DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENTS IN AFRICA

Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1989, students marched out of classes at the national university in Cotonou, the capital city of the West African country of Bénin.[1] They demanded that the government immediately disburse long-delayed scholarships and restore guarantees of public sector employment for university graduates. By July, civil servants and schoolteachers also took to the streets with threats of a general strike to protest having gone without salaries for months.

The government of Bénin could not respond to these demands because it was bankrupt. Tax revenues had been slumping for years, capital flight was increasing, and top public officials were embroiled in embarrassing financial scandals. Unhappy with the government's failure to put into effect an economic austerity program, foreign donors withheld disbursements of the budgetary support that was keeping the government afloat. In response to this economic quandary and to the mass street protests, Bénin's military-installed president Mathieu Kérékou began to make political concessions. In August 1989, he invited a prominent human rights activist and legal reformer into the Cabinet; in September, he announced a broad amnesty for political exiles and released some 200 political prisoners.

The protesters were not assuaged, however, escalating their demands to include an end to the ill treatment of political detainees and a clampdown on corruption. Endeavoring to recapture the political initiative, Kérékou surprised his compatriots with a landmark announcement on December 5, 1989, that the People's Revolutionary Party of Bénin (PRPB) would abandon both its ideological commitment to Marxism–Leninism and its monopolistic grip on political affairs. Four days later, he accepted the principle of a return from single-party to multiparty politics. Most important, the president created a commission to prepare a "national reconciliation conference" to which political and trade union organizations, religious associations, and Béninois living abroad would be invited to discuss the country's future.

Perhaps sensing the leader's weakness, key elements in the ruling coalition began to defect. Senior military officers distanced themselves from Kérékou, de-

claring the army politically neutral and agreeing to withdraw from public life and return to the barracks. Led by teachers and postal workers, trade unionists broke away from the government-chartered National Federation of Workers' Unions of Bénin (UNSTB). Demonstrations grew apace with as many as 40,000 citizens paralyzing downtown Cotonou at the end of 1989. In an attempted show of strength, Kérékou walked among the protesters but was booed and jostled. For the first time, government-controlled television screened pictures of demonstrators holding placards with slogans hostile to the regime.

By the time the National Conference of Active Forces was convened in a downtown Cotonou hotel on February 19, 1990, Kérékou had clearly lost control of political events. Declaring "I will not resign, I will have to be removed," he apparently hoped the national conference would provide a last-ditch opportunity to retain office.[2] Yet the 488 conferees soon declared themselves sovereign, suspended the republic's constitution, dissolved the national assembly, created the post of prime minister, and appointed to it Nicéphore Soglo, a former World Bank official. The nine-day proceedings of the national conference turned into a devastating personal indictment of Kérékou and his cronies for mismanaging the economy and pillaging the public treasury. Although retaining the offices of head of state and army, the fatally wounded strongman had no choice but to support a new constitution that allowed for presidential term limits and multiparty elections, and to accept the installation of an interim government composed of independent technocrats.

Following a massive "yes" vote for the new constitution by 96 percent of eligible Béninois in December 1990, competitive elections were planned for the legislature in February 1991 and the presidency in March 1991. A total of 24 political parties contested parliamentary seats, and 13 candidates, including both Soglo and Kérékou, vied for the presidency. Despite polling irregularities in several northern parliamentary departments and violent ethnic clashes during the second round of presidential balloting, the elections were certified by domestic and international observers to have been generally free and fair. Soglo's loose electoral coalition, called the Union for the Triumph of Democratic Renewal, not only won the largest bloc of assembly seats, but Soglo himself trounced Kérékou in the presidential race by a two-to-one margin.

Following this decisive electoral defeat, Matthieu Kérékou asked forgiveness for abusing power during his tenure in office and vowed his "deep, sincere, and irreversible desire to change."[3] In a parting act, the interim government agreed not to prosecute the outgoing dictator for any crimes he may have committed previously. Kérékou responded by pledging loyalty to the new government and asking the people of Bénin to rally behind its program for national development.

A PERIOD OF REGIME TRANSITION

As an isolated event, the demise of a local strongman in a West African backwater would normally attract little attention. But Bénin was among the first of a

much larger number of countries in Africa that went on to experience a regime transition; Kérékou's downfall was simply an early harbinger of unprecedented political changes soon to follow all over the continent. Moreover, the emblematic drama that unfolded in Cotonou's public arenas combined in one country's experience the core attributes of a landmark transition to democracy, however fragile the institutions of this type of regime subsequently proved to be. In Allen's words, "Bénin may lay claim to the most extensive and impressive peaceful political transformation of any formerly one-party African state in the present period."[4]

The general objective of this study is to understand what happened politically to African countries in the early 1990s. Why did political protesters rise up? Why did incumbent leaders accede to the demands of their opponents? Why, in some countries, were dictators displaced in multiparty elections? Why, in other countries, did they survive and continue governing according to well-established authoritarian methods?

The first half of the 1990s saw widespread political turbulence across the African continent, which can be summarized with reference to a few key political trends. Transitions away from one-party and military regimes started with political protest, evolved through liberalization reforms, often culminated in competitive elections, and usually ended with the installation of new forms of regimes. While not unfolding uniformly and to the same extent everywhere, these movements and institutional rearrangements were evident to some degree in almost all African countries. Together, they amounted to the most far-reaching shifts in African political life since the time of political independence 30 years earlier. Linked in a rough sequence, they delineate a period of regime transition in Africa that lasted for approximately five years between the beginning of 1990 and the end of 1994.

These political trends are depicted graphically in Figures 1 to 4. Data is derived from two main sources: an original data handbook on African political transitions[5] and a standard, time-series data set on civil liberties and political rights worldwide.[6] Starting in 1990, the number of political protests in sub-Saharan Africa rose dramatically, from about twenty incidents annually during the 1980s to a peak of some 86 major protest events across 30 countries in 1991 (see Figure 1).[7] The following year marked the pinnacle of a trend of increased political liberty in which African governments gradually introduced reforms to guarantee previously denied civil rights (see Figure 2).[8] There was also a marked upswing in the number of competitive national elections, from no more than two annually in the 1980s to a record 14 in 1993 (see Figure 3).[9] That the general direction of change was toward democracy is evidenced by the gradually increased availability of basic political rights, which climbed steadily from a low point in 1989 to a peak in 1994 (see Figure 4).[10] There is thus little doubt that Africans experienced a broad and pronounced ferment of political change in the early 1990s.

These data point to several noteworthy features about regime transition in Africa. First, key political events occurred sequentially, peaking at roughly one-year intervals: Whereas the frequency of political protests crested in 1991, liberalization reforms reached their apex in 1992; whereas most electoral activity oc-

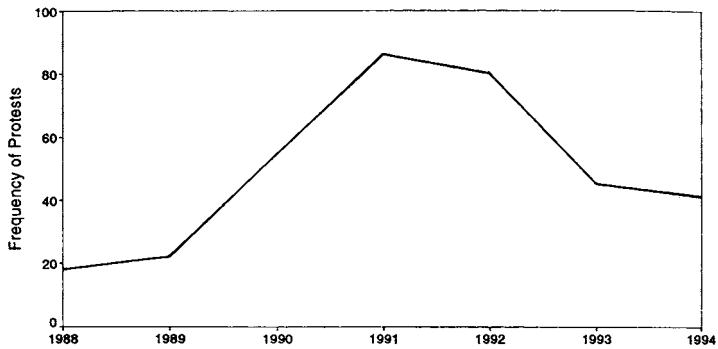

Figure 1 Trends in Political Protest, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1988–1994

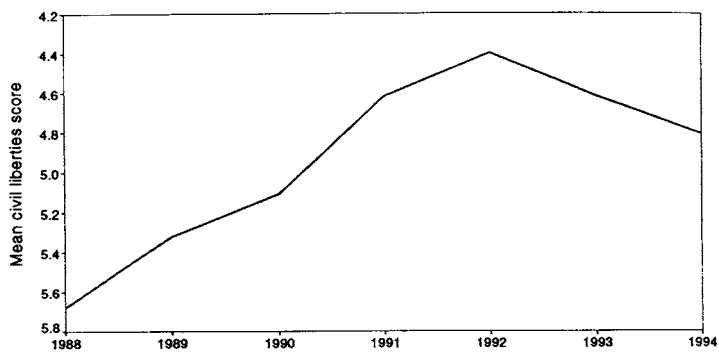

Figure 2 Trends in Political Liberty, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1988–1994

curred in 1993, indicators of democracy were still rising in 1994. The succession of transition events strongly suggests that one trend precipitated the next. In other words, increases in mass protests may have directly contributed to elite decisions to undertake political reform; subsequently, the extent of reform measures may have in turn influenced the convening of competitive elections, some of which led to democratic transitions. Thus connective patterns seem to underly what otherwise appear to be highly contingent political processes.

Second, African regime transitions happened rapidly. No more than four years elapsed between the beginning of the political protest movement in 1990 and 1993's feverish round of elections. Indeed, for the 35 sub-Saharan African countries that underwent regime change by December 1994, the median interval between the onset of transition and the accession to office of a new govern-

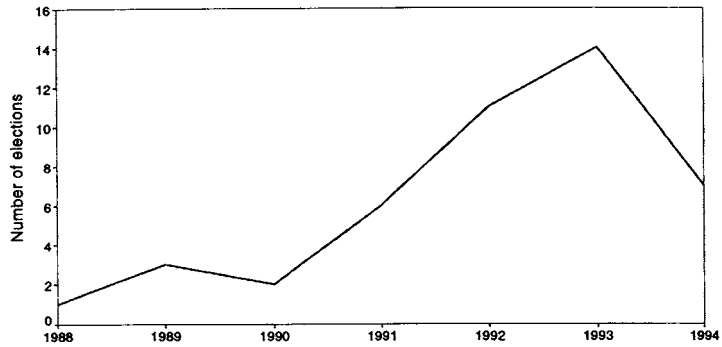

Figure 3 Trends in Competitive Elections, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1988–1994

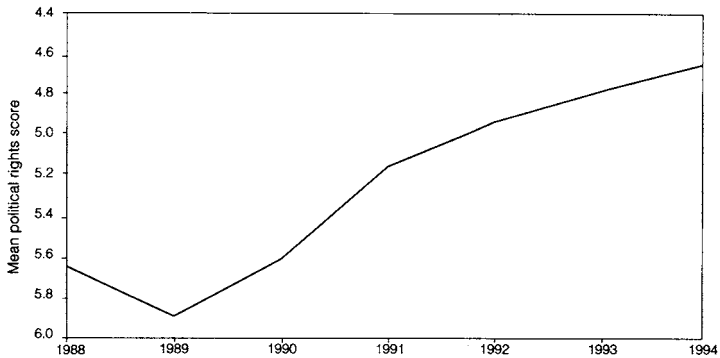

Figure 4 Trends in Democracy, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1988–1994

ment was just 35 months (and just 9 months in Côte d'Ivoire). Compared with the recent experiences of Poland and Brazil, where democratization evolved gradually over periods of at least a decade, African regime transitions seemed frantically hurried. Insofar as democratization involves the institutionalization of procedures for popular government, precious little time was available for such procedures to take root, implying that the consolidation of democratic institutions in Africa will be problematic in years to come.

Finally, trends in African regime transitions were not linear. Recent peaks in key transition events were followed by descents toward new valleys. In part, curvilinear trends reflect the nature of the political phenomena under study. Street protests are naturally episodic because protesters can rarely sustain high levels of mobilization over a long duration, especially if they attain their objec-

tives. Elections occur intermittently after fixed intervals; following a rash of polls, one would expect their frequency to decline until the next electoral cycle. But the liberalization or democratization of political regimes are less bound by such intrinsic rhythms; trends in these phenomena are more likely to depict secular political changes.

Declining mean civil liberties scores for African countries after 1992 therefore amounted to a genuine setback in political liberalization. They reflect not only the reclosing of some political regimes after promising initial openings but also the incidence of major human rights catastrophes in countries like Somalia and Rwanda. Indeed, the entire wave of regime transition in Africa passed its zenith during 1993, as the emergence of fragile democracies in a few countries began to be offset by a rehardening of political regimes elsewhere. Continued gains in democratization through 1994 (see Figure 4), an apparent exception to the downturns in other trends, is probably an artifact resulting from the cumulative effect of the installation by competitive election of four new regimes – in South Africa, Malawi, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique – in that year. The observation of sequential linkages among transition trends leads us to expect that the mean political rights scores for African countries will also turn downward in the near future.[11]

A POLITICAL WATERSHED?

Did the period of regime transition in the early 1990s mark a watershed in African politics? Unfortunately, this question does not have a clear and definitive answer. African transitions led to widely divergent outcomes that were expressed through the installation or restoration of a broad range of authoritarian, democratic, or mixed regimes (see Chapter 3). In other words, the political processes of the period displayed a combination of *both* change *and* continuity. Among other objectives, this book seeks to distinguish the innovations introduced into African political life in the early 1990s from underlying institutional foundations that remained very much the same.

Political change certainly occurred. For the first time in the postcolonial era, the trend toward the centralization of political power at the apex of the state was halted and partially reversed. In almost all African countries, autocratic leaders were forced to acknowledge that they could not monopolize and direct the political process and that they would have to divide and redistribute some of the excessive powers they had accumulated. Several major, general innovations occurred in African politics during the period of transition in the early 1990s as compared with the earlier postcolonial era.[12]

The first was increased political competition; African citizens came to enjoy a measure of choice in who would govern them. To the extent that elections were held in Africa before 1990, these were largely noncompetitive affairs in which, by foregone conclusion, a dominant ruling party won all available elective seats. In the five years (1985 to 1989) prior to the onset of the current wave of regime

transitions, competitive elections were held in only nine sub-Saharan African countries, measured as elections in which an opposition party obtained a presence in the national legislature. These countries included a group of multiparty regimes – Botswana, Gambia, Mauritius, Sénégal, and Zimbabwe – that had evolved a measure of experience with political competition by allowing a limited space for opposition parties to organize. In the four remaining countries – Liberia, Madagascar, South Africa, and Sudan – competitive elections were not only irregular but seriously compromised by electoral malpractice, a restrictive franchise, or continued military interference in civilian politics.

This record changed dramatically after 1990. In the five years that followed, the number of African countries holding competitive legislative elections more than quadrupled to 38 out of a total of the 47 countries in the sub-Saharan region. Opposition parties won legislative seats in 35 of these elections, and the average share of legislative seats held by opposition parties rose from a paltry 10 percent in 1989 to a somewhat more robust 31 percent by 1994.[13] Of the elections held in 38 African countries from 1990 to 1994, 29 can be considered as founding elections in the sense that they paved a route away from the monopoly politics of authoritarian regimes.[14] In an early evaluation, Wiseman depicted these elections as "an important and non-ephemeral alteration in the way a significant number of African states are, and will be, governed."[15] Discussion and further assessment of these elections is provided in Chapters 3 and 6.

A second innovation was leadership turnover. The postcolonial era in Africa saw the consolidation of personal rule, by which incumbent heads of state concentrated power in their own hands and constructed procedural defenses against being voted out of office. Political succession occurred relatively infrequently, and then only when the military staged a coup or an ailing civilian strongman installed a handpicked successor.[16] Before 1990, more than nine out of ten incoming national leaders were appointed to their posts by military or party elites.[17] The small minority who won office through election invariably did so as candidates of a dominant political party that already held power. On only one occasion before 1990 was a sitting chief executive displaced by means of election; the independence leader of Mauritius, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, was swept from office in 1982 in the landslide victory of an opposition alliance headed by Aneerood Jugnauth.[18]

The March 1991 election in Bénin therefore marked the first instance on mainland Africa when a national political leader was peacefully supplanted as a consequence of the expressed will of the people. Unexpectedly, at least 10 more such democratic leadership transitions occurred in sub-Saharan Africa in the five short years between 1990 and 1994. In three additional cases, the incumbent did not run in the election, but a new leader was elected anyway. Compared with previous patterns of political succession in Africa, the electoral turnover of presidents was a novelty.

Africa's period of transition was marked not only by greater electoral competition and the ouster of incumbents but sometimes by fundamental changes

in the rules of the political game. The range of political regimes on the sub-Saharan subcontinent was altered during this period. At the turn of the decade, the predominant types of regime in Africa were military oligarchies, civilian one-party states, or hybrids of the two (see Chapter 2). The most common institutional formation was a plebiscitary system in which a personalistic leader, who had come to power by a military coup, had constructed a single ruling party that periodically ratified its limited political legitimacy through ritualistic, noncompetitive elections. In 1989, 29 African countries were governed under some kind of single-party constitution, and one-party rule seemed entrenched as the modal form of governance in Africa; only 11 African countries were ruled directly by the military without the pretense of political party institutions (see Table 3).

By 1994, a transformation had taken place: Not a single *de jure* one-party state remained in Africa. In its place, governments adopted new constitutional rules that formally guaranteed basic political liberties, placed limits on tenure and power of chief political executives, and allowed multiple parties to exist and compete in elections. To all appearances, the African one-party state was not only politically bankrupt but – at least as a legal entity – extinct.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that in many other respects the Africa of 1994 was not markedly different from the Africa of a decade before. The enduring institutional characteristics of the continent's politics continued to condition the longevity and success of democratic experiments. In other words, the watershed changes just noted were offset by significant continuities.

For example, despite leadership alternation in some countries, long-standing incumbent leaders in other countries managed to survive competitive elections. Notably, in open presidential contests after 1990, just as many incumbents (15) were reelected as were replaced (14). Henry Bienen and Jeffrey Herbst interpret the reported election results as meaning that "political liberalization is less successful in promoting leadership transition in Africa than is usually assumed and less than elsewhere in the world."[19] Indeed, incumbent leaders seemed to soon learn from the electoral defeats of African colleagues that participatory politics constituted a threat to be controlled. Moreover, even when the faces of top leaders changed, the new rulers were often drawn from the same social and political classes as before, including an aging generation of old-guard politicians who had previously served the postcolonial regime. The election of recycled leaders engendered doubts about whether they would govern any differently than the men they replaced.

Few political institutions were strengthened by regime transition. The state's ability to respond to citizens' needs, either by ensuring law and order throughout the territory or by providing basic services to low-income populations, was still seriously deficient in many countries. National judicial and legislative institutions remained weak. Moreover, past practices of clientelism, rent-seeking, and fraud remained deeply ingrained in certain administrations. The election of new leaders did not mean that they would cease to search for the spoils

of political office; on the contrary, the advent of elections marked a scramble for political positions and an intensification of tendencies to quickly make the most of the benefits of office-holding. And just because one-party rule was legally defunct did not, *de facto,* mean that dominant parties would resist using large electoral majorities to revive monopolistic styles of rule. Finally, even though non-state institutions were reinvigorated by the transitions, they remained on the whole weak. Serious doubts soon emerged whether opposition parties, a free press, labor unions, and various other civic, religious, and professional associations would prove strong enough to enforce the accountability and transparency needed for democratic governance. These benefits were far from guaranteed in most countries, making it difficult to resist the view that the consolidation of democratic rule in the region would be difficult and exceptional (see Chapter 7).

These and other tendencies soon became evident in Bénin. Despite a peaceful transfer of power (amidst much public celebration) and the resumption of foreign aid, the Soglo-led democratic government faced daunting economic and political challenges. If anything, the state of the economy had worsened during the uncertain transition, making a tough economic reform program more urgent than ever. Emboldened by its ability to oust Kérékou, much of the political class was wary of presidential prerogatives and keen to assert the power of a revitalized legislature. By late 1993, Soglo's relationships with the 12 parties represented in the legislature were contentious and polarized. When the legislature rejected the government's 1994 austerity budget proposals, thereby triggering a major political crisis, some observers predicted the return to the kind of institutional paralysis that had discredited the country's first attempt at multiparty rule in the early 1960s.[20] The regime's legitimacy was also undermined by persistent accusations of corruption and arrogance in the president's inner circle, which Soglo had packed with family members.

In a startling turn of events in the scheduled presidential elections of March 1996, Béninese voters punished Soglo by bringing back the previously discredited Kérékou.[21] The second leadership turnover in Bénin – a landmark institutional development that restored a previously discredited leader – raised fresh and fascinating questions about the complex amalgamations of political continuity and change that characterize Africa's democratic experiments.

DEFINING DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Before proceeding, we define some of the key concepts used in this study, beginning with regimes, regime transitions, and democracy.

Political *regimes* are sets of political procedures – sometimes called the "rules of the political game" – that determine the distribution of power. These rules prescribe who may engage in politics and how.[22] The relevant rules may be formally codified in constitutions and other legal statutes; or they may be informal, embodying customs and habits to which all participants are attuned. Differences

among types of regimes are captured in the first instance by the contrast between democracy and authoritarianism, and, more finely, by further distinctions among subsets within these broad categories.

A regime *transition* is a shift from one set of political procedures to another, from an old pattern of rule to a new one. It is an interval of intense political uncertainty during which the shape of the new institutional dispensation is up for grabs by incumbent and opposition contenders. For this reason, a regime transition can be depicted as a struggle between competing political forces over the rules of the political game and for the resources with which the game is played. Regime transition may occur by means of a short, sharp transformation – for example, when a coercive autocracy collapses and gives way to an elected democracy. Or a transition may unfold incrementally, as when a personal dictatorship gradually relaxes controls on its political opponents and introduces a softer, more liberalized form of authoritarian rule. The direction of transitions is nonetheless multivalent, potentially unfolding toward harder, more authoritarian regime types. It is also reversible, as when new regimes are installed but political innovations fail to take root, and older forms of rule reassert themselves.

To what extent can any new regime be described as a *democracy?* And to what extent do processes of regime change resemble *democratization?* We believe that these concepts can be applied to Africa, and we disagree vigorously with the view that their usage in sub-Saharan contexts is "both arbitrary and terribly premature."[23] We argue instead that the efforts of African citizens to hold their leaders accountable for providing for the common good are, at heart, a quest for democracy. We further contend that the innovative trend to install leaders by means of competitive elections, while far from the be-all and end-all of democratization, is an indispensable first step. Moreover, to view recent African political developments through a lens of democratization provides a useful point of comparison both within the continent and to other world regions. Indeed, instead of adding to Africa's marginalization by asserting its cultural uniqueness, we see value in situating our study within the ambit of mainstream analysis. In considering African cases of regime transition in the context of the rich literature on democratization, we are able to highlight their singularity – but also their similarity – in relation to political reforms that have swept the rest of the late-twentieth-century world.

Democracy is a contested term. Various authors have endowed it with assorted meanings, including "a distinctive set of political institutions and practices, a particular body of rights, a social and economic order, a system that ensures desirable results, or a unique process of making collective and binding decisions."[24] Influential contemporary interpretations of democracy range from a tight focus on the electoral procedures for choosing political elites[25] to expansive visions of citizen participation in political parties, community groups, and workplace organizations.[26]

The etymology of the term *democracy* reveals its roots: It refers to rule by the people.[27] Democracy is a form of regime whose legitimacy derives from the prin-

ciple of popular sovereignty: Namely, that ordinary citizens are equally endowed with the right and ability to govern themselves. We recognize that the notion of rule by the people contains intrinsic ambiguities. For example, Robert Dahl has asked how "the people" are designated.[28] Rustow has proposed that democracy cannot be installed unless the inhabitants of a state share a sense of national unity: "The people cannot decide until somebody decides who are the people."[29] And what constitutes "rule"? One could argue, following the ancient Greeks, that rule by the people is possible only under conditions of direct democracy when citizens gather and make decisions in a face-to-face assembly. Alternatively, one could accept Montesquieu's more practical standard that democracy inevitably requires citizens to sacrifice some of their rights of decision-making to representatives who will speak and act on their behalf.[30]

These dilemmas need not detain us long, even for contemporary Africa. To be sure, the scope of the *demos* is problematic on a continent where the boundaries of the modern state rarely coincide with the sense of nationhood felt by its various peoples. Nevertheless, since colonial times, African political leaders have claimed authority and subdued communal identities by asserting the legitimacy of inherited state boundaries.[31] That strong centrifugal tendencies persist is attested by Eritrea's secessionist independence from Ethiopia in 1992, as well as by continuing civil wars in Sudan and the Western Sahara. But Africa's political reformers have generally aimed to change the rules of politics *within* the state rather than to alter the state's parameters. Like the nationalist movements of the 1950s, the prodemocracy movements of the 1990s articulated a view of "the people" that was consistent with state citizenship.

Furthermore, modern democracy has inexorably come to mean representative democracy. Even if the small-scale political communities of precolonial Africa displayed attributes of direct democracy, which is debatable, such communities have long been superseded. Traditional political practices often allowed for public discussion of community issues before a male elder announced a "consensus" position. But the principle of direct democracy was compromised to the extent that leaders could exercise authority arbitrarily to shape the public agenda and interpret the group will. Moreover, whether in state or stateless societies, political norms tended to limit the number of decision makers, with male elders accumulating political authority at the expense of women, younger people, slaves, and strangers.

The enlarged size of the postcolonial political community and the complexity of development policy issues necessitate representative forms of governance. At the same time, citizen control of elected representatives is imperfect in all modern democracies. It is particularly elusive in Africa, where many citizens have limited levels of formal education and live in remote rural areas; not surprisingly, they tend to regard central government as remote and inscrutable. Democratic principles can be expressed in a variety of institutional forms, including forms that embody cultural preferences derived from African traditions. But for ordinary people – in Africa as elsewhere in the world – the challenge of democracy

concerns how to obtain accountability from officials of the state. According to John Dunn, "those best placed to represent themselves in African countries are the denizens of the higher reaches, civil and still more military, of its state apparatuses.... it is exceptionally difficult for their fellow citizens to impede them from collectively representing themselves."[32]

In our view, debates over the meaning of democracy boil down to two core definitional issues. First, is the nature of democracy best distinguished according to the form of its *procedures* or the *substance* of its results? We prefer a procedural definition precisely because political regimes are best understood as sets of rules. As Ake notes, "It is the involvement in the process rather than the acceptability of the end decision, which satisfies the right to participate."[33]

We recognize that citizens often judge the performance of regimes in terms of the substantive benefits they receive from the government in power. But various types of political regimes can perform equally well (or badly) on valued policy matters such as economic growth, the distribution of income, and the provision of public services. Indeed, the extensive literature probing the effects of regime type on policy performance reaches no firm conclusions about whether political democracy promotes or inhibits economic growth and income equality.[34] In any event, to judge democracy by the substance of policy outcomes runs the risk of confusing political regimes with the extent of state intervention in the economy or with the capacity of economic institutions. The distinctive feature of democracy is not that it is better than authoritarian rule at raising or equalizing living standards but that it provides political access to decision making for ordinary citizens. Thus, our understanding of democracy refers to a set of political *procedures,* or rule *by* the people; we disassociate it from rule *for* the people, which implies, substantively, a distributive socioeconomic order.

Second, does the definition of democracy embody a *minimal* set of essential requirements? Or does it provide a *comprehensive* characterization that exhausts the phenomenon's full complexity? This study prefers an approach that captures basic elements as most useful in distinguishing political regimes, especially in situations where democratization has only just begun. The flowering of any type of regime undoubtedly requires the mature development of a system of interlocking political institutions and sets of widely shared political values. But to define democracy in terms of the full realization of ideal forms is to risk finding few actual democracies or none at all. Robert Dahl reserved the term "democracy" for "a hypothetical system ... [that is] completely responsive to all its citizens" and resorted to the awkward neologism of "polyarchy" to refer to responsive regimes in the less than perfect real world.[35] On balance, we prefer to use the common currency of "democracy" but to strictly specify its referents to a few essential attributes.

The task of adducing a definition of democracy is now simplified. By what *minimal* set of political *procedures* are citizens in a modern state able to govern themselves? The most basic requirement for democracy is that citizens be empowered to choose and remove leaders. Thus, democracy is defined in this study