

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19112-8 - Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform

Nic Cheeseman

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Democratization Against the Odds

When I told people that I was writing a book on democracy in sub-Saharan Africa they often joked that it would surely be a very short volume, up there with the history of Swiss military victories and the compendium of great English cooking. Such a response is understandable. Since the reintroduction of multiparty elections in the early 1990s, the cause of African democracy has suffered a major setback in almost every round of elections. In the early-1990s, the return of party politics was closely associated with the resumption of the Angolan civil war in 1993 and the Rwandan genocide of 1994. In 1996, the reputation of Zambia's Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) – initially celebrated as one of the first opposition parties in Africa to defeat an authoritarian government at the polls – was undermined by a flawed election and evidence of widespread corruption. Four years later, Côte d'Ivoire, thought to be among Africa's most stable political systems during the single-party era, descended into civil war following a disputed election.

Sadly, these democratic breakdowns were not just the result of “teething problems”: they continue to be a prominent feature of multiparty politics up to the present day. In 2007, election observers described the polls in Nigeria – the third to be held since 1999 – as some of the worst they had ever had the misfortune to witness. Just months later, accusations of electoral manipulation in Kenya – which by then was on its fourth competitive contest – led to a month of civil conflict in which more than 1,000 people lost their lives. The same year, President Robert Mugabe refused to accept defeat at the hands

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of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe amidst the mass repression of opposition supporters. More recently, democratic experiments in Mali and South Sudan have been undone by violent conflict. It is therefore easy to see why so many commentators are skeptical as to the prospects for multiparty politics on the continent. Endemic poverty, weak infrastructure, and pronounced inter-communal tensions are unpromising foundations upon which to build successful democracies.

Yet in a number of countries democratization has resulted in a far more positive outcome. Those who depict sub-Saharan Africa as “A Hopeless Continent”¹ tend to ignore the fact that the region contains two states that have enjoyed uninterrupted multiparty politics since independence: Botswana and Mauritius. Indeed, cases in which elections have not led to civil conflict or political disorder are typically overlooked in favour of examples in which the body count makes for more eye-catching headlines. Yet Africa’s success stories are every bit as important as those of Côte d’Ivoire and Rwanda. Despite a history of violent divide-and-rule politics, South Africa has managed a stable and relatively peaceful transition from apartheid to majority rule. Ghana’s transformation from a political system marked by coups, military rule, and mismanagement to one of Africa’s leading democratic lights is equally striking. The recent histories of Benin and Cape Verde are no less impressive, and these are not isolated examples: all told, around a quarter of sub-Saharan African countries can now be considered “free”. Moreover, although African elections have typically been won by those already in power, limiting the extent of political change, many leaders have been forced to step down as a result of constitutional restrictions on their time in office. In the 2000s, elections and term limits replaced death and coup d’état as the most common ways in which African presidents and prime ministers left office.²

These more open polities did not emerge out of a vacuum; rather, reformers in countries such as Ghana and Senegal drew on previous elements of democratic practice and experience. Although authoritarian rule was the norm on the continent for much of the last century, few, if any, African societies have recognized the right of a government to exercise absolute power. As a result, building a regime that is

¹ This was the banner headline that famously ran above a picture of the continent on the front cover of *The Economist*, 13–19 May 2000.

² Posner, Daniel N., and Daniel J. Young. “The Institutionalization of Political Power in Africa”. *Journal of Democracy* 18, 3 (2007), pp. 126–140.

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both legitimate and popular – and hence can be maintained without the use of widespread repression – has required leaders to fulfil local expectations and to rule within limits. Thus, while the continent has endured more than its fair share of brutal dictators, Africa's history is also dotted with fragments of democracy. In the pre-colonial period, centralized states with hierarchical authority structures were rare; in most cases the power of leaders was constrained both by their limited territorial control and by local custom. Moreover, many communities, such as the Kikuyu in Kenya, developed a shared understanding of the appropriate relationship between leaders and their communities that gave rise to complex moral economies in which rulers were expected to provide for their followers in return for their support. These sorts of patron-client agreements served to legitimate highly unequal political and social arrangements, but nonetheless located norms of reciprocity at the heart of the social contract between the government and the governed. In doing so, they placed important, if limited, constraints on the abuse of power.

In some of the continent's more repressive political systems, these kinds of norms and expectations were frequently violated by unscrupulous leaders prepared to use violence to compensate for a lack of popular support, but this was not always the case. While the one-party states that mushroomed in the 1960s both centralized power and denied citizens a choice of ruling party, many continued to hold elections for constituency MPs, reflecting the desire of ordinary Africans to select their representatives. These regimes were far from being competitive democracies, but single-party systems in countries such as Kenya, Senegal, and Zambia were nevertheless significantly more open, tolerant, and responsive than was typically the case in their Latin American and Eastern European counterparts. As a result, African political systems were sometimes more democratic than they seemed. Although they are typically overlooked, these histories of more open politics are important, because they established norms regarding the appropriate – and inappropriate – actions of governments. In turn, these norms constrained authoritarian leaders and were later harnessed by pro-democracy campaigners, facilitating the process of political change.

But even when we factor in these prior experiences of electoral politics, the existence of democratic states in Africa is still remarkable. Political scientists have identified a long wish list of factors that make it easier to establish and consolidate a democracy. Towards the top of the list are a coherent national identity, strong and autonomous

TABLE I.1 *GDP per capita of selected African countries (1965 and 1995), current US\$*

	1965	1995
Botswana	77	2,988
Burkina Faso	82	236
Chad	126	207
Congo, Dem. Rep. of	233	134
Côte d'Ivoire	206	774
Kenya	105	270
Liberia	183	65
Malawi	58	140
Nigeria	176	205
Niger	117	263
Rwanda	46	228
South Africa	555	3,863
Sudan	121	462
Zambia	297	393
Zimbabwe	297	611
Latin America	452	3,778
OECD	1,806	22,292
South Asia	118	385
sub-Saharan Africa	162	564

Source: World Bank.

political institutions, a developed and vibrant civil society, the effective rule of law, and a strong and well-performing economy. For example, Adam Przeworski has famously shown that countries that enjoyed a GDP per capita of more than \$6,000 when they introduced democracy almost always succeed, while those with a GDP per capita of less than \$1,000 almost always fail.³ Both in the 1960s and in the 1990s, few African countries fulfilled this – or any other – wish list criteria (see Table I.1). Yet a quarter of them have nonetheless made significant progress towards establishing stable and accountable multiparty systems. In other words, a significant proportion of the continent is democratizing against the odds. Given this, Africa should not be thought of solely as an interesting context in which to analyse the fragility of democracy. Rather, it is a continent that has much to teach us about the different pathways through which even the poorest

³ Przeworski, Adam et al. “What Makes Democracies Endure?” *Journal of Democracy* 7, 1 (1996), pp. 39–55.

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and most unstable countries can break free from authoritarian rule. It turns out that a book about democracy in Africa needs to be longer than most people would think.

Democratization and Autocratization

Explaining the success and failure of democracy in Africa requires us to think about what facilitates political liberalization. Given the great power wielded by African political elites it is tempting to conclude that political reform occurs when leaders allow it to. In Ghana, Flight Lieutenant J.J. Rawlings responded to pressure to democratize by constructing an increasingly rule-bound political system that was responsive to people's needs. Faced with the similar pressures, President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya adopted a radically different strategy, manipulating state resources to fund his party's campaign of thuggery and intimidation. It is tempting to conclude that Rawlings was simply a better man than Moi; that Ghana was just luckier than Kenya. It is certainly true that African leaders demonstrated very different capacities to put the national interest first when faced with pressure to reform in the 1990s. In Côte d'Ivoire, Rwanda, Togo, and Zimbabwe, incumbents held onto power at all costs, even when doing so spawned widespread civil conflict. By contrast, Presidents Kerekou in Benin and Kaunda in Zambia gracefully accepted defeat following their "founding" elections.

Yet while Kaunda and Kerekou may have been made of stronger moral fibre than their counterparts, this was not the only reason for their willingness to cede power. Both presidents lacked the resources and international support required to overcome the sizeable opposition to their rule, and understood that repression was not a viable long-term strategy. At the same time, Kaunda and Kerekou found it relatively easy to walk away from power because they had not committed crimes that were likely to make them targets for domestic and international prosecution and because they trusted future governments not to persecute them. By contrast, leaders who were blessed with greater resources and who feared that losing power would lead to prosecution for corruption or crimes against humanity, such as Moi, naturally found it far harder to relinquish control. In other words, incumbent leaders did not decide how to act on the basis of moral backbone (or lack of it) alone, and it is possible to identify the main factors that encouraged them to accept, or reject, democratization.

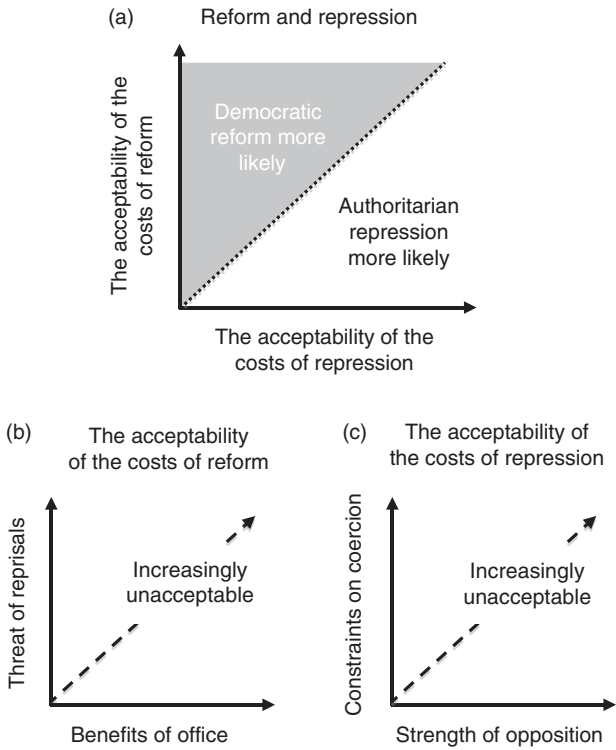


FIGURE I.1 The costs and benefits of democratization to incumbent leaders.

In building such a framework it is helpful to start with Robert Dahl’s intuitive but important point that leaders are more likely to pursue political liberalization when they find the costs of reform to be more acceptable than the costs of repression. For example, if the danger of electoral defeat is more acceptable than the cost of repressing the opposition (which might include, for example, the loss of legitimacy that would ensue) incumbents are more likely to allow for free and fair elections.⁴ This is illustrated in Figure I.1a, where the shaded area represents the conditions under which incumbents are most likely to choose democratization over autocratization. Although a given leader will evaluate the acceptability of a particular cost depending upon their own beliefs and values, I suggest that it is possible to

⁴ Dahl, Robert. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, p. 15. Staffan Lindberg has also used Dahl’s framework to look at the process of democratization in Africa.

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distill some generalizations about the factors that render the costs of political liberalization more or less easy to bear.

The Costs of Repression

From the point of view of a sitting president the costs of repression are shaped by a broad range of factors, but the most important are the strength of the opposition and whether leaders have the funds and authority to be able to sustain their regimes through the use of coercion (Figure 1.1c). In cases where pro-democracy forces are united, better funded, and supported by a vibrant civil society, an incumbent must expend far greater resources in order to contain the opposition (see Chapter 2). When the pro-reform movement is so strong that it can only be defeated through force, leaders must also factor in the likely loss of domestic and international support that will result. This was clearly the case in both Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, and similar processes have previously played out in a number of sub-Saharan countries. Moreover, in cases where the military refuses to participate in attacks on protestors, as was the case in Egypt during the protests against the regime of Hosni Mubarak, it may not even be viable for the president to suppress pro-democracy activists.

The unity of the opposition is also critical. In many countries, leaders were able to retain power by playing different factions of the opposition off against each other. Consider Kenya, where the regime of Daniel arap Moi actively encouraged different factions of the opposition Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) to register as separate parties (FORD-A and FORD-K) for the 1992 founding elections. Subsequently, a heavily divided opposition, in addition to the use of electoral violence and vote rigging, enabled Moi to win the election with just 38 per cent of the vote. One of the reasons that the Kenyan opposition became so fragmented was the refusal of different ethnic leaders to compromise on their personal ambitions – and the expectations of their communities – in order to build a united party (see Chapter 5). In this way, pronounced ethnic and religious identities can make it harder for a united opposition to emerge, and so reduce the cost of maintaining the status quo.

The cost of repressing the opposition also depends on whether a leader enjoys the machinery and resources necessary to rule through force. Where incumbents lack an effective police force and security service, and struggle to raise the finance required to meet the costs

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of repression, they are more likely to find reform acceptable. The strength of key political and judicial institutions is also important. In cases where institutions are particularly weak and undermined by informal patronage networks, the barriers to corruption and the use of violence are particularly low. However, where strong checks and balances exist on the executive, employing extralegal strategies and purchasing the support of key institutions such as the electoral commission is likely to cost the incumbent far more economic and political capital. Thus, the institutionalization of the rule of law places constraints on the use of coercion and hence improves the prospects for democratization.

The economic position of a government is equally significant. Even when the costs of containing the opposition are very high, incumbents may be willing to bear them if they can afford to sustain a high level of coercion indefinitely. This is one of the reasons that periods of economic decline are so significant to processes of political change. Recessions highlight the poor performance of the government and have a direct impact on jobs and wages, making citizens increasingly sympathetic to the opposition. At the same time, falling revenues forces leaders to make tough choices: they can reduce the pay of the security forces, dip into their personal reserves, or cut government spending elsewhere. Each strategy creates as many problems as it solves. The first increases the prospect of a coup or mutiny. The second eats into the retirement fund of the incumbent, and so undermines one of the main reasons for retaining power. The third requires the regime to cut back on the services it provides and/or the funds being channelled through its patronage networks. In turn, this reduces the number of people dependent on the government, and so makes it more difficult to stem the flow of defectors to the opposition. Consequently, as the resources available to the incumbent dwindle, the costs of repression become increasingly unacceptable (see Chapter 3). It is therefore unsurprising that incumbents blessed with vast oil wealth, as in Saudi Arabia or Sudan, have been far less responsive to demands for change than their counterparts in poorer states.

Well-targeted government spending can help to persuade voters, officials, and bureaucrats to stay loyal to a regime, even after it has begun to use repressive strategies. However, the extent to which this strategy is necessary and feasible depends on the socio-economic context. For example, in countries where democratic rules and values are ingrained, incumbents may find that money is a poor tool

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with which to influence political behaviour. The level of poverty and inequality is also important because, other things being equal, ruling parties in poorer countries are likely to find it less costly to buy votes and hence electoral victories. Similarly, the more unequal a society is, the cheaper it will be for those at the top of the ladder to buy the support of those at the bottom. Of course, poor communities regularly reject financial inducements to vote for a certain candidate, and support opposition leaders even when faced with the most brutal repression – as in Zimbabwe. But where politics is dominated by patron-client relationships, poverty and inequality make it less costly for leaders to provide the goods necessary to fulfil their side of the bargain. In turn, this makes it that much easier for leaders to maintain the status quo. If the strength of communal identities means that incumbents can rely on ethnic ties to mobilize supporters without financial inducements, the costs are further reduced.

The level of control that incumbents enjoy over their revenue streams is just as important as the amount of revenue available. In resource-rich economies, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, and Nigeria, incumbents typically enjoy a monopoly over trade taxes and so face few barriers to the exploitation of their nation's natural wealth. By contrast, where leaders are unable to rely on oil and gas deposits, collecting revenue may involve complex bargains that limit the incumbents' range of options. In countries where the government is dependent on tax revenue raised on the population through income tax or a form of sales tax, it may be forced to bargain with workers in order to secure a continual flow of revenue. For example, citizens who are highly taxed are more likely to demand a greater say in how their money is spent and so may be less willing to accept poorly performing regimes. Moreover, in countries with strong trade union movements or producers groups like South Africa and Zambia, workers were able to use their key position within the national economy to strike for higher wages and other concessions. In such cases, trade unions emerged as key players in the struggle for democracy, and by lending their economic leverage and organizational might to the opposition significantly increased the costs of repression.

Of course, the economic independence of a regime has an international component as well as a domestic one. When government revenues decline, incumbents become more economically dependent upon foreign lenders such as the International Monetary Fund and

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the World Bank, and on foreign donors, such as the United States, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom, and more recently Brazil, China, India, and Japan. In turn, the dependence of governments on financial assistance can confer great political influence on the international community, as Greece, Ireland, and Portugal have recently discovered. When the coffers of an authoritarian regime run dry, donors have the option of making access to their funds conditional on political reform. Many foreign governments were willing to prop up vicious regimes such as Mobutu Sese Seko's regime in Zaire during the Cold War, when security concerns won out over human rights. But following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 Western donors became more willing to use the economic weakness of African states to push for political liberalization, dramatically increasing the costs of repression (see Chapters 3 and 4).

The Costs of Reform

Even when the costs of repression rise, leaders are only likely to democratize when they find them less acceptable than the costs of reform. Quite how much a leader stands to lose by implementing reforms depends on what benefits they accrue from holding office and the likelihood that they will suffer reprisals from those who follow in their footsteps (Figure I.1b). The rampant corruption in many African states has naturally focused attention on the financial benefits that presidents can derive from holding office. In Nigeria, successive presidents are thought to have stolen more than \$6 billion from state coffers; the benefits of retaining office could hardly have been greater. But control over jobs and business opportunities are important too. Where the government enjoys a monopoly over resources and jobs (such that opportunities for those outside of the regime are few and far between), as in many African countries, political control means economic control. Under these circumstances, loss of office implies a loss of financial opportunities not just for the leader, but also for their allies, family, and supporters. As a result, when leaders perceive that reforms could open the way for an opposition victory, they often conclude that the cost is unacceptable.

While financial rewards are important, they represent only a small part of the potential gains from office. Incumbency typically carries with it immunity from prosecution and the ability to protect allies. The more an incumbent fears that they and their friends and family