

The people of Malawi are in mourning following the death of the country's vice-president, Saulos Chilima.

He, together with nine others, died in a plane crash in a forest in the north of the country where they were due to attend a funeral of a former cabinet minister.

Chilima was leader of the United Transformation Party that is an alliance partner of the President Lazarus Chakwera's party. His death could destabilize the presidency by stirring differences among political parties.

The 51-year-old was poised to stand as the next candidate for the alliance that swept President Lazarus Chakwera and him to power in 2020. Chilima, outlining his planned candidacy, cited the terms of their alliance agreement although there were disputes about the existence of such a clause in their agreement.

The plane was reported missing on Monday, prompting a search. The wreckage was discovered on Tuesday in a mountainous forest in the north of the country.

In a statement, the president confirmed that all passengers on board had been killed in the crash. Chakwera said he was deeply saddened by "what has turned out to be a tragedy."

Describing Chilima on Tuesday, as a "good man" and a "patriotic citizen", but there had been reports recently of friction between the two men.

On Tuesday, the United Transformation Movement (UTM) officials criticized the government saying its response when the plane went missing had been slow.

They also questioned why there appeared to have been no transponder on the aircraft.

"As a party, we are looking forward to seeing where the transponder is and why is [it] that we are failing to trace it," said the party's secretary general, Patricia Kaliati.

Chilima came third during annulled elections in 2019 and formed an alliance with Chakwera's party in the 2020 rerun.

Malawi's constitution states a vacancy in the role of vice president must be filled for the unexpired period of that term by a person appointed by the president — a pivotal decision that could highlight divisions along party lines.

Chilima's sudden death while in office echoes that of former President Bingu Mutharika who died in 2012 following a heart attack. That prompted leadership wrangles which led to the arrest of prominent government officials before then-Vice President Joyce Banda assumed the presidency.

A new vice president must be appointed within the next seven days. make this better.