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**LES ALTERNANCES DEMOCRATIQUES EN AFRIQUE**

**LEGITIMITE ET ALTERNANCE**


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**«PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C’EST LA MÊME CHOSE !»**

**AFRICAN RULING ELITES AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIZATION**

BY PETER J. SCHRAEDER*

Dozens of countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern and Southern Europe made transitions from authoritarian to democratic forms of governance from 1974 to 1994, prompting American proponents of democracy, such as Samuel P. Huntington, to speak of democracy’s «third wave» of expansion in world history (the first two waves began in the 1820s and the 1940s) (1). In the case of Africa, this third wave — often referred to as Africa’s «second independence» — largely began in 1989 and was sparked by the end of the Cold War and the downfall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (2). Although one should not downplay the important impact of international factors on democratization in Africa, the primary impetus for this process that prompted African ruling elites to negotiate with pro-democracy movements was a variety of internal trends, such as severe economic stagnation and decline, the so-called «crisis» of the state, and popular demonstrations against rising human rights abuses and political repression (3).

Africanists initially viewed the democratization process in highly optimistic terms. «The prospects for democracy in Africa are now unquestionably brighter than they were decades ago, explained Michael Clough, Senior Fellow for Africa at the New York Council on Foreign Relations, «if for no other reason than that Africans now know all too well the costs of failure of democracy» (4). Adopting a less pan-guinean viewpoint, Rané Laroumhand warned of «compelling reasons to fear that the movement toward democracy may contain within itself the seeds of its own undoing», including the continued ability of authoritarian ruling elites to manipulate the democratization process for personal gain at the expense of the welfare of their respective political systems (5). Indeed, according to Claude Ake, the director of the Center for Social Science Research at Port Harcourt, Nigeria, what one is witnessing in Africa is the «democratization of disempowerment» — a process whereby newly installed multiparty systems merely allow rotating and competing portions of ruling elites to exploit the vast majority of Africa's largely rural populations, who continue to remain disempowered from their respective political systems (6). Yet regardless of whether they are optimistic or pessimistic, very few (if any) Africanists reject the normative value of a process that replaces authoritarian, single-party systems with more democratic forms of governance.

The primary focus of this article is the internal dimension of the democratization process in Africa, most notably the varied roles of African ruling elites as facilitators and impediments to political development. For the purposes of analysis, the ruling

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elite is defined as the most privileged leadership sector of African societies that controls the reins of government and sets the rules of the political system. This ruling elite historically assumed power through either civilian-based independence movements or military-based coups d'état (and to a lesser degree, guerrilla insurgencies), and it often finds itself in conflict with other elite groups seeking change within their respective societies. Among those opposition political leaders, lower-ranking military officers, elders and the heads of women's organizations, ethnic and religious leaders, labor and student activists, and powerful financial and business interests. After briefly outlining the authoritarian (i.e., antidemocratic) tendencies of African ruling elites from the 1950s to the 1980s, including a discussion of official rations for the creation of single-party political systems, the greater part of this article focuses on the responses of these elites to popular demands for democratization beginning in 1989.

FAILURE OF SINGLE-PARTY RULE

The first generation of African ruling elites was confronted by two major paradoxes during the heady Independence period of the 1960s. First, although they were trained and politically socialized within highly authoritarian, colonial political cultures, these leaders achieved independence at the head of hastily constructed, untested, and ill-suited “democratic” political systems left behind by the retreating European powers. The colonial powers sought to establish a system of “checks-and-balances” in which newly created, independent offices of the president, legislatures, and judiciaries would “balance” each other’s powers and “check” the rise of authoritarian leaders. For example, whereas the decentralized Westminster model of parliamentary governance was grafted onto the authoritarian structures of colonial rule in the former British colonies, the more centralized French formula of ensuring a strong executive—the Ellysée model—was similarly introduced into the former Francophone colonies (7). This state affairs contributed to an “authoritarian-democratic” paradox in which ruling elites trained within an authoritarian tradition were expected to abide by the constraints and “rules of the game” of Western democratic society.

The first generation of ruling elites also faced what can be termed the “great expectations—minimal capabilities” paradox. Newly elected political elites were confronted by popular expectations that the fruits of independence—most notably higher wages and better living conditions—would be quickly and widely shared after the departure of the former colonial powers. In almost every case, the African states (i.e., the institutions of governance and power within a country) as constructed just prior to independence simply did not have the capabilities required by ruling elites to satisfy public demands (9). In addition to remaining heavily dependent on the former colonial power (or new surrogates, such as the United States or the former Soviet Union) for trade, investment, and even personnel to staff key governmental ministries, the capabilities of the state often were constrained by macro-crop and mineral-based economies, low levels of education among the general population, and pervasive infrastructural development favoring the maintenance of external links as opposed to internal development (9).

In almost every case, the contradictions associated with the just-noted paradoxes of independence prompted the first generation of ruling elites to systematically dismantle the ill-suited “democratic” political systems that inherited the formal colonial powers and to replace them with more authoritarian forms of governance based on centralization of power and personal rule (10). It is important to note, however, that ruling elites were not exclusively interested in acquiring power for its sake, but often shared many high-minded principles (e.g., quick development of communal demands) that, at least in their eyes, made the suspension of democratic practices an undesirable necessity.

Yet what originally were envisioned as temporary suspensions of democratic procedures, in practice usually became long term in nature. Even the most principled of African leaders, such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (11) and Kaunda of Zambia, and Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, invariably turned to a variety of authoritarian measures to enhance their powers and ensure political survival at the expense of the over other elite groups within society. Among those actions taken were the staffing of enlarged bureaucracies, militaries, and police forces with members of the leader's ethnic or clan groups (as well as with members of their primary ethnic or clan elites); the rejection of federalist principles (such as constitutional amendments) that guaranteed autonomy for ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities; the emasculation and, in many cases, the disbандing of independent parliaments and judiciaries that at best became rubber-stamp organizations incapable of serving as a check on the powers of the executive; the imprisonment or exile of vocal critics from a variety of competitive elite groups, including labor unions and student organizations; and the outlawing of rival political parties and the disbanning of multiparty political systems in favor of the creation of single-party systems (11).

The creation of single-party regimes constituted the most important authoritarian trend undertaken by African presidents during the post-colonial era (12). Those parties ranged from Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), a mass-mobilizing socialist party created by Julius Nyerere (the former president of Tanzania); the Worker's Party of Ethiopia (WPE), a Marxist vanguard party created by Mengistu Haile Mariam, the former president of Ethiopia; and the Kenya African National Union (KANU), the sole ruling party of capitalist-oriented Kenya that was created by former President Jomo Kenyatta and strengthened by his successor, Daniel Arap Moi. In short, regardless of their political ideology, nearly all ruling elites exhibited authoritarian tendencies that inevitably resulted in the creation of single-party political systems during the postcolonial era (13).

Ruling elites offered numerous rationales to justify what in essence constituted the establishment of political monopolies over their respective political parties (14). The justification was that single-party regimes were reflective of traditional African political systems as they existed prior to the imposition of direct colonial rule (15). According to this reasoning, the single-party system was not to be perceived as a “temporary aberration” from a universal norm of multiparty democracy, but rather as a “modern adaptation of traditional African political behavior” (16). Unlike the divisive nature of Western multiparty systems (i.e., one party emerges dominant, and the others are marginalized), the concept of single-party democracy was heralded as conducive to promote traditional African norms of consensus and inclusivity of the entire community. It is for this reason that in 1964, Dr. Kenneth Kaunda chose the term *njamza* (the Kiswahili term for “brotherhood”) as the symbolic guiding principle of the CCM and his country's return to traditional African socialism (17).

The necessity of overcoming existing and potential crises constituted the second rationale for the creation of single-party systems. For example, crises of development (“How best do we quickly develop our society?”), crises of administration (“How do we quickly educate the required leaders?”) and, most important, crises of governance (“How do we quickly satisfy rising popular demands for the fruits of independence?”) led ruling elites to argue against “fritting away scarce resources on competitive politics (18). Just as unity was crucial to the attainment of independence from colonial rule, argued the ruling elites, who in most cases had led the independence struggles during the 1950s and the 1960s, so too was unity important once that independence had been achieved. Equally important, ruling elites feared that multiparty systems would lead to the frag-
example, although legislative candidates were allowed to run against each other under the unified banner of the CCM, they were not permitted to question either the socialist domestic ideology or the foreign policy of the Nyerere regime. Candidates could debate the instrumental aspects of carrying out party-approved policies, but were unable to offer alternatives even in the face of obviously misguided policies. In this and other cases, ruling elites who felt they "knew best" restricted the range of political debate to such a degree that the single party ultimately became a means for maintaining control rather than a dynamic tool for promoting change and development.

The growing stagnation of single-party rule from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s was matched by the growing power and influence of African militarists and military elites (21). Specifically, a veritable explosion of military coups d'état led to the replacement of entrenched civilian elites with their military counterparts and became the primary form of regime change in African politics during the postcolonial era. From 1955 to 1985, for example, 60 out of 131 attempted coups d'état resulted in the overthrow of the civilian regime of an African country (22). (If one includes reported "plots" against an established government, the number of potential episodes of military involvement equals 257) (23). Most important, the emergence of military elites as power brokers within African governments and parliaments did not usher in a new period of democracy and prosperity. Rather, it seemed clear that military coups d'état usually led to renewed forms of military-ruled authoritarianism as bad, if not worse, than their civilian counterparts (24).


The combination of a variety of international and domestic trends beginning in 1989 ushered in a period of democratic transition previously unknown in African history. First, the downfall of single-party communist systems throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union— the intellectual heartland of single-party rule— sent shock waves throughout the African continent. Ruling elites who had depended on the Eastern bloc nations for economic and military assistance, such as Mengistu in Ethiopia, suddenly found themselves abandoned by their former allies. Most important, once single-party systems had become almost completely discredited throughout the former Eastern bloc (except in the People's Republic of China, North Korea and Cuba), the rationales that ruling elites offered for the maintenance of single-party systems throughout Africa became especially hollow.

Cold War-inspired international factors were reinforced by a host of domestic trends at the end of the 1980s. First, growing levels of political repression and human rights abuses throughout the African continent increasingly were being countered by popular resistance and demands for political reform (25). Second, the majority of African economies were in crisis owing to the debt crisis and the tremendous burden of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Economic decline was hastened by bloated, corrupt, and inefficient bureaucracies—the so-called "crisis of the state"—that increasingly were incapable of responding to the day-to-day needs of their respective populations (26). In short, the combination of domestic and international trends fostered the rise of democratization movements seeking the replacement of single-party systems with more inclusive forms of democracy.

As succinctly indicated in the September 1994 edition of Africa Demos, a quarterly publication of the African Governance Program of the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, out of a total of 54 African countries for which data are compiled, 15 (roughly 28 percent) are described as either maintaining or having ensured a successful transition to "democratic" forms of governance—defined as "wide competition between organized groups, numerous opportunities for popular participation in government, and processes that are regularly and fairly conducted." This stood in sharp contrast to the smaller number of only 5 democracies (roughly 9 percent of the total) that existed as late as 1990. Another 26 countries (roughly 48 percent) are described as "in transition" as of 1994 from various types of authoritarian rule to potentially more democratic forms of governance (27). In short, the vast majority of African regimes (70 percent) seemingly either has become democratic, or embodies a transition process potentially leading to more democratic forms of governance.

Despite high expectations, Africans are quick to underscore that the new democracies of Africa are extremely fragile, lack political cultures supportive of democratic principles, and, most important, are not immune to setbacks by either civilian or military ruling elites more interested in personal power than in the principles of democratic practice (28). Indeed, a number of the transitions to democracy have either stalled, are being co-opted, or have been completely derailed by ruling elites intent upon maintaining themselves in power. Simply put, the democratic process—which should not be equated with democratic outcomes—is extremely fluid and anything but irreversible. In order to provide a tentative assessment of the strength of African democratization movements, especially in terms of the varied roles of ruling elites as facilitators or impediments to change, one must distinguish between
the various types of transition processes currently unfolding on the African continent. Towards this end, an analysis of the impact of ruling elites is divided according to six types of democratic transition that build upon a typology originally proposed by Guy Martin (29).

Regime change via multipartty elections

By the end of 1994, at least 15 African countries had carried out at least one set of multipartty elections in which there occurred a relatively peaceful transfer of power from one ruling elite to another. It is important to note, however, that the successful holding of multipartty elections does not ensure that democratic practices have become institutionalized in countries still marked by democratic fragility (30).

"The frequency of democratic breakdowns in this century — and the difficulties of consolidating new democracies — must give serious pause to those who would argue teleologically for the inevitability of 'global democracy'," explains Larry Diamond, a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution (31). "As a result, those concerned about how countries can move 'beyond authoritarianism and totalitarianism' must also ponder the conditions that permit such movement to endure," concludes Diamond. "To rid a country of an authoritarian regime or dictator is not necessarily to move it fundamentally beyond authoritarianism" (32).

The concept of democratic fragility is captured by an 8-point scale of democracy ranging from the lowest rating of «democratic decay» (1 point on the scale), in which the government loses its ability to manage basic aspects of its agenda, such as personal security and economic welfare; to the highest rating of «democratic consolidation» (8 points on the scale), in which a secure political culture fosters widespread respect for fundamental constitutional provisions, especially the rules governing succession in office» (33). According to the scale of democracy, none of the previously noted 15 African countries that as of 1994 were categorized under the democratic category received the highest ranking of democratic consolidation (34).

The case of Zambian highlights the caution that one must adopt when analyzing regime change via multipartty elections, and especially the role of ruling elites in either facilitating or impeding that process. Specifically, Zambia in 1991 experienced a successful transition from the single-party system headed by president Kenneth Kaunda (who had ruled since independence in 1956) to a multipartty political system under the elected leadership of president Frederik Chiluba, the candidate of the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) (35). Eighteen months after achieving victory, Chiluba reinstated a «state of emergency» that had existed throughout Kaunda's rule and arrested and detained without charges at least 14 members of the official opposition, the United National Independence Party (UNIP) (36). One of the reasons offered for Chiluba's actions was a desire to preempt what he and his cabinet characterized as UNIP's intentions to destabilize the government (37).

Critique. Critique must draw parallels between Kaunda's use of the state of emergency to silence oppositional opponents and Chiluba's desire to stem rising criticism of his regime's inability to resolve Zambia's pressing economic problems. Most important, critics noted that the domination of Zambia's parliament by Chiluba's ruling MMD party (123 out of 150 seats) in reality called into question the independence of this branch of government from the executive, especially after Chiluba was successful in acquiring legislative approval for his harsh measures. "It did not take much to silence enough back-benchers with promises of senior positions in the next cabinet reshuffle for the government to win a comfortable majority of 114 to 23," explained one observer of events in Zambia. "Only three back-benchers voted against the motion, although several registered protest by not showing up» (38). In short, even a democratically elected president in control of party structures can use that party to thwart the opposition and suppress dissent.

Regime change via the national conference

A second important vehicle of the democratization process that has taken root particularly in Francophone Africa is the so-called «national conference» (39). In this scenario, a broad coalition of individuals from all major elite groups — including elders and the heads of women's organizations, ethnic and religious leaders, labor and student activists, and ruling and opposition political leaders — holds an extended «national» conference or gathering that serves as the basis for debating the outlines of a new democratic political order. In its ideal form, such a conference builds upon the traditional African concept of «consensus» in which every participant has the right to voice his/her opinion, and decisions are made only when agreed upon by all members present (as opposed to the more Western-centric concept of majority rule).

The democratization process under the guidance of the national conference generally follows five major steps (40). First, a broad coalition of opposition elite groups responds to a growing crisis of governance in the country by convening a national conference in the capital city.

The guiding principle of this body is its self-appointed «sovereignty» (i.e. independence) from either the existing constitutional framework or any interference on the part of the ruling regime. Second, the national conference appoints a transitional government that initially seeks a dialogue with the ruling elite. Over time, however, a weakened president is either gradually robbed of his executive powers or is simply declared an illegitimate authority who no longer has the authority to lead. In either case, the president is usually reduced to a ceremonial role. Finally, the conference transforms itself into a transitional legislative body (often referred to as the High Council) that, in turn, formally elects a prime minister who manages the transition process. Finally, the transition government adopts a new constitution and holds legislative and presidential elections, subsequently dissolving itself and the conference. In this way, the new democratically elected regime is created.

The strong appeal of the national conference approach to democratization lies in the dramatic success achieved by its first application in Benin, and subsequent initial successes in other African countries such as the Congo, Gabon, Mali and Niger (41). In the case of Benin, more than 18 years of authoritarian rule under the African-Communist dictatorship of president Mathieu Kerekou were peacefully overcome by a 488-member national conference that lasted 10 days. Between 19-28 February 1990, the national conference declared its sovereignty, provided Kerekou with political amnesty while at the same time stripping him of his official powers, and drafted a timetable that ultimately led to the successful holding of multipartty elections in 1991. The critical element that contributed to the success of this democratization process was Kerekou's peaceful acceptance of the national conference's self-declared right to take control of the political process. As observed by Jacques Mariel Nzapouko, Director of the Center for Study and Research on Plural Democracy in the Third World (CERDET), Kerekou still enjoyed the loyalty of the Beninois Armed Forces and presumably could have crushed the opposition with military force (42). Moreover, the military elite constituted a potential threat to the national conference in that the transition to a civilian regime was expected to lead to a reduction in the political power of the military. Nonetheless, both Kerekou and the military elite inevitably accepted the popular legitimacy of the national conference and embraced its timetable for the introduction of multipartty politics to Benin (43).

The critical importance of the ruling elite's ultimate response to the demands of the national conference is clearly demonstrated by the example of Zaire (44). In sharp contrast to the unfolding of events in Benin, president Mobutu Sese Seko skillfully utilized a
combination of political maneuvering and repression to effectively forestall the efforts of a Zairian national conference convened by opposition parties. Utilizing many of the classic tools of political survival that have enabled him to remain in power since leading a military coup d'état in 1965, Mobutu not only successfully packed the national conference with hundreds of his own supporters (who subsequently have been able to delay, divert, and water down the proceedings), but created and sponsored progovernment parties that, although legally independent, in essence serve as front organizations for the maintenance of single-party rule. Equally important, Mobutu effectively fomented divisions within the opposition force by “buying off” renegade members (several of whom have been provided with plum jobs within the government) and fostering ethnically based rivalries among delegates (45).

Co-opted transitions

A third scenario occurs when the ruling elite is able to “co-opt” the transition process and maintains itself in power despite the holding of relatively free and fair elections. This co-optation of the democratic process usually follows three major steps (46). First, unlike the successful cases of transition by national conference in which an embattled president is stripped of his powers, the president under this scenario is acutely aware of the precarious nature of his political rule and acts in a quick, albeit relatively peaceful manner to preempt the democratic process. The usual course of action is to quickly accede to opposition demands to dismantle the single-party system, and to legalize all opposition parties within a new multiparty framework. Second, rather than giving the new opposition parties time to organize and therefore present a viable alternative to the voters capable of defeating the ruling regime, snap elections (often to be held within months) are announced by the ruling party. In this case, the ruling party — which usually still commands a formidable organizational structure and supporters within every region of the country — ideally desires the proliferation of numerous new parties so as to divide the opposition vote. Finally, during the period immediately preceding the elections, the president uses his party’s monopoly of the government-controlled print, radio, and television media to dominate the political debate. The net result is a “peaceful,” yet obviously tainted victory by the incumbent president and his party.

Multiparty elections held in Côte-d’Ivoire in October 1990 offer a classic example of a ruling elite’s ability to peacefully co-opt the democratization process (47). Considered by many analysts as a “master-tactician,” President Félix Houphouët-Boigny “completely outmaneuvered” his country’s democratization movement by “promptly legalizing all political parties and according to their fullest demands — open presidential and legislative elections — rushing the democratic transformation before opposition leaders could expand or redefine their demands, sharpen their tactics, or properly organize for electoral contests” (48). When some requested a delay (so they could get organized) this was rejected on the grounds of “their own recent demonstrations for instant national elections,” explains Samuel Decalo, a noted observer of the democratization process in Africa. “Election funds were allocated to all parties so they could not claim being at a disadvantage (some parties took the funds and withdrew from the elections), and the outcome was never in doubt” (49). Deep divisions within an unprepared opposition and government control of all the major media outlets not only ensured President Houphouët-Boigny’s victory in presidential elections with approximately 81 percent of the popular vote, but his ruling party — the Democratic Party of Côte-d’Ivoire-African Democratic Assembly (PDCI-RDA) — won 163 out of a total of 175 seats in the National Assembly. In short, Houphouët-Boigny’s foresight and ability to act quickly and decisively enabled him to co-opt the democratization process peacefully under multiparty elections that left opposition elites with little alternative but to accept the results and set their sights on future electoral contests.

Guided democratization

Unlike the process of co-optation in which an incumbent ruling elite is forced by events to quickly take action, the model of guided democratization is one in which the military maintains tight control over the transition process. The hallmark of this process is an extremely powerful military leader who, owing to the lack of any major competing centers of power, is capable of slowly instituting “democratization from above” according to his own timetable and preferences.

The Ghanaian military regime of Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings provides a clear-cut example of the process of guided democratization (50). Assuming power in a military coup d'état in June 1979, Rawlings led the Ghanaian Armed Forces back to the barracks in September 1979 after Dr. Hilla Limann was elected president by the constituent assembly. Political corruption, economic stagnation, and popular discontent with the Limann regime, however, prompted Rawlings to once again assume the leadership of Ghana in a military coup d'état in December 1981. Rather than returning to the barracks for a second time, Rawlings remained in power at the head of the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC), a military-based revolutionary organ that outlawed opposition political parties and enforced its vision of economically restructuring the country. The unchanged status of the PNDC would only be altered in 1992 — nearly 11 years after assuming power for a second time — when Rawlings decided that Ghana was ready for another attempt at multiparty democracy.

Rawlings oversaw a deliberately slow and measured liberalization of the Ghanaian political system that ultimately included the writing of a new constitution, the unbanning of political parties, the emergence of a private press, and the creation of independent national human rights organizations (51). In multiparty presidential elections held in November 1992, a combination of popular support (especially within the rural areas), careful planning, and strong control exerted by the ruling PNDC led to a Rawlings victory with 58.3 percent of the popular vote. Claiming that Rawlings and the PNDC had exercised “excessive control” over an inherently flawed election process, opposition allies boycotted the legislative elections held one month later, thereby ensuring a sweep of the National Legislature by pro-Rawlings parties (52).

Despite the fact that electoral irregularities, most notably flawed voter registration lists reportedly favoring the ruling elite, marred the democratization process, Rawlings nonetheless remains firmly in control of the newly created political system. As is the case with other military leaders intent on promoting guided democracy from above, however, Rawlings’ “toughest test” will be that of “shedding the image of the radical military dictator and becoming a democratic constitutional ruler able to create a climate of tolerance” (53).

Authoritarian reaction

In contrast to the previous examples, the scenario of “authoritarian reaction” entails high levels of state-sponsored violence against proponents of democracy in order to preserve the status quo. In this case, the ruling elite conducts elections that are neither free nor fair with the intent of stealing them. One of the frequent themes of this authoritarian response is the promotion of ethnic fighting by the ruling elite in order to divide the opposition and intimidate the general population. After this elite wins the elections, it uses “victory” to silence the opposition through such varied means as imprisonment, exile, and, in the extreme, execution. When ruling elites are willing to cast themselves in office through the use of authoritarian tactics is clearly demonstrated by the example of Cameroon (54). In October 1992, President Paul Biya and his ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) declared victory in the country’s first multiparty presidential
elections with 39.9 percent of the popular vote. During the two years preceding the elections, human rights groups estimate that at least 400 people associated with the democratization movement were killed by the Biya regime, and the elections themselves were fraught with gross violations of human rights and election procedures. «Widespread irregularities during the election period, on election day, and in the tabulation of results seriously calls into question, for any fair observer, the validity of the outcome», explained a report of the U.S. National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), one of the foreign groups that monitored the elections. «It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that this election system was designed to fail» (55).

Biya's self-proclaimed victory in the elections was followed by a wave of repression and arrests directed against opposition elites. For example, John Fru Ndi, the leader of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), who took second place in the presidential elections with 35.9 percent of the popular vote, was placed under house arrest with 135 of his supporters. Another 200 opposition figures were jailed, and a state of emergency was declared in the province of Western Cameroon «The brutality of the forces of law and order, particularly during arrests, is very alarming», explains Solomon Nfor Gwei, the chairman of Cameroon's National Commission for Human Rights and Freedom. «Many detainees are continuously being subjected to psychological and physical torture, some of whom we saw in great pain, with swollen limbs and genitalia, blisters and deep wounds and cracks on skulls» (56). In short, the facade of victory actually serves to embolden authoritarian ruling elites to unleash waves of repression that are designed to maintain the status quo at any cost.

Civil war and contested sovereignty

In the extreme, the authoritarian response of the incumbent elite can lead to civil war and the complete breakdown of the state. The resulting state of affairs has been referred to as «contested sovereignty» (57) owing to the simple reality that no one group is capable of asserting its authority over the entire territory or constructing a government considered to be legitimate either domestically or internationally.

An example of this extreme scenario is the bloody inter- and intrafront warfare that erupted in Somalia after Col. Mohamed Slad Barre was overthrown by a coalition of guerrilla forces in January 1991. Rather than abide by a 2 October 1990 accord in which the major guerrilla groups agreed to decide the shape of a post-Slaid political system, the United Somali Congress (USC), by virtue of its control of the capital, unilaterally named a Hawle, Ali Mahdi Mohamed, president of the country. This move heightened the often-turbulent rivalry between the Isakak-dominated Somali National Movement (SNM), the Hawle-dominated USC, and the Ogaden-dominated Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), as well as among scores of other, less-organized, clan groupings (58). In a move based on a strongly held Isakak belief that the north would continue to be victimized by a southern-dominated government, the SNM announced on 17 May 1991 that the former British Somaliland territory was seceding from the 1960 union and henceforth would be known as the Somaliand Republic. This event was followed by the intensification of clan conflict in the southern portion of the country between the USC and the SPM, which, in turn, was exacerbated by a group of former SNA soldiers, the Harad clan groupings under the military banner of the Somali National Front (SNF). Moreover, a brutal intraclan power struggle erupted in Mogadishu between USC forces loyal to Interim President Mahdi, a member of the Abgal clan of the Hawle, and those led by General Mohamed Farah Aidid, a member of the Heber Gedir clan of the Hawle. In short, one of the common political enemies no longer existed, traditional clan differences, exacerbated by the dictatorial divide-and-rule practices of the Slad years, led to an intensification of clan conflict and famine throughout southern and central Somalia.

As of May 1995, rising levels of clan-based violence had led to the withdrawal of U.S. and other UN-sponsored peacekeeping forces originally introduced into Somalia as part of «Operation Restore Hope». According to many policy analysts, continuing clan conflict suggests that the Somali civil war is far from over, and that the images of famine and fighting that dominated the international news media during 1992 are more likely to return. Although the U.S.-led military operation underscored the difficulty of imposing solutions from abroad, it is important to note that internal reconciliation processes also faltered as a result of historically based clan enmities exacerbated by over 21 years of the divide-and-rule policies of the Slad regime. Other African countries that have erupted in civil warfare, and therefore represent varying degrees of contested sovereignty, include Angola, Liberia, Rwanda, Spanish Sahara (claimed by Morocco), and the Sudan.

TOWARD THE FUTURE: OPTIMISM OR PESSIMISM?

The period of democratization unfolding in Africa since 1990 has fostered both optimism and pessimism among Africanists. Optimism was particularly generated by a host of early successes, most notably the national conference experiment in Benin during 1990, that led to the successful transfer of power from authoritarian regimes to popularly elected multiparty democracies. Pessimism increasingly had to do with the simple reality that beginning in 1992, the democratization process in Africa has significantly stalled and, in some cases such as Burundi, has been reversed (59).

Ruling elites have played the most critical role in this process, invariably serving as either facilitators or impediments to rising popular demands for democracy. In the case of Benin, for example, President Kerekou's willingness to cede power to the national conference and therefore act in the end as a facilitator was critical in avoiding the potential bloodbath that could have occurred if he attempted to suppress the democratization process with the support of the military.

The willingness to accede to opposition demands has diminished as ruling elites have «learned the lessons» of democratization movements in neighboring countries — most notably that the failure to act quickly and decisively almost ensures their departure from office. In the case of Zaire, this meant a very proactive stance on the part of Mobutu to derail the national conference. In Côte d'Ivoire, Houphouët-Boigny quickly embraced the central demands of the democratization movement and held national elections before the opposition could mount an effective challenge. In the case of Ghana, Rawlings also preempted the opposition by implementing a tightly monitored reform process made possible by his control of the military and popular support. Finally, Biya of Cameroon literally stole the elections and turned to more authoritarian tactics in their aftermath to silence opposition voices. The result of these cases is that all four leaders were able to manipulate the democratization process to maintain their elite coalitions in power. It is precisely these types of responses, as opposed to the earlier, more accommodating stances, that appear to be most likely at least in the short-term future.

Yet even in those cases in which African countries have made a successful transition to more democratic forms of governance, their newly elected regimes are extremely fragile and thus have not achieved levels of consolidation enjoyed within the industrialized West. As was the case with the inherited democracies of the 1950s, the newly formed democracies of the 1990s and the 2000s face the «great expectations — minimal-capabilities» paradox that led to the creation of single-party political systems. In the case of Zambia, for example, a significant portion of the Zambian people seemingly believed that the overthrow of single-party rule and the institution into a multiparty system would somehow save...
as a panacea for the country’s economic problems. The combination of the minimal capabilities of the Zambian state and the constraints imposed on executive action by the democratic system, however, have led to little success within the economic realm followed by growing public weariness and disenchantment with the Chiluba regime.

The net result of Chiluba’s declining popularity has been the necessity of coming to grips with the “authoritarian-democratic” paradox faced by ruling elites during the independence era. Although largely socialized and trained within an authoritarian tradition as were his predecessors, Chiluba is expected to abide by the “rules of the game” of the newly inaugurated multipartite political system. Strict adherence to these rules, however, could effectively seal Chiluba’s fate at the hands of new opposition movements that increasingly criticize his lack of leadership. Unfortunately, some of Chiluba’s responses to the growing economic and political crisis, most notably the imposition of a state of emergency, harken back to the authoritarian excesses of his predecessors and could severely undermine the very democratic political system he sought to create.

These paradoxes are not unique to Chiluba’s situation in Zambia, but are instead applicable to all the democratization movements in Africa. Just as the decisions adopted by newly elected elites during the late 1950s and early 1960s led to approximately 30 years of single-party rule on the African continent, so the decisions employed by current elites to resolve these paradoxes during the decade of the 1990s may establish the outlines of a new form of political rule in Africa that will continue to exist well into the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although it is still too early to make a definitive assessment as to what shape or form that political rule will take, it does appear that, at least for the short term, ruling elites more often than not will continue to act as impediments to the democratization process in order to maintain themselves in office.

The most important conclusion suggested by the preceding analysis, however, is that neither ruling elites nor their replacements in the cases of successful democratization have allowed the contest for governance to slip beyond their control. In other words, the contest over political ascendency in Africa still largely takes place among the same group of contestants: a very small elite (whether civilian or military) that generally favors political self-preservation over policies and political structures truly designed to benefit the disempowered majorities of most African countries. In case after case, ruling elites continue to impede the process of sharing political and economic power more broadly.

As suggested by siddqy typology, however, the process of democratization in Africa and other regions of the world is extremely complex, and cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies of democratic and nondemocratic outcomes. Different processes yield different outcomes, which in turn have different implications for the future evolution of African experiments with democracy (60). For example, countries currently employing relatively effective democratic systems (such as Zambia and Botswana) are building the basis for effective links between civil society and newly reformulated state structures, and therefore deserve the support of foreign governments and institutions. In other, more authoritarian cases, such as Cameroon and Kenya, foreign observers must resist the urge to reward superficial changes and instead seriously consider coercive measures (such as economic sanctions) to strengthen the position of opposition movements relative to entrenched authoritarian elites. Yet as demonstrated in the case of the US-sponsored and U.S.-led military intervention in Somalia, the use of military force is incapable of imposing a solution from abroad and may instead further intensify existing ethnic, clan and religious animosities within a given country.

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NOTES


(6) This was the thesis of Anie’s presentation, The Democratization of Disempowerment, at a conference, Democracy as Crusade: How Western Governments and Third World Elites Are Trying to Use Democracy as a Tool of Controlling the Third World, sponsored by the Transnational Institute (Cologne, Germany, 19 November 1993).


(12) For a good overview of this trend, see Ruth Berins Collier, Regimes in Tropical Africa: Changing Forms of Supremacy, 1945-75 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).


(14) For a good overview of which this discussion is drawn, see J. Gus...


(22) There have been at least six more successful coups during the 1987-88 period.


(24) For a comparison of military versus civilian rule, see Liebenow, African Politics, pp. 237-68.

(25) For example, see Bratton and van de Walle, «Toward Governance in Africa».


(27) The remaining countries are described as falling under one of three categories: authoritarian (17 percent); contested sovereignty (7 percent); and directed democracy (19 percent).


(29) See, for example, the September 1994 issue of Africa Demos, a quarterly publication of the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

(30) For a more extended discussion of this concept, see Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe S. Schmitter, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies (Baltimore, MD : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).


(33) Ibid.


(38) Nkouakbe, «Role of the National Conference», p. 45.

(39) Ibid.

(40) See Nkouakbe, «Role of the National Conference», p. 45.


(44) See Nkouakbe, «Role of the National Conference», p. 45.

(45) Ibid.


(49) Ibid.


(55) Quoted in ibid., p. 42.


(57) See, for example, the report on the September 1994 issue of Africa Demos.

(58) For an overview of the origins and evolution of these guerrilla groups, see Daniel Compagnon, «The Somalian Opposition Front: Some Comments and Questions», Horn of Africa 13, n°1-2 (1990).


(60) See, for example, Michael Bratton and Nickolas van de Walle, Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transition in Africa (Cambridge, MA : Cambridge University Press, 1998).