

I

Comparative Politics and Political Parties in Africa

This book is about the nature of African political parties. The first such study in book length since the 1960s, it demystifies several long-standing assumptions about politics in ethnically divided societies. Its main argument is that not all African parties are ethnic parties; instead, a wide variety of political party types shape the African political landscape. Although African parties by and large refrain from programmatic ideas, such ideas do feature in African politics. A detailed assessment of political parties in several countries indicates that, over time, the political salience of ethnicity is decreasing. Multi-party competition in Africa does not lead to a hardening of ethnic relations.

This book contributes to the recent and ongoing debate about African parties. It confirms those who claim that the salience of ethnicity in young democracies in general and in Africa in particular has been exaggerated (see, e.g., Chandra 2005, Lindberg and Morrison 2008, Basedau and Stroh 2012). In addition, this work broadens scholars' conceptual understanding of parties in Africa and elsewhere. Its findings are based on the first empirical application of a new global party typology.

For decades, comparative research on parties suffered one major shortcoming: scholars interested in African parties had no conceptual framework by which to identify and compare parties. The study of African parties by "Africanists" traditionally ran toward individual country studies. Although political scientists have recently begun to conduct comparative analyses, their studies of African parties often remain confined to the study of election results or survey data (see, e.g., Ishiyama 2012). Scholars of other non-European areas have equally failed to construct alternative frameworks beyond the prevailing party types derived from the study of Western European parties. The much longer duration of multiparty competition in Europe and the historical particularities of European party formation make Western party models unsuitable for the study of parties in nonindustrialized societies. The lack of comparative-empirical work on African parties and the dearth of conceptual tools for the study of parties in non-Western areas have caused many scholars to base their interpretation of African politics

on shaky assumptions. The alleged ubiquity of ethnic parties is the most prominent example.

HARBINGERS OF EVIL? ETHNIC PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY

Many scholars regarded democratic contest in ethnically segmented societies as a hotbed of instability and conflict. Until recently, the political science community was cautious about the possibility of peaceful and successful democratic transitions, let alone democratic consolidation, in Africa. According to some, ethnic loyalties would inevitably become the basis for intense partisanship, thereby fuelling ethnic divisions and making ethnic conflict more likely (Kaplan 1997, Horowitz 2000, Mann 2005, Bremmer 2006, Rudolph 2006, Lewis 2011; for a summary, see Reynolds 2011).

The most cited study on the effect and ubiquity of ethnic parties in new democracies remains *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Horowitz 2000). According to Horowitz, ethnically segmented societies and their respective political parties are in a reciprocal relationship.

In the industrialized world, party competition is characterized by multiple cleavages. Communal boundaries constitute one cleavage line out of many. In the nonindustrialized world, communal boundaries constitute the dominant – if not the only (Lawson 1999: 12, Posner 2005) – cleavage line that structures party politics. The inevitable result is the introduction of ethnically based parties into the political system.

Once in place, ethnic parties aggravate ethnic divisions. They depend exclusively on the support of a particular ethnic group. Due to a lack of other cleavage lines, ethnically based parties are unable to diversify their electoral base. There is no transferability across communal boundaries. The total dependency on communal support puts ethnic parties under great pressure to satisfy group demands. They constantly face the possibility of competition within the group the party claims to represent. The potential of “ethnic outbidding” (Horowitz 2000: 348) by an intra-group competitor makes parties adopt radical positions. Party leaders espouse ethnic demands, thereby bolstering chauvinistic elements. These positions are irreconcilable with the positions of other ethnic parties (Horowitz 2000).

Multiethnic parties or nonethnic parties may emerge, yet they are not sustainable over time. Due to severe competition from ethnic parties and the lack of alternative cleavage lines, multiethnic parties disintegrate into ethnic wings. The lack or the dissolution of multiethnic parties leads to a “bankruptcy of moderation” (Reilly 2001: 3) within the party system. Not only is the formation of ethnic parties inevitable – ethnic parties become ubiquitous.

These dynamics make multiparty elections tense and conflict-ridden. The exclusionary political environment transforms democratic election outcomes into an ethnic census. Among the losers, elections produce a feeling of constant political marginalization. The political environment is thus conducive

to ethnic violence. Eventually, the prevalence of ethnic parties and the political dynamics they produce can lead either to the imposition of an autocratic one-party state – often imposed by a governing multiethnic party to avoid the further deterioration of state cohesion – or by a military coup conducted by the army to restore stability and peace (Horowitz 2000, Chandra 2005, Rabushka and Shepsle 2009). In short, ethnic parties foster ethnic conflict and electoral violence and are conducive to autocratic forms of governance. Although more recent works on partisan preference in Africa suggest that ethnicity is only one of several factors driving African politics, most scholars studying African politics take the enduring significance of communal boundaries as a starting point for their analysis (Palmberg 1999, Bekker et al. 2001, Daddieh and Fair 2002, Posner 2005, Ishiyama and Fox 2006, Basedau and Stroh 2012).

Scholars of ethnic parties in a Western context have provided more sophisticated concepts of the conduct of an ethnic party. The pursuit of policies directed against the interests of other communities and the pursuit of policies that challenge the legitimacy of the multinational state is only one strategy at their disposal. Alternatively, ethnic parties might try and change the constitutional principles of the multinational state in a peaceful and democratic manner. Instead of cultural irredentism, they may try to foster political autonomy or increase territorial self-determination and thus attempt to alter the status quo by nonviolent means. Or, they might do what programmatic parties do and appeal to a particular socioeconomic group within their community and beyond. The literature on particularistic parties in Europe clearly shows party politics based on particularistic motivations to be congruent with state stability. Western electoral competition entered by ethnic parties is resolved by “mostly ballots, rarely bullets” (Newman 1996). Democratic contest is neither replaced by ethnic conflict, nor does the existence of particularistic parties lead to the collapse of nonethnic parties (Newman 1996, Ishiyama and Breuning 1998, Birnir 2007, Brancati 2009, Ishiyama 2009). It is regrettable that scholars of new democracies do not study the dynamics of group politics in advanced democracies in greater detail. The vast and growing empirical evidence from Western Europe shows that often, communal interests manifest themselves in a different, more complex way as group demands coexist and interact with other interests. Over the course of the last three decades, European politics have been shaped increasingly by parties with a focus on a particular region or community. A number of labels have been created to capture the nature of these parties, including “niche,” “ethnic,” “regional,” “stateless,” or “nationalist.” In many countries these particularistic parties¹ have entered government coalitions (Masseti 2009, Hepburn 2009, 2011).

¹ The term “particularistic party” was first used in an African context and has recently been used by scholars working on ethnic party bans (Bogaards et al. 2010). I am using the term in a purely descriptive manner.

Ethnic parties, however, can always and anywhere affect the quality of democracy. The proliferation of ethnic parties is likely to increase the number of parties achieving legislative representation. This development is likely to lead to a high degree of party fragmentation, and formation of governments subsequently becomes a cumbersome process. The emergence of ethnic parties or an increase in the number of ethnic parties further minimizes the number of voters with the potential to switch parties. The identification of voters with particularistic parties is at least to some extent based on kinship; accordingly, voters do not assess the performance of the incumbent party vis-à-vis changes in their personal well-being. The number of “available voters” (Bartolini 1999: 465) – voters willing to reconsider changing their previous electoral choice – declines. Thus ethnic parties minimize elite responsiveness and distort competition and choice. The high polarization and the low degree of voter availability make any assessment of the incumbent government less contingent on governmental performance. Incumbent vulnerability instead becomes dependent on the turnout rates of ethnic communities. Even if elections remain peaceful and ethnic parties do not constitute a threat to state stability, elections still resemble an ethnic census.

Overall, scholars concerned with questions of democratization should rightly care a great deal about the impact of ethnic parties. Although the effect on stability and peace is not clear-cut, ethnic parties negatively affect democratic competition and choice. They minimize elite responsiveness, increase political polarization, and make political change at least partly contingent on turnout rates of individual communities (Bartolini 1999, 2000, Müller and Strom 1999, Meguid 2005, Adams et al. 2006, Brancati 2008).

INTERNATIONAL PARTY ASSISTANCE AND ETHNIC PARTIES

Given the detrimental effects of ethnic parties on politics in nonindustrialized societies, international donors and African governments have dedicated significant efforts to combating the impact of ethnicity at the level of political parties. Both appear to have accepted the Afro-pessimism that accompanied the return of multiparty competition in the early 1990s.

By now, international party assistance constitutes roughly five to seven percent of international democracy support (Burnell and Gerrits 2010). One of the main goals of international party assistance is to counteract the formation of ethnic parties; its leading proponents are German and American party foundations. Guidelines for the dispersal of aid highlight the need for parties to have strong local ties, while at the same time, parties ought to be present in all parts of the country. Aiming for a broad support base is essential: the multiethnic nature of parties serves as an important benchmark for the identification of local recipients by donors. In addition, recipients are expected to formulate and adhere to key principles. Ideally, they have the

firm intention to translate these principles into policies once elected into office. Furthermore, African parties ought to reach out to interest groups and invest meaningful time in drafting their policy platforms. Finally, political parties are supposed to follow democratic standards in their internal dealings. The international community clearly promotes an image of political parties that in essence represents the programmatic mass-based parties that shaped party competition in Europe in the 1950s (National Democratic Institute 2003, Norris 2005, Carothers 2006, Erdmann 2010).

African governments themselves have invested significant efforts to rid their countries of ethnically based party competition. The spread of multi-party competition in the early 1990s has been accompanied by widespread legal bans on ethnic and other particularistic parties. Currently, 39 of 45 Sub-Saharan African countries ban particularistic parties. Of these 39 countries, 32 explicitly ban ethnic parties either in their constitutions or in party laws regulating party competition. Party bans state explicitly the aim of creating political stability. In the immediate post-independence period, only 17 countries had similar regulations in place. Party bans are clearly a response to the assumption that the return of multiparty contest in Africa would harden ethnic cleavages and endanger stability (Bogaards et al. 2010, Moroff 2010, Moroff and Basedau 2010). Thus both Western donors and African governments are keen to create a political playing field in which ethnic parties are absent. They have subscribed to the assumption that unless party competition is manipulated, ethnic parties will prevail. Some thus regard ethnic party bans as an institution for peace (Basedau 2011).

FIGHTING GHOSTS? POLITICAL SCIENCE AND AFRICAN PARTIES

Despite a plethora of literature on the role of ethnic parties and the alleged dominance of ethnic parties in Africa, comparatively little systematic scholarship has been written about African parties. Even less work has been conducted that considers parties in a comparative manner. Contemporary studies of African parties are confined to in-depth analyses of election results in a specific country at one particular point in time. If voting behavior occurs along communal boundaries, scholars of African politics are inclined to use the term “ethnic party.” This convention raises a variety of issues that carry serious theoretical implications for scholars and direct consequences for aid practitioners.

First, parties are analyzed with the help of only one indicator: election results or survey data (see, e.g., Ishiyama 2012). This is a gross oversimplification of the dynamics of political contest. An analysis of other aspects of party life such as original party documents, party factions, the composition of a party’s leadership – all of which constitute very popular tools in comparative politics literature – are missing (Chandra 2011).

Second, preliminary research implies that more often than not, African parties do not rely on the exclusive support of one group (Erdmann 2007a). Yet despite their frequent multiethnic composition, these parties still follow the logic of ethnic politics – especially if the party in question is restricted to culturally similar groups. This observation raises a serious conceptual issue: when is an African party an ethnic party, and when does it constitute a nonethnic party? More important, what types of nonethnic parties exist? Often, scholars do not even admit to this possibility and ignore alternative party types. Instead, the term “ethnic party” is the only point of reference for the classification of parties. For example, some distinguish between “ethnic parties” and “potentially ethnic parties” (Scarritt 2006, Cheeseman and Ford 2007, Chandra 2011). The term “ethnic party” is thus used promiscuously and holds little discriminatory power.

Third, the lack of suitable party classification schemes for African parties and the lack of comparative empirical research on African parties constitute a serious shortcoming for the donor community. An appropriate assessment of which party types in Africa are conducive to democracy is missing. As a result, donors use Western party models as a starting point for the design of international party assistance. Not only are these models unsuitable for the African political contexts, but they also idealize the nature of Western parties (Carothers 2006, Erdmann 2010).

Finally, and most pertinent for ongoing research, recent findings illustrate that ethnicity affects African politics considerably less than conventionally assumed. Since the return of multiparty democracy to Africa in the early 1990s, scholars have dedicated new and more thorough efforts to analyzing the attitudes and opinions of African voters. Their writings have arrived at a much more nuanced picture of African political life. Although ethnicity clearly matters, the extent to which it shapes political action varies significantly between countries (Cheeseman and Ford 2007, Dowd and Driessen 2008, Basedau et al. 2011, Basedau and Stroh 2012). Survey data have revealed some of the most striking findings on political opinion formation in Africa. Accordingly, African democracies are characterized by large segments of swing voters (Young 2009, Keffer 2010). Elections do not correspond to the logic of ethnic census; African voters instead choose candidates on the basis of past performance in office. African political participation in large parts resembles the dynamics of political participation in established democracies (Norris and Mattes 2003, Lindberg and Morrison 2008, Bratton et al. 2011).

Twenty years after the third wave of democratization reached the African continent, comparative political science still lacks the analytical tools necessary to capture the nature of African parties. Yet such an analysis is more urgent than ever. Although practitioners and local governments allocate numerous resources to counteract the centrifugal effects of ethnic parties,

recent political science research indicates that the political salience of ethnicity has long been exaggerated.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

First, this book builds on an already existing party typology to systematically classify African political parties. It puts forward an operationalization of an ethnic party and how an ethnic party can be distinguished from a number of nonethnic party types; it names and defines these nonethnic party types. It classifies parties with the help of conventional indicators from the comparative politics literature. The framework of analysis is not confined to the realm of area studies (Schmitter and Karl 1994, Basedau and Köllner 2007, Ahram 2011). This book creates a new tool for comparative scholars interested in African parties and/or in parties in nonindustrialized societies in general. It facilitates future cross-regional comparisons with parties in other regions. The party typology advanced here is not carved in stone; it is a starting point for comparative analyses of parties in Africa and beyond. Other scholars can add to or amend the typology, based on their knowledge and expertise.

Second, this book applies the new party typology to a number of African countries to examine the African political landscape in a comparative and systematic manner. Although party systems have recently enjoyed a surge in interest (Bogaards 2004, Basedau and Stroh 2012), analyses of individual African parties have not been conducted. The results from the application of the party typology prove that a variety of party types exist. Ethnic parties are part of this diversity, yet ethnic parties certainly do not dominate political competition. In some countries, both ethnic and nonethnic party types have strong programmatic anchors – although programmatically inclined parties constitute exceptions, not the rule. However, the programmatic aspect of African parties certainly deserves attention.

The existence of ethnic parties does not mean that nonethnic parties disintegrate; rather, ethnic and nonethnic parties coexist over long periods of time. Most strikingly, the present volume finds that over time, the political salience of ethnicity decreases. As multiparty competition endures, ethnic parties attempt to increase their outreach. There is no indication that democratic competition in nonindustrialized societies fosters conflict or hardens communal relations.

Third, this book finds a variation of ethnic and nonethnic party types within and across countries. As outlined previously, the dominant voices in political science literature assume that in societies lacking an industrial revolution, ethnic parties emerge. In the absence of class- and/or post-material cleavages, the argument goes, ethnic differences become the main pillar on which political participation rests. Although this argument carries internal

logic, it does not constitute an empirically grounded theory. Results from the application of the party typology clearly demonstrate that ethnicity exercises a strong salience in party politics in some countries, yet ethnicity holds little to no impact on parties in other countries. The book examines why in some countries the formation of ethnic parties is more likely than in others. The small number of cases under scrutiny requires future studies to test the robustness of this finding.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter Two reviews the manner in which political parties in different regions around the globe have been examined. It examines the major threads of the comparative politics literature on parties elsewhere. The chapter attests to the dual dilemma described earlier: no comparative framework exists by which African parties can be compared, neither across Africa, nor across continents. In reviewing the major works on African politics since independence, it further outlines the main variables African political life is subjected to. Subsequently, the chapter introduces a global typology of political parties designed by Diamond and Gunther (2001).² The Diamond and Gunther typology is amended to grasp the full diversity of the African continent. The operationalization of the typology is conducted on the basis of worldwide research on parties. Five party types are at the heart of this study: the mono-ethnic party, the multiethnic alliance, the multiethnic catch-all party, the programmatic party, and the personalistic party. Although the mono-ethnic party and the multiethnic alliance are regarded as ethnic parties, the others are seen as nonethnic parties.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five are dedicated to the empirical application of the global typology to all relevant (Sartori 2005a) and effective (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) parties in three countries: Kenya, Namibia, and Ghana. Individual chapters analyze parties within the remits of each parliamentary cycle and across the whole observation period ranging from the early 1990s to 2010. Kenya, Ghana, and Namibia have been selected because each country entails party types that correspond to the party types in the typology. Kenya represents the archetypical case of an ethnic party system; all parties remain ethnic parties. Namibia represents a mixed-party system; its incumbent party is a nonethnic, its opposition is first an ethnic and later a nonethnic party. Ghana represents a nonethnic party system; both government and opposition are nonethnic. Both Ghanaian parties display programmatic undertones. Taken together, the three chapters illustrate the political diversity of the African continent with previously unknown data.

² Depending on the publication (Gunther and Diamond 2003 or Diamond and Gunther 2001), the typology could also be referred to as “Gunther and Diamond typology.” For reasons of simplicity, I use the term “Diamond and Gunther typology.”

Chapter Six summarizes the results from the three empirical chapters and comes to an overall assessment of the analytical efficacy of the amended party typology. The chapter shows that even though ethnic parties prevail overall, in two of three countries, nonethnic parties dominate. Parties also do not retain the same facets over time, and most try to become more inclusive over the course of successive elections. This is particularly true of opposition parties. This study finds that the salience of ethnicity differs across and within countries. These further qualify the conventional assumption that African parties are per se ethnic parties.

These challenging and new findings call for empirical verification by additional cases. The systematic application of the new party typology is labor- and time-intensive; therefore, verification of the results relies on preliminary evidence from seven African countries: Tanzania, Botswana, Malawi, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Zambia, and Benin. The results from the preliminary cases confirm the findings from the in-depth cases. Ethnic parties neither dominate, nor does the duration of multiparty contest increase the political salience of ethnicity. To facilitate future large-N comparisons of parties, Chapter Six also assesses the discriminative power of each of the indicators of the new party typology.

Chapter Seven examines which factors might be responsible for the prevalence of ethnic parties in some and nonethnic parties in other countries. The literature assumes a causal relationship between the lack of an industrial revolution and the formation of ethnicity-based parties. Yet the causes for the formation of a particular party type have not been examined in earnest. A number of variables that might account for the formation in ethnic parties in some and nonethnic parties in other countries must yet be tested. The initial focus is again on the three in-depth cases of Kenya, Namibia, and Ghana. Economic inequalities (both at the local and at the national level), the quality of democracy, the electoral system in place, and the provision of ethnic party bans cannot account entirely for the formation of (non-) ethnic parties.

The ethnic structure of countries – the existence of a core ethnic group and a low ethnic fractionalization index – is a key factor for the formation of nonethnic parties. The lack of an ethnic core group and a high ethnic fractionalization index by contrast fosters the formation of ethnic parties. Evidence from the additional cases largely confirms the hypothesized relationship. Given the preliminary nature of the additional case studies and the limited number of cases available, this book arrives at preliminary findings. Ensuing studies can take these findings as a point of departure, as the book facilitates a theory-driven approach to African politics.

The Conclusion summarizes the main findings of the study. It demonstrates that the political saliency of ethnicity in African political life has been widely exaggerated. It illustrates once more the diversity of African party competition. Ethnic parties do exist but by no means dominate African

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03346-7 - Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation

Sebastian Elischer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

politics. The chapter links the findings from the empirical part back to the much broader question of democracy in Africa. The debate about the democratization potential of parties – in Africa and elsewhere – is under the heavy normative shadow of the European mass party. The European mass party, however, is an inappropriate analytical yardstick to evaluate the democratization potential of any party. The conclusion deliberately highlights the positive contributions African parties make to democratic consolidation. Furthermore, the chapter outlines some general suggestions of what international aid concerned with international party assistance should consider. In particular, international party assistance should analyze more thoroughly the conditions on the ground and try to foster nationwide parties. To achieve this end, mass-based organizations are not necessary. Although ethnic parties do not necessarily spell doom, the empirical evidence shows that countries with catch-all parties are more stable and thus more susceptible to democratic consolidation. The book concludes with some general remarks about future pathways of comparative political science.