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Dilemmas of Democracy and State Power in Africa

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We begin the fifth year of AfricaPlus with discussions of two paradoxes in sub-Saharan Africa: the durability of both democratizing and authoritarian governments; and the expansion of economies despite their tepid structural transformation. Such dilemmas suggest the need for vigorous theorizing and debate, and their alignment with efforts to strengthen state capacities, build democratic institutions, promote entrepreneurship, and enhance economic governance.

A quarter-century after sub-Saharan Africa experienced an upsurge of democracy, a different and more complicated political era has dawned. The expansion of liberal democracy h

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slowed in the continent just as it has globally. Several forces are responsible for this dénouement: the rise of China; the entrenchment of illiberal systems; intensified and multiplying conflicts in the Middle East; authoritarian nationalism in Russia and other countries; the harmonizing of market economies with non-democratic governance; and jihadist and other intractable wars.

The advance and retreat of democracy in Africa since the end of the Cold War have resulted in a new mosaic of political systems. Popular uprisings can still sweep away autocracies, such as that of Blaise Campaoré in Burkina Faso, or block their consolidation as under Abdoulaye Wade in Senegal. However, such movements can also be thwarted by determined autocrats as exemplified by Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and Uganda's Yoweri Museveni. Some of the most enduring systems of personal rule in the world can now be found in Africa, as the cases of Cameroon, Gabon, and Togo attest. Regimes that came to power by armed force, and have permitted restricted electoral competition, can crush political opponents with little harm to their external relationships. Such systems can be seen in Angola, Ethiopia, and Rwanda.

Selection of African Leaders with Twenty Years in Power Omar al-Bashir, Sudan (top left); Idress Deby Itno, Chad (top center); Yoweri Museveni, Uganda (top right); King Mswati III, Swaziland (middle left); Denis Sassou Nguesso, Republic of the Congo (middle center); Paul Biya, Cameroon (middle right); Robert

Mugabe, Zimbabwe (bottom left); Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, Angola (bottom center); Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasongo, Equatorial Guinea (bottom right) Source: African Leadership Magazine

Over a decade ago, Robert Cooper predicted that the number of "fractured nations", lacking states with effective authority, was likely to increase in the developing world.[1] In the case of Africa, his prediction is confirmed by the absence of governmental authority in much of Somalia, Eastern Congo, Darfur and other Sudanese provinces, northern Mali, northeast Nigeria, Central African Republic, and Libya. While the number of pure tyrannies has declined, those that persist – in Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, and Gambia – are very resistant to external pressure.

It is pertinent to reread arguments advanced by African historian and social theorist, Achille Mbembe, at the very start of the *abertura* in 1990:

We are stymied in evaluating the prospects for African capitalism and democracy that are not simply acquisitions, or impositions, of elements drawn from western societies. In brief, Africa's failures reflect also the failure of our theories and prescriptions…We risk reducing democracy to mimicry, or worse, to a convenient way of becoming more 'presentable' in the world…Regimes which long relied on modes of authoritarian governance are making an about-turn and verbally espousing democratic ideals…There is a danger that multipartyism will reflect, in the end, merely a new consensus among the elites on the reallocation of prebends.[2]

It is important during the current era of heightened global conflict and uncertainty to revisit earlier prognoses about Africa's democratic prospects. What have been key factors and forces, in retrospect, that critically influenced these processes? What adjustments should be made to "our theories and prescriptions"? Finally, is democratic and constitutional governance likely to withstand the resurgence of authoritarianism?

The Waning of the Democratic Wave

Decades of political oscillation in Nigeria have contributed to the slowing of democratic momentum in the continent.[3] In 1975, Nigeria embarked on one of the most systematic transitions to constitutional democracy ever attempted in a large and complex nation. Well ahead of the global democratic upsurge, a transition to multi-party democracy was carried out in Nigeria after almost fourteen years of military rule. On December 31, 1983, however, an elected government led by Shehu Shagari was overthrown in a military coup just months after being returned to power in highly flawed elections.[4]

For the next decade, the most populous country in Africa was kept on the sidelines of democratic progress in the continent. When the vacillating military ruler, Ibrahim Babangida, finally allowed presidential elections to proceed in June 1993 – one of the best the country had ever known – it was abruptly annulled by his regime. Nigeria then succumbed to the tyrannical rule of General Sani Abacha, 1993-1998. All together, it took fifteen years before military rule was terminated in 1999, a longer period than the first military era, 1966 – 1979.[5]

What Thomas Carothers has called "feckless democracy", and Larry Diamond "pseudo democracy", prevailed in Nigeria during the first sixteen years of the Fourth Republic, May 1999 – May 2015.[6] This period has been characterized by excessive political turbulence, extensive civil violence, high levels of corruption, and fraudulent elections. The former military ruler, Olusegun Obasanjo, who had overseen the 1976-79 democratic transition, returned as an elected president in 1999. However, he governed in an often arbitrary and unpredictable manner. He even tried to have constitutional term limits to his presidency removed. Instead of pursuing what Francis Fukuyama has called "the long, costly, laborious and difficult process of institution building", Obasanjo entrenched feckless democracy by manipulating state financial, judicial, electoral, and anti-corruption institutions.[7]

Another major country that could have boosted democratization in the continent, namely South Africa, was also kept from doing so by its own leaders. The transfer of power to an elected government in South Africa via nonracial elections in April 1994 was one of the great triumphs of global democracy in the late twentieth century. After decades of arduous effort, during which a broad international movement bolstered the domestic struggle for nonracial democracy, the elimination of the apartheid system was accomplished without massive loss of lives.

Yet, the emergence of a "rainbow nation" under President Nelson Mandela and his successors did not translate into active support for democratic progress in the continent. For example, when Mandela wanted to support the struggle against Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha, he was pulled back from doing so by his ANC colleagues, and especially his vice-president, Thabo Mbeki. South Africa has steadily assumed a more nationalist than pro-democratic posture vis-à-vis several African conflict situations, from Côte d'Ivoire to Sudan.

Civil society and labor organizations in South Africa that demanded bolder action from the ANC government, for example regarding Robert Mugabe's brutal rule in Zimbabwe, have been repeatedly disappointed. The failure of the government of President Jacob Zuma to implement

a court order for the detention in South Africa of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir – based on an outstanding international warrant for his arrest – is one of a number of occasions when this pivotal African country has been "missing-in-action" regarding democracy and human rights promotion. The undeniable domestic gains in these domains have not translated into their advocacy and defense externally.

A woman casts her vote in South Africa's 2014 election. (Source: African Leadership Magazine)

I have written elsewhere about other factors and forces that have impeded democratic progress in Africa, such as authoritarian modernization in Ethiopia and Rwanda.[8] When, for example, prominent authoritarian governments produce better socio-economic outcomes than democracies, the climb to establish and strengthen the latter grows ever steeper. Also complicating the African political terrain has been the upsurge of jihadist violence. The September 2001 destruction of the World Trade Towers in New York City by al-Qaeda is usually cited as altering the global calculus of political order and security. Not to be overlooked, however, is the earlier bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. The threat posed by Jihadism to the American and European "homelands" has resulted in a policy tilt that often favors strong men and strong regimes over the building of democratic institutions.

The Primacy of Political Order

At the dawn of the millennium, the publication of Jeffrey Herbst's *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* provided a foundational text for the study of governance and state power.[9] Herbst delineated the continuities between pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and post-Cold War periods in the acquisition, projection, and erosion of state power.[10] His analysis is germane to two key questions in early twenty-first century Africa. First, can constitutional democracies be developmental, that is, represent more than "a new consensus among the elites on the reallocation of prebends", to use Mbembe's formulation? And second, can competitive democratic systems yield authoritative and effective government?

Answers to these questions are being sought in Africa's diverse national and regional arenas. The work of several scholars is pertinent to these pursuits. I wish to signal here that of Richard Sklar.[11] Sklar put forward nuanced understandings of African politics that deserve renewed attention. His notion of Africa as a "workshop of democracy" captures the importance of democratization being more than institutional mimicry. [12] Another relevant insight of Sklar is that a major contribution of Africa to political thought and practice is what he calls "dual majesty".[13] There is an expectation in much Western political thought that traditional forms of governance will eventually give way to more modern and universalistic systems. But communalism can persist and provide legitimacy to political orders. The resurgence of identity-based political mobilization is evident in many parts of the world, and especially the Middle East.

In the case of Africa, the configurations of governing majorities, even in electoral democracies such as Kenya and Nigeria, cannot be understood without reference to "the majesty" embedded in culturally-based socio-political structures. Nigerian scholar, Adigun Agbaje, alerted us during the post-1990 *abertura* of exactly this challenge. He contended, echoing Sklar and others, of the need for "more dialogue and debate on traditional perceptions of the history and contemporary work-a-day meanings of democratization and democracy among the divergent cultures, peoples and countries of Africa."[14] Even earlier, another Nigerian scholar spoke of "a unique historical configuration" of legitimate power in Africa, distinguishing a colonially-constructed "public" from a communal one that endures despite the alternation of national political regimes.[15] These contentions connect again with another Mbembe's suggestion in his 1990 essay:

There should be greater interest in the ways in which Africans involved in contemporary social

movements confront the issue of the 'political community'. The 'ethnic group' is a fundamental metaphor of civil virtue in contemporary Africa. Ethnicity is a potent force. If one desires African solutions to the democratic question, this point must be recognized…Greater attention must also be paid to political activities that occur outside formal institutions and emerge from below.[16]

The third Sklarian notion I will mention here is that all governmental systems are mixed and what is good in governance may not necessarily be democratic.[17] When African leaders rejected demands for transitions to pluralist democracy, citing African cultural dispositions, their views were usually regarded as self-serving. Today, these contentions have returned with renewed force. Advocates of the "good governance agenda" are often pushed back on their heels, especially with the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia.[18] Even some development economists regard authoritarian modernization as a more suitable course for poor African countries than systems characterized by excessive rent-seeking and "competitive clientelism".[19]

The primacy of political order, or the capacity to project force domestically and externally, is evident in the prominence achieved by authoritarian governments in Chad, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda. Within their respective regions, in continental fora, and in the global arena, attitudes towards these regimes are influenced by the fear of disorder and terrorist violence. Their failings in democracy, the rule of law, and observance of human rights, while acknowledged, are more tolerated and even excused. On the one hand, therefore, democracy advocates must confront the low thresholds for "democratic presentability" in Africa. On the other hand, the building of effective political orders seems to require more sensitivity to "work-a-day meanings of democratization and democracy", i.e., that are historically and culturally grounded. How these strands will be rewoven to meet the challenges of the post-9/11 era is a project that deserves more attention from scholars and policy analysts.[20]

State Power and Democratic Resilience

I will conclude this essay by reflecting briefly on the experiences of several states in which the maintenance or restoration of pluralist democracy required significant supportive action by external countries and agencies: Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Kenya.

In Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) a long period of post-colonial instability ended with the

seizure of power in August 1983 by a group of radically-minded military officers led by Thomas Sankara. Blaise Compaoré, a senior member of the junta, subsequently overthrew Sankara in an operation that led to the latter's death in October 1987. After 27 years, the Burkinabe people chased Campaoré from power in October 2014. They rose again when his presidential guard tried to remove a transitional government in September 2015. Popular uprisings can therefore still dislodge autocratic regimes in Africa as occurred in the early 1990s.

Côte d'Ivoire cycled through several usurpations of power after the death of its longtime ruler, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in 1993. The last of these usurpers, Laurent Gbagbo, was dislodged by a coalition of domestic and external forces that included the former colonial power, France. Gbagbo had refused to abide by the results of an election overseen by international agencies. In Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade did not mount a resistance to the same extent as Gbagbo, but his removal from power after elections in February and March 2012 similarly involved collaborative action by domestic opponents and external countries and agencies.

A similar pattern of collective action played out in Mali where a former paragon of democracy, Ahmadou Toumani Touré, was dislodged by a military coup in March 2012. The coup leaders, in turn, were forced to transfer power to an elected government in August 2013. Alone among the countries discussed here, Ghana and Zambia have not veered from the core constitutional provisions since their transitions to multiparty rule in 1991 and 1992, respectively. Ghana can be further distinguished from Zambia in that no overt attempt was made, although feared in 2000 and 2012, to override such constitutional provisions.[21] The maintenance or restitution of constitutional democracy has required timely action by external countries and agencies that tip the balance in favor of domestic pro-democratic forces.[22]

Two striking state- and democracy-building experiences in East Africa can be seen in Mozambique and Kenya. After a bitter civil war, the two major adversaries in Mozambique were brought into a single political system as a result of sustained negotiations by external countries and agencies. Contrasting greatly with Angola, which also underwent a post-colonial armed struggle for power, the ruling party in Mozambique has not crushed or physically eliminated the opposition. Instead, after the renewal of hostilities, 2013-2014, the national compact was re-negotiated along with the re-division of the spoils of office.[23]

The last two countries to be discussed here, Nigeria and Kenya, show how configurations of power can be renegotiated within a democratic constitutional framework. The transition in Kenya from a country in severe turmoil as a result of the electoral dispute and mass violence of

2007-2008, illustrates again the effective and timely contributions of external actors and agencies to restoring countries to a democratic path. As Nigeria approached the 2015 national elections, sustained external action was needed to tilt the balance in favor of a successful vote and the historic alternation in power from one national party to another. Both countries also show the political significance of cultural and other identities, and the dispersion of power through a federal system (in Nigeria) and provincial entities (in Kenya).

The resurgence of authoritarianism did follow the democratic upsurge in Africa of the 1990s. However, unlike North Africa, with the still precarious exception of Tunisia, constitutional and pluralist democracy has proven resilient in sub-Saharan Africa. It was mentioned earlier that the political oscillations in Nigeria since 1979 have undermined democratization in the continent. The profound challenge to state authority represented by the Boko Haram insurgency, and the unremitting criminalization of the state by corrupt public officials, did not prevent the alternation in party control via national elections in March/April 2015. These episodes demonstrate that the potential for combined democracy- and state-building in Africa is still considerable.

The reconfiguration of power in Africa, while usually favorable to authoritarianism, is not necessarily so. As seen in several of the country cases discussed above, domestic and external coalitions can work creatively to help build state systems that are authoritative, effective, and accountable. The blending of order, democracy, and inclusive development is a path still available, with appropriate external assistance, to the people of Africa.

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[1] *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

[2] "Democratization and Social Movements in Africa," *Africa Demos*, Vol 1, No. 1 (November 1990), p. 4. All issues of this publication of the African Governance Program of The Carter Center, 1990-1995, are now available at http://books.northwestern.edu/viewer.html?id=inu:inu-mntb-0006443104-bk.

[3] For early discussions of this issue, see R. Joseph, "Democratization in Africa after 1989: Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (April 1997),

and "Africa, 1990-1997: From *Abertura* to Closure," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1998).

[4] Paradoxically, the military officer who led the removal of Shagari, Muhammadu Buhari, has returned to power in Nigeria after the 2015 national elections.

[5] Just prior to the assumption of power by Abacha in November 1993, and following his death in June 1998, there were instances of hybrid rule or dyarchy: a three-month government nominally led by civilian Ernest Shonekan, August – November 1993; and an eleventh-month transitional regime overseen by General Abdusalam Abubakar, June 1998 – May 1999. In both instances power remained squarely with the military.

[6] Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), and Larry Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002).

[7] F. Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). Obasanjo is also the person most responsible for foisting on Nigeria his first two inadequate presidential successors, Umaru Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan.

[8] Another appropriate term to describe these policies is "developmental authoritarianism". See R. Joseph, "Growth, Democracy, and Security in Africa," *Journal of Democracy,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (2014). As discussed there and elsewhere, a third designation, "developmental patrimonialism", obscures the essentially authoritarian nature of the relevant governments.

[9] Published by Princeton University Press in 2000.

[10] Complementing Herbst's study, and the culmination of decades of scholarly inquiry, is Crawford Young's masterwork, *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960-2010* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

[11] I resume here the brief commentary about Sklar's thought in R. Joseph, "Democracy and the Reconfiguration of Africa", *Current History*, Vol. 110, No. 739 (2011).

[12] Richard L. Sklar, "Democracy in Africa," *African* Studies *Review*, Vol. 26, Nos. 3&4 (1983).

[13] Richard L. Sklar, "The African Frontier for Political Science," in R. H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and J.F. O'Barr, *Africa and the Disciplines* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[14] See his contribution to a volume of evaluative essays on *Africa Demos* in *African Democratic Perspectives* (1996), now available at http://nucat.library.northwestern.edu/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?BBID=6519374.

[15] Peter P. Ekeh: "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1975).

[16] For essays which take up this challenge in several Nigerian states, see Wale Adebanwi and Ebenezer Obadare, *Democracy and Prebendalism in Nigeria: Critical Interpretations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[17] Sklar, "The African Frontier". See also his essay, "On the Study of Constitutional Government in Africa" (2004): http://rsklar.bol.ucla.edu/recentessays/africagovtstudy.pdf.

[18] See the discussion in "Growth, Security and Democracy in Africa".

[19] See Joseph E. Stiglitz et al., ed., *The Industrial Policy Revolution II: Africa in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013),

[20] For an exceptional set of essays on global authoritarianism and democratic resilience, see the *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 26, No. 4 (October 2015).

[21] Such an attempt was made by Zambia's first president, Frederick Chiluba, to have term limits removed. Space does not permit a discussion of the important, though less conspicuous, external role in Ghana's democratic journey since 1989.

[22] Benin, Guinea, and Niger are West African countries in which the authoritarian past still hovers over their fragile electoral democracies.

[23] For an excellent discussion of these developments in Mozambique by Carrie Manning, see https://africaplus.wordpress.com/2015/03/24/peacemaking-and-democracy-in-mozambique-lessons-learned-1992-2014/