and received work and remuneration which they considered as less than their worth.⁴¹

Contrary to China's rhetoric of mutual partnership and sharing expertise with African countries, this scenario provided credence to how this Chinese Government-aided project failed the skills transfer test. A former Public Works official reflecting on some of the problems associated with labour recruitment and morale told me that:

The other problem which we had was because all workers were from China. Here it was only labourers. Sometimes they wanted to suppress them but our Ministry of Labour used to visit the place to make sure that they were happy. But there was no transfer of anything or skills, there was no skills transfer because they were mostly using labourers.⁴²

This approach possibly planted seeds for animosity as the Malawians I spoke with, especially those involved in the construction sector, were distraught at how locals had been muscled out of the building project. While the parliament building has beautified Lilongwe and provides residents with a sense of pride, it is equally a constant reminder of the ill-treatment endured by local companies, artisans and semi-skilled workers.

Implications of the blank-cheque approach to Malawi

Having shown how China had free rein in implementing the parliament building project, in this section I explain the reasons for and implications of Malawi ruling elites' blank-cheque approach. In the first place, Malawi's government

⁴⁰ Interview with a former Public Works ministry official, 25 July 2019.

⁴¹ FGD with artisans, Lilongwe, 5 August 2019.

⁴² Interview with a former Public Works ministry official, Lilongwe, 25 July 2019.

accepted China's financial and material support because it desperately needed a purpose-built parliament building. Since the capital moved from Zomba to Lilongwe in 1975 (Potts, 1985), the Legislature had lacked a permanent home. Initially, Malawi's parliament had remained in Zomba when the other arms of the state moved. The Zomba parliament building, inaugurated in 1957, was meant for not more than thirty members. With the increase in membership to 193, and the resumption of multi-party politics in 1994, parliament needed a bigger meeting facility. In 2001, then President Bakili Muluzi suggested that parliament move to the new State House in Lilongwe (now called the Kamuzu Palace) a 300-room presidential palace built during the Kamuzu Banda era.

At the new State House, the banqueting hall was transformed into a parliamentary chamber and tea rooms were converted into committee rooms. This adaptation was not without difficulty. For instance, the banqueting hall was not suitable for plenary sittings because:

The guest and the Member were only separated by a very small barrier ... You have gone there to watch but, in the end, you are not very far from the Member who is sitting in front of you. So, you were all like Members because they couldn't do much about it and it became very inconvenient to Members and yet the rules of the House have in their thinking that these barriers should be clear.⁴³

The State House tea rooms were not suitable for use as committee rooms especially for the larger portfolio and oversight committees such as the Public Accounts and Public Appointment Committees, so parliament incurred further costs by using hotels for some of its business.

Alongside these practical reasons, Mutharika had political reasons for leveraging Chinese Government support to construct the parliament building. Politically, Mutharika was a 'big ideas President' who was keen on monument building,⁴⁴ like other African presidents such as Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire (see Gallagher and Yah Ariane N'djoré in Chapter 5, this collection, and Nana Akufo-Addo in Ghana (see Ofori-Sarpong in Chapter 2, this collection). In retrospect, this explains a plethora of signature construction projects done during his tenure. When I spoke to elites and ordinary people in Lilongwe, Mutharika was described by his admirers as 'a visionary', a man keen on development who 'built' many important landmarks in Malawi which include the Kamuzu Mausoleum, the Parliament Building and a new

⁴³ Interview with a former Clerk of Parliament, Lilongwe, 4 July 2019.

⁴⁴ Speaking to Malawians, they are most likely to point out a number of Mutharika's construction projects which include state buildings, tobacco processing factories and housing units.

university. Architects who were tasked with designing these buildings report that he was actively involved in the initial design process and followed all the subsequent steps with keen interest.⁴⁵ Extrapolating from this interest, it is understandable why the funding of the parliament building was a central condition put forward by the Malawian negotiation team with Beijing.

Mutharika gave prominence to this issue by repeatedly mentioning this promise to deliver a new parliament building at rallies.⁴⁶ The construction phase took place during the 2009 electoral season where it was an important reference point for Mutharika and his newly formed DPP.

Delivering the parliament building in record time enhanced Mutharika's political capital especially in the context of delivering physical symbols of 'development'. This is because the parliament building project, as Malawi-China's first and biggest undertaking, provided a backdrop during the elections on what the relationship could potentially produce. Mutharika received two-thirds of the vote, making his the largest victory in the era of Malawi's multi-party politics. Some of the major reasons that have been attributed to this success include this physical Chinese support and the President's handling of the food security situation during the first term.⁴⁷ Moreover, Mutharika's speech at the official commissioning of the building shows that he was personally and politically invested in the project. He said: 'I am delighted that my dream has come true. The construction of this parliament [building] is an extremely important milestone for the Malawi Government and I am glad that China has delivered its promises in time' (Xinhua, 2010).

Notwithstanding the President's gushing praise, the construction of the parliament building project produced a series of negative impacts on Malawian agency. The exclusive manner in which China controlled the design, funding construction and subsequently the maintenance of the building suggests the side-lining of Malawian expertise and internal public works processes. Such Chinese dominance in Malawi's public works arena undermined the country's control of its parliamentary habitat. A Malawian senior academic reasoned that, 'if you have the Chinese building your parliament, you are basically surrendering a huge degree of your sovereignty'.⁴⁸ This perspective is based on the fact that the building does not yet fully belong to the country due to the continued presence and involvement of China in it. The management contract between the two governments still centres the Chinese companies

⁴⁵ Interview with a senior architect, Lilongwe, 11 July 2019.

⁴⁶ Interview with civic society leaders, Lilongwe, 23 July 2019; FGD with traditional leaders, Biwi, 14 August 2019.

⁴⁷ Interview with a civic society leader, Lilongwe, 16 July 2019.

⁴⁸ Interview with a senior academic, Zomba, 20 August 2019.

in maintaining the building.⁴⁹ This reality is also a legacy of the manner in which the project was carried out. For example, in the maintenance works carried out since 2010, most materials were Chinese, as were the contractors.⁵⁰ This situation undercuts the state public works bureaucracy and limits the extent which Malawi and Malawians can have a say in the maintenance of the building.

One very practical legacy – and headache for the current users – is the fact that some of the building’s signage is written in Chinese. This has made it difficult for local engineers employed by government to fully understand the nooks and crannies of the building – an important attribute which would help in domesticating the maintenance its in the long run.⁵¹ While the replacement materials continue to be sourced from China by the contractor, opportunities for the construction industry in Malawi are limited.⁵²

With regard to the user experience, I found out that, while people appreciated and celebrated having a purpose-built structure, their non-involvement in the earlier phases of the project had a negative impact. Most of my informants who were present in 2010 when the building was commissioned mentioned that their first experience in the building was when it had been completed. Their initial reaction was that it was a magnificent building,⁵³ looked ‘stunning’⁵⁴ from outside and they were looking forward to working from it. However, once they moved in they ‘realised that it had so many shortfalls’.⁵⁵ For example, commenting on the lack of a security screen between the visitors’ gallery and the members’ seating area, a senior parliamentary staffer regretted that:

The people who constructed this building never thought about the fact that when you are seated up there even a small book ... which weighs about 500 grams can be a potential danger to a Member of Parliament seated down there. There is an open space between the Members sitting down in the chamber and members of the public such that if somebody were to throw this book on the head of somebody, it can have disastrous effects.⁵⁶

49 Interview with a Foreign Affairs official, 16 July 2019.

50 Multiple conversations with Parliament maintenance staff, Lilongwe, 5 August 2019.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Focus group discussion with Malawi contractors, 12 August 2019.

53 Interview with a senior parliament officer, Lilongwe, 29 August 2019.

54 Interview with a parliament officer, Lilongwe, 12 August 2019.

55 Interview with a parliament officer, Lilongwe, 5 August 2019.

56 Interview with a senior parliament officer, Lilongwe, 8 August 2019.

This anxiety over the security limitations in the chamber has an indirect impact on making the chamber truly accessible to members of the public. For instance, in February 2020, parliamentary proceedings were halted after some MPs objected to the presence of prominent activists, Timothy Mtambo and Gift Trapence of the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (Kadzanja, 2020). Apart from the security dimension, other users feel constrained by the building. Staff in the printing press are stuck in the basement and, as indicated above, grapple with toxic fumes from the heavy-duty machines.

A senior official rationalised this anomaly by highlighting that the Chinese-built structure is the first phase and the second will house the printing press and other auxiliary offices.⁵⁷ Until that comes to pass, the user experience of the printing section remains clouded in smoke. Others also pointed out that the way the library was designed is not suitable for a parliamentary library.⁵⁸ This is because it was allocated one 'large' room too small to partition. This scenario has forced parliament management and officers and large stacks of books to share space with their clients. This shortage of space occurs in the context of a building that is designed with vast corridors which could have been reduced to optimise work areas. These are examples of the experiences of working in the building. The positive feelings of a separate and friendly work environment for the Legislature are tempered by uneasiness due to its limitations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I leveraged the Chinese-funded parliament building in Malawi to explore China-Africa relations, Chinese foreign aid delivery in Africa and the extent of African state agency in engagements with big powers. I have shown that the implementation of this building project highlights the asymmetrical power between the donor and the recipient. Whereas the motivation for the building implies a mutually beneficial arrangement, the same cannot be said about the method of executing the project. The disproportionate power that China had in project management through exclusively determining the contractor, materials procurement and labour recruitment brings to the fore the larger question of the position of African states in determining the course of their development. Here, this is brought to bear through the ways in which Malawian companies were pushed out of the project to make exclusive way for those from China. In the chapter I have shown that, whereas the mind that conceived and initially designed the parliament building was Malawian, Chinese foreign aid had the effect of expunging this fact from history. This is

⁵⁷ Interview with a senior parliament official, 26 July 2019.

⁵⁸ Interview with a parliament official, Lilongwe, 5 July 2019.

why the extant materials related to the parliament building project incorrectly suggest the idea as Chinese – a version found even within official Malawi Government literature. I have also shown that the limited participation of Malawians in shaping the final product has had far-reaching implications. While it is a positive development that at least Malawi now has a purpose-built Parliament building that looks stunning from the outside, the users grapple with a dysfunctional structure that impacts their work. From the leaking chamber, the poorly designed library, the peeling tiles and the foul smell from the plumbing system, to the fume-filled printing section in the basement, the building simply is not as functional as the exterior veneer suggests.

Regarding the study of African states in their relation to China and other global players I have shown that the Malawi Parliament building project is a microcosm of China's new strategy of concrete investment in African governance architecture. There are already fifteen parliament buildings constructed and refurbished by the Chinese Government across the continent. Each has its own nuanced story, but I contend that the rudiments remain similar. This finding ignites an important discourse on the character of the ruling elites and the malleability of African states' institutional architecture. I have shown that the bureaucrats and attendant structures in Malawi were given less room to exercise their functions in a project whose conception was secret, and implementation laced by high politics. From this perspective, this chapter has modestly contributed to the age-old debate of the presence, utility and effectiveness of institutions in African states.