Elites as Facilitators or Impediments to Political Development? Some Lessons from the “Third Wave” of Democratization in Africa

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 prodemocracy 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 three decades ago,” explained Michael Clough, Senior Fellow for

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Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Loyola University Chicago, 6525 N. Sheridan Road, Chicago, Illinois 60626, and Fulbright Lecturer (1994–95 academic year) in the Faculté de Droit et de Science Politique at Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal.

An initial, shortened version of this article was presented at a conference sponsored by the Transnational Institute, Cologne, Germany, 13 November 1993. The author appreciates the comments of Patrick Boyle and Guy Martin on earlier drafts of this article, and the research support provided by Bruce Taylor and Gary Gordon.

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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." Adopting a less sanguine viewpoint, René Lemarchand 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; the inability of opposition forces to rally around a credible alternative owing to the religious, ethnic, and regional divisions evident within most African societies; and the crushing socioeconomic impact of internal economic decline and externally enforced structural adjustment programs (SAPs). 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. 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.

Differences of opinion over the strength and future viability of democracy in Africa are matched by an ongoing debate over the proper roles of external powers in facilitating the democratization process. According to Huntington, for example, the United States and the West in general should be in the forefront of ensuring that the "global democratic revolution" reaches "virtually every country in the world," including those on the African continent. Scholars operating from a more critical perspective seriously question the implications of external pressures for reform. Africanist Timothy M. Shaw underscores that Western pressures for what in essence constitutes the "Westernization" of Africa and the other regions of the Third World can be characterized as the most recent manifestation of "neocolonialism." Several Africanists have even begun to speak of the "recolonization" or the "second scramble" for Africa (the "first scramble" was formalized in 1884–85, when the colonial powers divided up the African continent at the Berlin Conference in Germany).

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


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 power and “check” the rise of authoritarian leaders. For example, whereas the relatively 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 Elysée model—was similarly introduced into the former Francophone colonies.10 This state of 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 “state” (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.11 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 mono-crop and mono-mineral-based economies, low levels of education among the general population, and perverse infrastructural development favoring the maintenance of external links as opposed to internal development.12

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 left behind by the former colonial powers and to replace them with more authoritarian forms of governance based on centralization of power and personal rule.13 It is important to note, however, that ruling elites were not exclusively interested in acquiring power for
power's sake, but often shared many high-minded principles (e.g., quick development to satisfy popular 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, Kenneth 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 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 allies); 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 disbanding 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 disbanding of multiparty political systems in favor of the creation of single-party systems.14

The creation of single-party regimes constituted the most important authoritarian trend undertaken by African presidents during the postcolonial era.15 These parties ranged from Chama Cha Mapinduizi (CCM), a mass-mobilizing socialist party created by Julius Nyerere (the former president of Tanzania); to the Workers' 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.16

Ruling elites offered numerous rationales to justify what in essence constituted the establishment of political monopolies over their respective political systems.17 The first justification was that single-party regimes were reflective of traditional African political systems as they existed prior to the imposition of direct colonial rule.18 According to this argument, 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."19 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 promoting traditional African norms of consensus and inclusivity of the entire community. It is for this reason that President Nyerere of Tanzania chose ujamaa (the Kiswahili term for "brotherhood") as the symbolic guiding principle of the CCM and his country's "return" to traditional African socialism.20
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 "frittering away" scarce resources on competitive politics. 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 fragmentation of ethnically, religiously, and regionally divided African societies, and therefore perceived the single-party system as one of the most important tools for transforming artificial, colonially inspired states into true nations.

Finally, numerous ruling elites, most notably those from the African-Marxist tradition, justified the creation of single-party systems in terms of the "vanguard" role that single parties were expected to play. Drawing upon the Leninist concept that the "masses" of individual African societies needed to be led by an "enlightened elite," the single party was envisioned as serving in the vanguard (i.e., in the "forefront") of promoting and protecting socialist revolutions on the African continent. The single party was oriented toward the future evolution of African societies, particularly in terms of ensuring industrial development and the promotion of basic human needs such as guaranteed access to adequate food, shelter, and healthcare.

Regardless of the rationales offered by its political proponents, the nearly 30-year experiment with single-party systems is regarded by academics from all points of the ideological spectrum as, at worst, failing completely, and, at best, achieving few if any results that would make such systems preferable to other forms of democracy. To be sure, single-party systems have differed in terms of governance and their general treatment of their respective populations. As explained by Samuel Decalo:

The single party system has been the means to govern society relatively benevolently—by Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda and Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Tanzania, Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire respectively; more harshly but still responsibly—by Kamuzu Banda and Thomas Sankara in Malawi and Burkina Faso; to venally plunder it—as have Mobutu Sese Seko and Samuel Doe in Zaire and Liberia; or as a camouflage for personal or class tyranny—as under Jean-Bedel Bokassa, Mengistu Haile Mariam or Macias Nguema in the Central African Republic, Ethiopia and Equatorial Guinea.

Even in the most benevolent of examples, such as Nyerere's ujamaa experiment in Tanzania, however, the country made significant strides in promoting mass literacy and in the provision of basic human needs only at the expense of a failed overall economy that witnessed an annual average decline of 7 percent in agricultural output. One of the primary reasons for this failure was that the initially "voluntary" villagization program—the centerpiece of the ujamaa ideology
in which peasants would be grouped together in new communal villages—ultimately became coercive in nature. Specifically, many peasants were forced off of their traditional (and productive) lands to villagization projects chosen by party bureaucrats that were either poorly conceived or simply inappropriate for farming practices. If the state inevitably became coercive (and therefore counterproductive to the goal of development) in the most benevolent of single-party systems, one has only to imagine the impact on development of the most tyrannical single-party systems such as Mengistu’s Ethiopia.

The most notable problem associated with the single-party experiment of Tanzania and its contemporaries was that it led to a “stagnation of ideas.” For 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 militaries and military elites. 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 1956 to 1986, for example, 60 out of 131 attempted coups d’état resulted in the overthrow of the civilian regime of an African country. (If one includes reported “plots” against an established government, the number of potential episodes of military involvement equals 257.) Only three African countries—Botswana, Cape Verde, and Djibouti—have not experienced some form of extralegal involvement by their military forces within the political arena. Most important, the emergence of military elites as power brokers within African executive mansions and parliaments did not usher in a new period of democracy and prosperity. Rather, it soon became clear that military coups d’état usually led to new forms of military-led authoritarianism as bad as, if not worse than, their civilian counterparts.


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. Second, the majority of African economies were in crisis owing to internal economic decline 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. 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 July–August 1993 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 elections 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 24 countries (roughly 44 percent) are described as “in transition” as of 1993 from various types of authoritarian rule to potentially more democratic forms of governance. In short, the vast majority of African regimes (72 percent) seemingly either has become democratic, or embodies a transition process potentially leading to more democratic forms of governance.

Despite high expectations, Africanists 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. In the case of Burundi, for example, which was praised by the Clinton administration as holding “exemplary presidential elections” in June 1993, the newly elected democratic government was overthrown in a successful military coup d’état in October 1993. Similarly, 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. Toward 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. These six types comprise (1) regime change via multiparty elections; (2) regime change via the national conference; (3) co-opted transitions; (4) guided democratization; (5) authoritarian reaction; and (6) civil war and contested sovereignty.

1. Regime Change via Multiparty Elections. By the end of 1993, 15 African countries had carried out at least one set of multiparty elections in which there occurred a relatively peaceful transfer of power from one ruling elite to another. The shifts in power that were formalized by these elections ranged from the transformation of Benin (1991) from the African-Marxist dictatorship of Mathieu Kerekou to the pro-Western presidency of Nicephore Soglo; the independence of Namibia from South Africa in 1990 under the elected leadership of Sam Nujoma; to the election in 1980 of President Quett Masire of Botswana after his predecessor, Sir Seretse Khama, died in a plane crash during that same year. In this final case, elections fostered a change in “government” (as opposed to a change in regime) in that both Masire and Khama were elected under the party sponsorship of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party.

It is important to note, however, that the successful holding of multiparty elections does not ensure that democratic practices have become institutionalized in countries still marked by democratic fragility. 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. “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.”

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.” According to this scale of democracy, none of the previously noted 15 African countries that as of 1993 were categorized under the democratic category received the highest ranking of democratic consolidation.

Two examples highlight the caution that one must adopt when analyzing regime change via multiparty elections, and especially the role of ruling elites in either facilitating or impeding that process. First, scholars rightfully have described Botswana as Africa’s oldest surviving multiparty democracy (presidential and
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legislative elections have been held six times since independence in 1966), and they have suggested that it potentially can serve as a model for more recently emerging democracies on the African continent.39 When one closely examines the results of presidential and legislative elections, however, it soon becomes clear that despite the outward appearance of a vibrant multiparty democracy, Botswana can be characterized as constituting a de facto single-party system. Specifically, although Botswana’s postindependence era has witnessed a proliferation of political parties, ranging from the labor-oriented Botswana Liberal Party (BLP) to the socialist-inspired Botswana National Front (BNF), the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has dominated the political system.40 In every election since independence in 1966, not only has the BDP won the presidency, but it has never failed to win less than 77 percent of all seats within the National Assembly, and in the latest elections in 1989 it consolidated its hold over national politics by winning 91 percent of all legislative seats.41

The primary reason for the BDP’s success is a strong presidential system that heavily favors the incumbent president and his ruling party.42 Although the opposition is able to freely organize and compete in national elections, it is nearly impossible to break the monopoly of the ruling party, which controls both executive and legislative branches of government. Commenting on the overwhelming victory of the BNP in the 1989 national elections, for example, Bojosi Otlogile, Lecturer in Law at the University of Botswana, succinctly noted that “any determined government with such parliamentary strength [91 percent of all seats] can easily pass any legislation effecting any changes it so wishes.”43 Moreover, the ruling party combines government control of the most significant media outlets with the president’s unique vested powers to co-opt any rising opposition elite groups. “Conflict over key issues occurs inside the BDP and is sometimes continued in the National Assembly,” explains Kenneth Good, “but after a backbencher, critical of the Government’s urban housing policy, was actually ejected in 1974 over the issue, he became an assistant minister [to the president].”44

The potential impediments posed by ruling elites to the consolidation of multiparty democracy are also demonstrated by events in Zambia, a country that in 1991 made a successful transition from the single-party system headed by President Kenneth Kaunda (who had ruled since independence in 1964) to a multiparty political system under the elected leadership of President Frederik Chiluba, the candidate of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD).45 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).46 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.47

Critics of the government’s actions drew parallels between Kaunda’s use of the state of emergency to silence political 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 (125 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.”46 In short, even a democratically elected president in control of party structures can use that party to thwart the opposition and suppress dissent.

2. 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.”49 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.50 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 figurehead. Fourth, the national 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 transitional government adopts a new constitution and holds legislative and presidential elections, subsequently dissolving itself upon the inauguration of the new democratically elected regime.

The strong appeal of the national conference approach to democratization—demanded in some shape or form by prodemocracy movements in almost every nondemocratic African country—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.51 In the case of Benin, more than 18 years of authoritarian rule under the African-Marxist dictatorship of President 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 multiparty 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 Nzoouankeu, 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. 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 multiparty politics to Benin.

The critical importance of the ruling elite’s ultimate response to the demands of a national conference is clearly demonstrated by the counterexample of Zaire. In sharp contrast to the unfolding of events in Benin, President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire 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 forces by “buying off” renegade members (several of whom have been provided with plum jobs within the government) and fostering ethnically based rivalries among delegates.

3. 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. 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 democratization forces. 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. 57 Considered by many analysts as a “master-tactician,” President Félix Houphouët-Boigny “completely outmaneuvered” his country’s prodemocracy movement by “promptly legalizing all political parties, and acceding 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.”58 “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.”59 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 the guise of free (but ultimately unfair) multiparty elections that left opposition elites with little alternative but to accept the results and set their sights on future electoral contests.

4. 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 elite 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. 60 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 in democratic elections. 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 unchallenged 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. 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 exerted “excessive control” over an inherently flawed election process, opposition elites boycotted the legislative elections held one month later, thereby ensuring a sweep of the National Legislature by pro-Rawlings parties.

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 Ghanaian 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.”

5. 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 existing 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 hallmarks 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.

The extent to which ruling elites are willing to maintain themselves in office through the use of authoritarian tactics is clearly demonstrated by the example of Cameroon. 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 electoral 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.”
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 Ndii, 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 also 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 genitals, blisters and deep wounds and cracks on skulls." 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.

6. 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" 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 intraclan warfare that erupted in Somalia after Somali dictator Mohammed Siad 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-Siad political system, the United Somali Congress (USC), by virtue of its control of the capital, unilaterally named a Hawiye, Ali Mahdi Mohammed, president of the country. This move heightened the already-tense relations between the Isaak-dominated Somali National Movement (SNM), the Hawiye-dominated USC, and the Ogadeni-dominated Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), as well as among scores of other, less-organized, clan groupings. In a move based on a strongly held Isaak 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 Somaliland 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 regrouping of Siad's Darod 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 Maahi, a member of the Abgal subclan of the Hawiye, and those led by General Mohamed Farah Aidid, a member of the Habar Gedir subclan of the Hawiye. In short, once the common political enemy no longer existed, traditional clan differences, exacerbated by the dictatorial divide-and-rule practices of the Siad years, led to an intensification of clan conflict and famine throughout southern and central Somalia.
As it became increasingly clear that the UN Security Council was incapable of generating the leadership necessary to stem intensifying levels of clan conflict and famine, President George Bush announced in a live television address to the U.S. public on 4 December 1992 that U.S. troops would be deployed in Somalia to "create a secure environment" for the distribution of famine-relief aid. Five days later the first contingent of U.S. troops led by three teams of Navy SEALs (Sea-Air-Land Commandos) landed on the beaches of Mogadishu and secured the airport and the port. The U.S. military landing, designated "Operation Restore Hope," was carried out under the auspices of a UN Security Council resolution sanctioning foreign intervention. In the weeks that followed, over 36,000 foreign troops from over 20 countries (including approximately 24,000 U.S. military personnel) occupied various cities and towns throughout central and southern Somalia, and began the task of opening food supply routes, as well as creating distribution networks.69

In addition to the potent impact of presidential politics in an election year, as well as President Bush's desire (once he had lost the elections) to ensure that the history books remember him as ending his term of office as a "decisive leader" as opposed to a "vanquished politician,"70 the primary reason for White House approval of Operation Restore Hope was growing public and congressional pressures on the White House to "do something" to resolve what James R. Kunder, the head of the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, labeled the "world's worst humanitarian disaster."71 By August 1992, nearly nine months after fighting had broken out between rival factions of the USC, as many as 1.5 million of an estimated Somali population of 6 million were threatened with starvation, with approximately 300,000 Somalis already having died, including roughly 25 percent of all children under the age of five. As media reports of this extended humanitarian crisis increased in quantity beginning in July 1992, particularly in terms of live satellite broadcasts that portrayed images of starving Somali children on morning talk shows and nightly newscasts,72 criticism of executive branch inaction from a variety of quarters increasingly was taken more seriously by the White House. Indeed, according to a New York Times/CBS public opinion poll conducted just prior to the beginning of Operation Restore Hope, 81 percent of the U.S. public believed that President Bush was "doing the right thing in sending troops to Somalia to make sure food gets to the people there," with 70 percent believing that sending troops was even "worth the possible loss of American lives, financial costs, and other risks."73

By the fall of 1994, however, rising levels of clan-based violence had led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the imminent departure of the remaining UN peace-keeping forces. According to most 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 than likely going 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
Siad 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.

**Conclusion: Optimism or Pessimism?**

The period of democratization unfolding in Africa since 1989 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 has been generated by 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.

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 had attempted to suppress the democratization process with the support of the military.

The willingness to accede to opposition demands seemingly 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 in the countryside. Finally, Biya of Cameroon literally stole the elections and turned to more authoritarian tactics in their aftermath to silence opposition voices. The net 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 democratic systems of the 1950s and the 1960s, the newly formed democracies of the 1980s and the 1990s 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 ushering in of a multiparty system would
somehow serve 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 multiparty political system. Strict adherence to those 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 our sixfold 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.75 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 UN-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, or religious animosities within a given country.

NOTES


6. This was the thesis of Ake’s presentation, “The Democratization of Disempowerment,” at a conference on 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, 13 November 1993.)


26. There have been at least six more successful coups during the 1987–93 period.


29. For example, see Bratton and van de Walle, “Toward Governance in Africa.”


31. The remaining countries are described as falling under one of three categories: “authoritarian” rule (7 percent); “contested sovereignty” (7 percent); and “directed democracy” (13 percent).


36. Ibid.

37. See, for example, the July–August 1993 issue of Africa Demos, a quarterly publication of the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia.


40. Other parties include the Botswana Independence Party (BIP), the Botswana People’s Party (BPP), and the Botswana Progressive Union (BPU).


47. Ibid.


53. Ibid.


59. Ibid.


64. For discussion, see Mark Hubbard, “Cameroon: A Flawed Victory,” Africa Report, January–February 1993, pp. 41–44.

65. Quoted in ibid., p. 42.
67. See, for example, the July–August 1993 issue of *Africa Demos*.
68. For an overview of the origins and evolution of these guerrilla groups, see Daniel Compagnon, “The Somali Opposition Fronts: Some Comments and Questions,” *Horn of Africa* 13, nos. 1–2 (1990).
75. See, for example, Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, “Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa” (MSU Working Paper #1 on Political Reform in Africa, Michigan State University, May 1993).