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Purpose-Built Parliament Buildings and the Institutionalisation of Parliament in Lesotho and Malawi

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Largely inspired by western donor good governance agenda, the current African parliaments literature has overlooked the significance of new parliament buildings that have been constructed by China and tends to place a premium on appraising the performance of parliaments and parliamentarians in executing their legislative, representation, oversight and constituency support. While understanding how parliaments perform is important and necessary, it does not sufficiently address all the ways in which these parliaments are establishing themselves as sustainable political institutions. By disregarding the new parliament buildings, the literature potentially undermines prospects of a wider understanding of the development of African parliamentary institutions. This article leverages the Chinese government donated parliament buildings in Lesotho and Malawi to make a theoretical and comparative case for the utility of discussing the concept of African legislative institutionalisation through and in juxtaposition to, the parliamentary built environment. I find that although there are stylistic and operational differences, the new parliament buildings in Lesotho and Malawi have provided a bespoke parliamentary built environment, enabled the expansion of a cohort of public officials working on legislative business and facilitated the procedural activities of the institution.

Keywords: Africa, Legislative Institutionalisation, Lesotho, Malawi, Parliaments

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, there have been two concurrent, and yet, parallel developments in and around African parliamentary institutions: (i) China has been donating parliament buildings to African countries and (ii) there has

been a marked increase in western donor inspired scholarly outputs on African parliaments. China has fully financed the construction and refurbishment of 15 parliamentary complexes in Africa (Wang and Wang, 2015). These buildings are funded from Chinese foreign aid and delivered in Complete Project Aid grant form (Cheng and Taylor, 2017). China is also responsible for furnishing the buildings, equipping them with relevant technologies, and their maintenance post-construction (Batsani-Ncube, forthcoming 2022). China provides these buildings to countries that do not yet have purpose-built structures of their own, meaning that once commissioned, these buildings provide beneficiary countries with legislative facilities for the first time. However, to date the impact of these buildings on the development of African parliaments has not yet been studied.

Concurrent with the emergence of the new parliamentary built environment, there has been an increase in African legislatures academic outputs. This academic work has been largely inspired and/or funded by western donors (Hudson and Wren, 2007; UK Africa All Party Parliamentary Group, 2008; Power, 2012; Cheeseman *et al.*, 2016). Prior to this, African parliaments were a largely ignored area of inquiry. Barkan's pioneering essay on the pages of the *Journal for Democracy* led to a chain of academic outputs not least being the commissioning of the first multi-country African Legislatures Project (ALP) (Barkan, 2008; Barkan, 2009; Barkan *et al.*, 2010; Mattes and Mozaffar, 2016). The ALP bold mission was to 'learn everything there is to know about how African Legislatures function' (Collord, 2018, p. 284). However, one of the main weaknesses of this literature is the limited reflection on the development trajectory of African parliamentary institutions, as well as the sociopolitical context that produces them.

Barkan and the ALP scholarship stems directly from the donor programmes aimed at promoting good governance in Africa. Barkan's linkage with the western donor policy includes working for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Forum for Democratic Studies in the National Endowment for Democracy and the World Bank (Cheeseman *et al.*, 2016). With funding from the World Bank, USAID, Department of International Development and the Heinrich Boll Foundation, Barkan, together with Robert Mattes and Shaheen Mozaffar, conceptualised the ALP to study legislative development in 17 African countries. Even before Barkan *et al.*, other scholars also towed the donor centric performance appraisal. Mohamed Salih's edited volume under the sponsorship of the Netherlands Institute of Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) emphasised the instrumental role of parliaments in deepening democracy (Salih, 2005). In the preface of the book, the then director of NIMD, Dr Roel von Meitjenfeld correctly mentions that research on African parliaments falls in the 'category of important social and political subjects that have not gained the attention they deserve from the academic and publishing community' (Salih, 2005, p. xvii).

This notwithstanding, the scholarship's link with western donor parliament strengthening programming has led to the narrow, albeit still important focus on African parliaments utility in the democratisation and good governance agenda pursued as foreign policy objectives in many donor countries. This would also explain why this scholarship has been oblivious to the new parliamentary built environment—because it is the Chinese doing the building and from a western donor conception, they are not seen as integral partners in liberal democratic leaning legislative development.

In this paper I suggest that these parliamentary facilities matter and that they offer us a platform to observe parliamentary institutionalisation in situ. In nascent parliamentary institutions this is hugely important because it provides granular details of how the exercise of introducing and sustaining legislative practice occurs. For example, in an environment where Parliament would meet in a presidential palace, such as in Malawi, the availability of independent facilities for parliamentarians to do their work can mark an increased sense of autonomy. Likewise, the routinisation of parliamentary practice by a cohort of officials working under one roof in a setting where previously there existed no specialised parliamentary bureaucracy potentially advances the institutionalisation of parliament.

The new parliament facilities do provide a vantage point to observe how the built environment enables the development of contemporary African parliamentary institutions. This paper leverages these new parliament buildings as a prism to understand how built environment is promoting the institutionalisation of parliament in the beneficiary countries. This paper does not deal with China's motives for constructing these buildings. I have dealt extensively with this aspect elsewhere.[1] Instead, the focus is on how these buildings once constructed are shaping the manner in which the legislature works in the beneficiary countries. Read this way, this is a contribution to mainstream legislative literature on parliamentary architecture.

Specifically, the paper makes a theoretical case for the utility of discussing the concept of legislative institutionalisation through and in juxtaposition to, the parliamentary built environment. I suggest that in nascent legislatures, engaging with and observing parliamentary space enables one to ascertain the political challenges and opportunities of the legislature's attempts at establishing itself within the institutional architecture. The second contribution is to test this model

[1]This was the central question in my PhD Thesis. Also see Batsani-Ncube (forthcoming, 2022) Whose building: Tracing the politics of the China funded parliament building in Lesotho. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48(3) and Batsani-Ncube (forthcoming, 2022). China's 'parliament building gift' to Malawi: Exploring its rationale, tensions and asymmetrical gains. In Tomkinson, J; Mulugeta, D and Gallagher, J (eds): *Architecture and Politics in Africa: Rethinking materiality*: London: James Currey.

of institutionalisation through a comparative case study of the Parliaments of Lesotho and Malawi.[2]

I purposively sampled two countries in Southern Africa which has the largest number of Chinese funded parliament buildings to date. I was also interested in countries with developing parliamentary systems, which share a parliamentary heritage to the Westminster system and those new buildings had at least been in use for a minimum five years to enable me to draw conclusions on the impact of the built environment. Lesotho and Malawi parliaments trace their institutional genealogy to the British Westminster parliamentary model and they transitioned to being representative parliaments around the same time in the 1990s after going through a long period of institutional emasculation (Kasfir, 1998). In Lesotho's case the democratic elections of 1993 ushered in an elected legislature after years of one party and later military rule (Makoa, 2004; Kapa, 2013). Malawi had ensured one-party political system during the Kamuzu Banda years and in 1994 a democratically elected parliament was ushered into office and from then on, the institution has maintained its multi-party characteristic (Ihonvbere, 1997). Prior to China's donated both parliaments did not have purpose-built facilities and were either operating from colonially constructed legislative building (Lesotho) or makeshift conference room in the vicinities of the presidential palace (Malawi). In terms of differences, the two legislatures are drawn from different political systems. Lesotho is a constitutional monarchy and Malawi is a presidential system. The new buildings also have a contrasting backstory. In Lesotho's case, the building was wholly constructed by China from scratch and commissioned in 2012. In Malawi, had been designed by Malawi architects and China finished off the construction in 2009 and commissioned it in 2010.

I draw on key informant semi-structured interviews, with parliament staff and members of parliament (MPs) and observation carried out in the two buildings (Leech, 2002; Willis, 2007). I obtained official permission (Feldman *et al.*, 2004) to observe proceedings and spent an average of two months in each of the buildings (Marcus, 2012; Neyland, 2012; Crewe, 2015, 2017). I was assigned working space and given permission to move freely in and around the buildings. I had a tour of the buildings, attended plenary debates, committee sessions and was a participant observer in the parliament canteens. I interviewed key informants who were purposively sampled for their knowledge of parliament in both the building's pre- and post-occupation phases (Stender, 2017). In each country, I interviewed top parliament executives, senior officials from the following offices: Table, Committee, Hansard, Library, Research and Documentation, Administration, ICT, Audio Visual Services and Building Maintenance. I also interviewed government officials in the public works ministries,

[2]This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 772070).

senior parliamentarians at the level of party whips, government whips and leaders of opposition. This sample, reinforced by my independent observations, enabled me to have a detailed picture of the operations of parliament in the buildings. I used thematic analysis to interpret my data. I have divided the article into two main sections. The first makes a theoretical case for the utility of discussing the concept of legislative institutionalisation through and in juxtaposition to, the parliamentary built environment. The second provides a comparative reading of legislative institutionalisation through the Lesotho and Malawi parliament buildings.

2. Reading legislative institutionalisation through parliamentary built environment

I approach legislative institutionalisation as referring to both to the outcome and process with which a parliament establishes its niche in the political institutional architecture (boundedness) and demonstrates specialised forms of in-house practices and conventions and rules (internal complexity) (Huntington, 1965; Polsby, 1968; Judge, 2003; Chiva, 2007; Obando Camino, 2013). Normatively, parliament exists within an ecosystem of political institutions that include political parties, electoral bodies, the executive arm of government and the courts hence the process of establishing its distinct identity seems a given in established political dispensations. This identity is taken for granted in a setting where the institution has been in existence for more than two centuries (Hicks, 2007).

However, this is not the case in nascent states where the process of making the institutions and getting them to work takes place concurrently. In such circumstances this requires us to reframe our expectations. For example, in established parliaments, boundedness means measuring the extent to which the institution distinguishes itself through career opportunities such as re-election of parliamentarians and the specialisation of its political and bureaucratic leadership (Polsby, 1968, 1981). However, in relatively new parliamentary institutions, such as the ones in Africa, the ways in which the institution establishes itself within the political architecture is in itself an important baseline for understanding the preliminary stages of its boundedness. Therefore, when studying nascent parliaments, it is important to proceed from the sociogenesis of the parliament in question. For instance, with respect to African parliaments, beside the fact that in their current iteration they are relatively new, we need to consider where they evolved from[3]

Mohammed Alabi notes that the rushed transition from colonial rule to independence was a major factor that facilitated the export of western parliamentary systems to Africa. Alabi captures the legacy question succinctly: 'the colonial legislature[s] … were merely designed to complement the work of the colonial governments by serving

[3]Here I refer to their character as multi-party parliaments and their specialised activities that include portfolio, adhoc, thematic committee sessions.

as agencies…. This orientation was to have a long-lasting effect on the performance of the legislature…. even years after effective renunciation of colonial rule' (Alabi, 2009, p. 35). This means that colonial legacy is a salient aspect of the development trajectory of the institution in Africa. Read this way, when studying contemporary African parliaments there is need to consider that its predecessor legislatures were not designed to do the things that are considered the holy grail of internal complexity in the established literature on legislative institutionalisation. Beyond the colonial legacy question, there is also the stunted growth that the institution experienced during the one-party state era. Later, when the political system changed to multi-party systems, parliaments had to contend with a domineering executive. This context is important when weighing the degree to which nascent parliamentary institutions are developing towards legislative internal complexity.

I suggest that this context can be accounted for through observing (i) the extent to which the legislature has established itself as a recognisable institutional actor relative within the political institutional architecture, and (ii), its inception, organisation and routinisation of specialised practices through looking at, and asking about the significance, and use of its physical space.

In emphasising the importance of the built environment, I lean on Goran Therbon's argument that place matters a lot in politics. In particular, Therborn points out that place, 'mold[s] actors, structure[s] their life chances, and provide[s] them with identities and traditions of social and political action. Places are strategic sites of action and the creation, development, or destruction of places form an important part in political agendas' (Therborn, 2009, p. 498). In another work he also addresses the scale of state buildings by arguing that symbolic representation in the expression of political power and that monumentality is core to this symbolic representation (Therborn, 2014). Read together, Therbon's two statements underscores the importance of taking the built environment seriously in studying the development trajectory of political institutions.

Beyond Therborn, other scholars also validate the utility of studying political institutions through state buildings. Julia Gallagher argues that aspects of statehood can be gleaned from the symbolism and processes carried out through state architecture (Gallagher, 2018; Gallagher *et al.*, 2021); Lawrence Vale posits that state buildings embody and communicate myths about national power and identity (Vale, 2014) and John Parkinson bemoans the fact that these buildings have escaped serious attention in political literatures as they have been barely noticed or dismissed outright (Parkinson, 2012). More direct to parliaments, Charles Goodsell maintains that the physical public space such as parliament buildings is an important unit of political analysis due to the way it embeds, reflects and perpetuates a specific political culture (Goodsell, 1988). Winston Churchill classically represented this perspective by remarking: 'We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us' (Commons debates, 28 October 1943: col. 403–9 in UK Parliament, 2021).

Flowing from the above discussion, I have drawn three mutually reinforcing points that underpin my framework of analysis. First, I approach legislative institutionalisation as both a process and outcome. In addition, while other studies have suggested legislative institutionalisation occurs from outside (Judge, 2003) and inside-out (Obando Camino, 2013) my approach centres the building as an embodiment and arena for legislative activity which facilitates both forms. Second, I concede that there could be universal elements of legislative institutionalisation; however, I assert that in studying nascent parliaments, there is need for a differentiated starting point. As I have highlighted earlier, this stems from the fact that for nascent parliaments such as the ones in Lesotho and Malawi, the process of making the institution takes place concurrently with the expectation of becoming effective. This is why the present studies African parliaments that focus on the performance appraisal of the institution are useful but inadequate in explaining the ways in which the institution is being co-constructed.

Third, I draw on existing studies on parliament architecture and politics. In particular, I build on Goodsell (1988) who made a case for using parliamentary built environment as a unit of political analysis (McCarthy-Cotter *et al.*, 2018). My point of departure is that I do not intend to go into the debates on the ways in which the building conditions political culture but instead to leverage it as a site where parliamentary politics is practiced and routinised hence feeding into the core idea of legislative institutionalisation. In the same vein, this paper flows from the premise that place matters big time in politics (Therborn, 2009) and that democracy as John Parkinson states, requires the physical place (Parkinson, 2012). Furthermore, the paper draws on Philip Norton's work on the ways which physical informal space contributes to legislative institutionalisation (Norton, 2019). Norton argues that the use of this space by parliamentarians, 'is an intrinsic part of parliamentary life, important to members for learning the rules and practices of the institution' (Norton, 2019, p. 260). Norton's specific focus on informal space chimes with Goodsell's study of formal space in the UK parliament and makes the point of looking at both these spaces. Given the foregoing, I will compare the two cases in terms of the following:

- The scale and significance of the new buildings and the extent to which they enable a distinctive identity for the institution.
- The utilisation of both formal and informal space and how this contributes to internal complexity.

3. The Lesotho and Malawi Parliament buildings and legislative institutionalisation

3.1 The scale and significance of the new buildings

The origin of the contemporary Lesotho Parliament starts in 1884 when the British government issued Proclamation 2B which vested legislative authority

for Lesotho in the office of the British High Commissioner in South Africa (Maqutu, 1990).

Pursuant to this move, the Basutoland National Council (BNC), was established as a forum which the British used to canvass non-binding public opinion from Basuto traditional leaders on planned legislation (Lord, 1953). A meeting place for the BNC was constructed in 1909. It was a hexagonal shaped building and had a chamber with green seats arranged in Westminster style format (African State Architecture, 2020). From this abode and its non-legislative origins, the BNC became both the progenitor and stimulant of the contemporary parliament in Lesotho. Progenitor because it provided the institutional home and political culture for the future parliament. In terms of an institutional home, the BNC building (after extensions effected in 1959) became the meeting place for independent Lesotho's parliament in 1966 up to 2012 when the National Assembly moved to the new building.[4]

In Malawi, the colonial era building which accommodated parliament up to 2001 was located in Zomba, Southern Malawi. Inaugurated in 1957, it was a small building meant for not more than 30 Members. Early efforts had been taken by the Kamuzu Banda government in the 1970s and 1980s to relocate parliament as part of moving the capital from Zomba to Lilongwe but the plans to construct the new parliament building during that era did not come to fruition (Potts, 1985). Parliament remained in Zomba when the other arms of the state moved to Lilongwe. In 2001, the then President, Bakili Muluzi authorised Parliament's move from Zomba to Lilongwe to occupy the New State House a 300-room presidential palace built during the Kamuzu Banda era.[5] At the New State house, the Banqueting Hall was transformed into a parliamentary debate chamber and tea rooms were converted into committee rooms.[6]

Lesotho's new parliament building is located on the outskirts of the Maseru central business district on Mpilo Hill. The building complex was designed by the China Northeast Architectural design and Research Institute and constructed by the China Yanjian Group, the parliament complex. The complex covers 43,273 square metres and includes a four-storey building that houses the National Assembly offices, the debate chamber, the reception checkpoint, accessory buildings, parking lot, open grounds and a retaining wall (African State Architecture, 2020).

[4]In Lesotho parliament consists of two houses, the elected National Assembly and a Senate that comprises 22 hereditary chiefs and an additional eleven nominated by the *Motlotlehi* (king). The Senate still conducts its sessions in the old BNC building.

[5]Now called the Kamuzu Palace in Lilongwe.

[6]Interview with a retired Clerk of parliament, Lilongwe, 4 July 2019.

In contrast, the new Parliament of Malawi building, is within the Lilongwe city centre. It was designed by a consortium of indigenous Malawian Architects Consortium and initially constructed by Terrastone and Deco. The project was eventually completed by Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Corporation after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malawi and the People's Republic of China (Batsani-Ncube, 2022). The complex consists of a front-end security reception office at the gate, a mini-stadium complex abutting Greek or Roman style colonnades and the main structure which houses the chamber and administrative offices. The chamber is a large theatre, occupying 1,256 square metres, with 282 fitted seats for members and an upper floor gallery for visitors.

Both buildings have significantly made the institution of parliament to be conspicuous deeply embedded and created a distinctive place for performing parliamentary politics.[7] Most people who live and work in and around both capital cities have either visually accessed the buildings, or have a mental image of where they are located and have something to say about these structures giving credence to the perspective that the institution is getting embedded in the political psyche.[8]

3.2 Utilisation of space and the development of a parliamentary ecosystem

I have developed the idea of a parliamentary ecosystem from Polsby's indicators of gauging internal complexity of a legislature. These elements include the facilitation and interaction of distinctive parliamentary functions such as division of labour in the legislature, the autonomy and expansion of the committee system (Polsby, 1968). Beyond Polsby I am also interested in comparing the availability and use of informal space (Norton, 2019). Therefore, I define a parliamentary ecosystem as the presence and maintenance of a network of public officials and representatives that work in a defined space, in close proximity to each other specialising in parliamentary activities. In other words, exploring the presence of a parliamentary ecosystem highlights the extent to which the buildings have enabled the institution of parliament to consolidate. Some of the key indicators include the expansion of a specialised parliament staff cohort, the availability of space for the political class to discharge their parliamentary duties and networking facilities such as lounges and dining facilities. Collectively these aspects are indicative of imbedding parliamentary practice.

The allocation of office space upon occupation of the buildings is indicative of how the parliamentary ecosystem took root. In Lesotho the four-storey edifice has been divided into parliament facing departments. Every section was given their offices in

[7]Notes from fieldwork in Maseru and Lilongwe, July to November 2019.

[8]Ibid.

terms of the work that they do in support of the legislature. For instance, the Hansard section was allocated the first floor due to its proximity to the debate chamber. The floor also houses the offices of the Speaker, Prime Minister, Clerk and the Table offices. The second floor hosts the offices of the Deputy Speaker, Leader of Opposition and Library services. Committee rooms, the office of the Leader of the House—who is incumbent Deputy Prime minister—and other support offices are on the third floor. The fourth-floor houses committee clerks, accounts and public relations units.

In Malawi office allocation was also designed to suit the core parliamentary business as the Speaker and other political leaders and officers collectively called officers of the House. Were allocated offices near or adjacent to the chamber and for easy interaction.[9] In evaluating the use of the space, the starting point is that there is corresponding appreciation of the new facilities in enabling and expanding parliamentary work. Both buildings in Maseru and Lilongwe are seen as having for the first time provided a one stop shop for parliament work and resulted in the restructuring of parliament into a somewhat formidable political institution.[10] They have provided a central facility for parliamentary work. A parliament executive manager in Lesotho said, 'one of the advantages is that moving from where we were, this building is big and it is accommodating all of us without any problem. Most of our officers have adequate space to work in'.[11]

Concurring, a parliament staffer in Malawi noted that, 'the building is quite spacious and it is a plus to us because it does accommodate all members of staff. Initially, before we occupied this building, [staff] members were scattered. [Now] we are housed in one building I think this has sort of eased the way we transact'.[12] In Lesotho, after moving into the building more specialised parliamentary departments were established and the staff complement increased. According to a Parliament of Lesotho executive manager they, 'had to engage more committee clerks, increase and establish research unit, legal unit, ICT Department and at that time increase the numbers in existing units by double bringing the staff complement to approximately 110'.[13]

This discussion on how the building has enabled parliamentary functions also gets us to explore the nature of parliamentary practice in these countries. The two parliament institutions trace their genealogy to what is usually referred to as the British Westminster parliamentary system (Maddicott, 2010; Russel and Serban,

[9]Interview with a senior parliament staffer, Lilongwe, 24 July 2019.

[10]Fieldnotes, Maseru and Lilongwe, July to November 2019.

[11]Interview with a Parliament executive manager Maseru, 17 September 2019.

[12]Interview with a parliament staffer, Lilongwe, 8 August 2019.

[13]Ibid.

2020). As indicated in the introduction, this is due to the British colonial institutional heritage. In both cases I found that this heritage matters, but in different degrees. Lesotho is more copying and Malawi more adapting. For example, in Lesotho, the inherent imagination that fuels the parliamentary bureaucracy is the desire to approximate as close as possible to the source, whereas in Malawi adaptation of Westminster practices to local realities is more salient. This is important to mention because the subtext in the characterisation of the buildings' impact on developing forms of parliamentary complexity is largely informed by the extent to which they enable that approximation. Two senior parliament officials from both parliaments demonstrated these viewpoints. In Malawi, the senior officer noted that, 'each Parliament has its own traditions but we are from the British system and the most of the traditions even though we may call them our traditions, some are carried over traditions like the ceremonial things and we still have them now'.[14]

My informant in Lesotho highlighted that, 'in terms of all parliamentary practices we didn't go away from the British practice although we can see that the more we adhere to the British practice the more the British themselves evolve'.[15] These views illustrate the conceptual preponderance of the Westminster parliamentary traditions in Lesotho and Malawi. This means that although the parliament buildings are Chinese conceived and constructed, their use and impact stems largely on the dominant imagination of 'Westminster-like' institutions.

As the reference point for parliaments in Lesotho, Malawi and indeed other former British colonies, the House of Commons chamber with its green benches arranged in government—opposition adversarial style, feeds into the imagination of what a typical robust parliamentary environment should be like. The caveat here is that the format in Westminster is just one of many ways of arranging the plenary hall (see van der Vegt and Cohen de Lara, 2016). The point though is that the Westminster model remains salient in the two countries due its status as a reference point and direct link to the transition from the old buildings to the new ones.

In the two countries, the old parliament buildings had chambers structured in the House of Commons style. Both also had green benches! The new buildings introduced them to the circular horseshoe format. While this change in sitting plan may be dismissed as pedantic, upon scrutiny it impacts the manner in which people who use and work in the chamber feel about the space.

In Lesotho the arrangement of seats is part of the reasons why the building is viewed as less enabling and a foreign imposition. It is seen more as an expression of a Chinese design than a facilitator of Lesotho parliamentary democracy. When

[14]Interview with a senior parliament of Malawi official, Lilongwe, 24 July 2019.

[15]Interview with a senior parliament of Lesotho official, Maseru, 11 September 2019.

I asked one of the long serving parliament staffers what they make of the chamber, he quipped, 'the Chinese had in mind their own deputies in their own arrangement in China whereby the deputies will come together to blah blah. So, this kind of democratic arrangement that we have in the western world, they are not accustomed to it'.[16] Furthermore, an executive official who was involved in the decision making of preparing the chamber for use, gave a description of the chamber and how parliament management felt about the debate chamber:

> It is a conference hall; it takes a conference hall shape and it denies an open classification of members. In terms of the Westminster style the opposition and the government should face each other directly and those people who said no, we are neither here nor there who state themselves to be neutral will be facing the Speaker directly with no hindrance. But this one takes the conference room form. It is not like what you can see in some other parliaments. We tried to customise it. It was very difficult. So that was it.[17]

It is instructive that the informants refer to the western democratic arrangement in general and the Westminster model in particular as a reference for Lesotho/African conception of parliamentary operation. In addition, the desire to customise the building to fit their conception of what the parliamentary bureaucrats considered the correct format points to an aspect that is less emphasised by the current literature on parliaments in Africa: the tension between approximation to a western ideal and the localised adaptation of parliamentary practice.

In contrast, the horseshoe seating arrangement in Malawi is part of a deliberate effort by the local designers to graft into African ideas into the legislature, a form of invented modernism. The lead architect told me that in designing the chamber they wanted, 'African ideas to feature as part of the design and came up with the idea of making the Parliament sitting on the Parliament to look like a horseshoe which in essence is like a 'U'. A 'U' which means union'.[18] However, the operational realities of the chamber have brought their own unique challenges, which almost measure up to the concerns we saw in the Lesotho case. This is because it has also been flagged as an operational challenge due to the phenomenon of independent MPs. Since 2009, Malawi has had a large group of independent MPs in successive three election cycles (Patel and Wahman, 2015).

[16]Ibid.

[17]Interview with a Parliament Executive of Lesotho, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

[18]Interview with the lead architect of the Parliament of Malawi building, Lilongwe, 11 July 2019.

Since the phenomenon is becoming a trend, a senior official pointed out that, 'in this horseshoe seating arrangement the opposition is on the left-hand side and then the government it is on the right-hand side but then we have this cadre that is now taking route in Malawi, independents. We have had the challenge where we can sit them.[19] In other words, although the perceived limitation of the chamber is due to the absence of the seats facing the speaker just like in the 'House of Commons template'. The idealised and practical use of both chambers indicate the dynamics of consolidating plenary parliamentary debates in the respective countries.

The committee system in both countries closely resembles the Westminster model (Norton, 1998) and only started taking shape around the same time the buildings were constructed. That said, the intention is not to establish causality but to assess the relationship between the buildings and the expanded committee system. The literature on parliaments in Africa has correctly identified the development of the portfolio committees as one of the significant elements in the growth of the institution in the past 20 years (Rotberg and Salahub, 2013). My contribution here is to provide a thick description of how this has occurred in the context of the parliamentary built environment. In Lesotho, before the initiation of parliamentary reforms, the committee that was in existence was the Public Accounts Committee. These parliamentary reforms were inclusive of the need for a new purpose-built parliamentary facility. After this process, three types of committees were introduced. These included sessional select committees, portfolio clusters and ad hoc committees.[20] Similarly in Malawi introduced standing, constitutional and portfolio committees.[21] This expansion of committee work coincided with the construction of the parliament buildings. In that regard, it is reasonable to infer that the two (the committees and the built environment) fed on, and into each other. On one hand, the growth in parliament procedure required reliable space for it to take root, while on the other, the large parliament building needed the sustained parliament committee activities to avoid being white elephants.

Both buildings have provided in-house conference facilities for the work of committees. In Lesotho there are six committee rooms, while in Malawi there are five. However, the Lesotho committee rooms are smaller than those in Malawi. The size of the buildings has created mixed feelings in the user experience. When full to capacity, the Lesotho committee rooms are invariably stuffy.[22] This is in part

[19]Interview with a senior Parliament of Malawi officer, Lilongwe, 8 August 2019.

[20]Interview with a Parliament of Lesotho official, Maseru, 12 September 2019.

[21]Interview with a Parliament of Malawi official, Lilongwe, 5 August 2019.

[22]Fieldnotes, Maseru, September to November 2019.

due to their size and the constantly malfunctioning air condition system. This design limitation is one of the examples raised by parliament staff as the problem arising from lack of end user consultation. A parliament executive told me that, 'the set up in the committee rooms; the size of the committee rooms offices, if we had been consulted, it would not be like this'.[23]

This is because in the committee rooms, 'it gets a bit congested sometimes when there are a lot of people there and the air conditioners are not working well. This is one of the challenges that we have'.[24] This notwithstanding, the facilities have enabled parliament to discharge its procedural oversight function better and in a more sustained manner. For example, while in Maseru, I observed that the committee rooms were actively in use which illustrated the active and routine role of the committee system in the Lesotho legislature.[25]

In contrast, the Malawi committee rooms are spacious, user friendly and having the adequate amenities for the work of parliament. An official in Lilongwe described them as conference rooms because, 'the moment I say committee it is as if you cannot do anything else there but you can hold a conference there because they have audio visual equipment; they also have walls that were designed for PowerPoint if you wanted to'.[26] These conference facilities allow for the hosting of at least four committee meetings at once. In addition to the available space for committees, the two spacious lounges for members and cabinet ministers are sometimes converted into temporary committee rooms. Evaluating the impact of the building on the work of the parliament committee system, the official posited that:

> In terms of time management, even the overall performance of committees I think it has improved greatly because we are concentrating on the business rather than on the management issues and logistical arrangements which sometimes can derail progress. It also gives us a sense of pride. You have a parliamentary committee meeting that is happening at Parliament. You know, unlike a parliamentary committee meeting is happening at Crossroads [Hotel].[27]

[23]Interview with a Parliament of Lesotho executive, Maseru, 17 September 2019.

[24]Interview with a Parliament of Lesotho official, Maseru, 12 September 2019.

[25]Fieldnotes, Maseru, September to November 2019.

[26]Interview with a Parliament of Malawi official, Lilongwe, 5 August 2019.

[27]Ibid.

The prestige of hosting the legislative events at a purpose-built parliament building is also seen through the ways in which the different committees have applied themselves to their work.

While in Lilongwe I observed three such committees: the public accounts, public appointments and the budget committee.[28] The public accounts reviews audit reports by the National Audit Office and conduct a number of enquiries on mismanagement of funds. These sessions are available to the public and media hence the proceedings of the committee are quoted in the media. The Public Appointments Committee approve the appointments by the executive and ratifying conditions of service for specific offices such as the Law Commission.[29] They are also involved in interviewing public officials such as the Director of Public Declarations. The Budget Committee is heavily involved in the passing of the national budget. They track and monitor government debt and projects. A cognate structure, the Parliamentary Budget Office had just been established and was poised to work in collaboration with the Budget Committee.[30] All this animated activity takes place in the parliament building. This illustrates that African parliaments are 'live structures' and these buildings have provided an observation locus for political scientists interested in observing legislatures at work.

In terms of formal and informal networking spaces, the Malawi building has better facilities than Lesotho. In Malawi, the President and the Minister of Finance have offices in the building. The Parliamentary office of the President is located on the west wing of the ground floor a few feet from the special entrance to the debate chamber.[31] According to a Senior Parliament official the Minister, 'comes to discuss his budget things so he sits in his office'.[32] Other political leaders who have offices and a retinue of staff in the building include the leader of opposition and the chief whips of the various parties represented in Parliament. In contrast, in Lesotho only the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition and the Leader of the House—who is incumbent Deputy Prime minister have support offices in the building.[33]

[28]Fieldnotes, Lilongwe, July to August 2019.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Fieldnotes, Lilongwe, July 2019.

[32]Interview with a senior parliament of Malawi official, Lilongwe, 24 July 2019.

[33]Fieldnotes, Maseru, August 2019.

In Malawi, there are also informal spaces that enhance networking within the parliamentary ecosystem. There are two lounges, one for cabinet ministers and the other for ordinary MPs. At the rear of the building there two dining halls that serve lunch to the parliamentary ecosystem. During lunch time, there is boisterous chatter as people working in the parliamentary orbit, both staffers and MPs converge for meals. However, the dining halls are separated according to parliamentary class distinctions. The one on the right side from the entrance is reserved for MPs. It has well-appointed dining facilities, resplendent with snow white table cloths, waiters and waitresses immaculately dressed in black and white.[34] The other dining hall is for parliament staff. It is just an ordinary eating place without drapings and attendants. The food served in the two dining halls is the same but buying a plate in the former is double the cost. The common denominator is that both spaces provide an informal networking space that strengthens intra-parliamentary work bonds.

The strengthening of intra-parliamentary bonds indicates the extent to which both buildings have become embedded in the host countries' political life. One way in which this can be appreciated is in how the buildings have outlived different sets of ruling elites and as sites of parliament enabled change. In Lesotho, construction of the building was initiated in 2007 during the era of Pakalitha Mosisili's Lesotho Congress Party but was eventually commissioned in 2012 by the All Basotho Convention government led by Thomas Thabane. Eventually, in 2020 the building was the site of a vote of no confidence on the Thabane government and the passing of a landmark legislation that stripped the Prime Minister's power of dissolving parliament when faced with a no confidence vote (Khan, 2019).

In Malawi, the building perceived during its construction days in 2008 as a President Bingu wa Mutharika pet project, saw the change of government in 2012 from the Democratic People's Party (DPP) to Joyce Banda's People's Party (PP) and then the switch from PP to Peter wa Mutharika's DPP in 2014.

Most significantly, the building became the preferred destination of protesters during the tumultuous demonstrations that occurred in 2019 in response to election irregularities. In February 2020, the building became the site where a majority member voted for a private members bill to put legislative effect to a Supreme court interpretation of a 50 + 1 majority required to elect a President (Nyale, 2020). This legislative action and the additional oversight role that

[34]Fieldnotes, Lilongwe, July 2019.

Parliament played in summoning and censuring errant election commissioners, as well as facilitating the smooth ratification of new commissioners facilitated the 2020 credible vote which ushered in the Lazarus Chakwera-led Tonse Alliance.

4. Conclusion

This article has established that although there are stylistic and operational differences—with the Malawi building being the better of the two—both buildings have provided a bespoke parliamentary built environment, enabled the expansion of a cohort of public officials working on legislative business and facilitated the procedural activities of the institution in the two countries. These findings give prominence to the overlooked backstory of how parliaments in fledgling polities become institutionalised. The article has demonstrated how the buildings have become incubators of parliamentary development by providing bespoke debate chambers and conference facilities for the parliament committee system. While there is contrasting user experience, with the Lesotho users less enchanted with their facilities than their Malawi counterparts, the common denominator is that the buildings have become essential cogs in entrenching parliamentary practice.

As illustrated, prior to occupying the new building in 2012, the Parliament of Lesotho was sparsely staffed and with limited departmental functions. An assessment of the post-2012 parliament showed that the staff had increased to over 110 and an expanded committee system put in place. In Malawi, the limitations placed on the growth of the institution due to shortage of working space and operating from multiple centres in Lilongwe curtailed the prospects of growth. Now the Parliament of Malawi boast over 200 staffers working on differentiated parliamentary roles. In both countries, the buildings have enabled the development and sustenance of a parliamentary ecosystem—the presence and maintenance of a network of public officials and representatives that work in a defined space, in close proximity to each other specialising in parliamentary activities. This is important context needed in studying African parliaments because representation, legislation and executive oversight do not occur in a vacuum. When I have factored in my field observations and the broader discourse on democracy and political institution building in contemporary Africa, on balance, these buildings are an important positive step towards the consolidation of the institution of parliament. Legislative institutionalisation requires a starting point to breed an ecosystem that can sustain this over time. Therefore, by shining the light on the impact of the buildings in consolidating parliament, I am highlighting the incremental steps towards legislative institutionalisation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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