Authoritarian Origins of Democratic Party Systems in Africa

Why have seemingly similar African countries developed very different forms of democratic party systems? Despite virtually ubiquitous conditions that are assumed to be challenging to democracy – low levels of economic development, high ethnic heterogeneity, and weak state capacity – nearly two dozen African countries have maintained democratic competition since the early 1990s. Yet the forms of party system competition vary greatly: from highly stable, nationally organized, well-institutionalized party systems to incredibly volatile, particularistic parties in systems with low institutionalization. To explain their divergent development, Rachel Beatty Riedl points to earlier authoritarian strategies to consolidate support and maintain power. The initial stages of democratic opening provide an opportunity for authoritarian incumbents to attempt to shape the rules of the new multiparty system in their own interests, but their power to do so depends on the extent of local support built up over time. The particular form of the party system that emerges from the democratic transition is sustained over time through isomorphic competitive pressures embodied in the new rules of the game, the forms of party organization, and the structure of competition that shape party and voter behavior alike.

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List of Acronyms

COSU	Coordinating Association for the Unified Senegalese Opposition
GMR	Gouvernement Militaire Revolutionnaire
PSI	Party System Institutionalization

Party Names

AFP	Alliance des Forces de Progres
ANC	African National Congress
CPP	Convention People's Party
FARD	Front d'Action pour le Rénouveau et le Développement
MADEP	Mouvement Africain pour la Développement et le Progrès
MMD	Movement for Multiparty Democracy
NDC	National Democratic Congress
PAI	Parti Africain de l'Indépendance
PDS	Parti Démocratique Senegalais
PIT	Parti de l'Indépendance et du Travail
PNC	People's National Convention
PNDC	Provisional National Defence Council
PRD	Parti du Rénouveau Démocratique
PRPB	Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin
PS	Parti Socialiste
PSD	Parti Social-Démocrate
RB	Renaissance du Benin
RND	Rassemblement National Démocratique
UNIP	United National Independence Party
UPND	United Party for National Development

Note on Party Names: Where party names changed over time, such as the Parti Socialiste in Senegal, I consistently use the contemporary party name to describe that party even during historical periods when it was officially known as the Bloc démocratique sénégalais (BDS), l'Union progressiste sénégalaise (UPS), or Bloc populaire sénégalais (BPS). This holds true for other party name changes as well, with the exception of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) in Ghana, which officially changed its name to the National Democratic Congress (NDC) with the transition to multipartism. During the transition period, I refer to the party as the (P)NDC.

Preface

Party systems across democracies in Sub-Saharan Africa vary dramatically. Some are weakly institutionalized; their political parties are poorly organized, cycling in and out of existence, and are not consistently present across the country. Others are highly institutionalized, with enduring parties that form deep links with voters and organize in every constituency. Why did some African party systems become highly institutionalized whereas others did not?

Observers of African politics overlook the importance of formal democratic institutions such as political parties. The conventional wisdom suggests that informal relationships prevail and that party systems are little more than window dressing in democratic politics. Informal institutions such as patrimonialism and clientelism do matter in African democracies, but they now work in tandem with formal institutions such as the party system. To understand African politics, we need to understand how these formal and informal institutions simultaneously structure politics in these countries.

Doing so means recognizing that political parties operate differently across the continent. The degree of party system institutionalization is an enduring feature of the democratic landscape of each country that offers uneven opportunities for participation, representation, accountability, and alternation. Why did countries develop the type of competitive political party system that they have, and what does this mean for the evolution of democracy?

Answering these questions requires looking at how prior authoritarian regimes accumulated power. In most African authoritarian regimes, incumbents consolidate their power in one of two ways: broad-based *incorporation* of social and economic authorities at the local level or *state substitution* – attempting to neutralize local power brokers and replace them with state-sponsored organizations. Both strategies are equally useful for authoritarians who want to maintain control, but they are not equally transferrable once

multiparty elections are held. Facing pressures for democratization, incumbents want to control the transition process, set the rules of the new multiparty system in their favor, and win founding elections to maintain power. But incumbent ruling parties need the support of local elites and their followers who could defect to the opposition. Whether an incumbent can control the transition depends on how authoritarian power was accumulated. Incumbents who had incorporated local authorities were able to maintain their support, set the rules of democratic competition in their favor, and retain power despite democratization. Those who had previously substituted party or state agents in an attempt to replace local power brokers found themselves lacking cooperation across the rural areas and unable to mobilize mass support. New opposition forces then pushed for more permissive electoral rules and weakened incumbent control.

The results of these initial conditions persisted beyond the moment of transition. Rules for party eligibility, organizational imperatives, and strategic interparty alignments drove parties within each country to resemble one another. Where authoritarian incumbents were strong at the moment of transition, they restricted entry by new challengers and compelled opposition parties to coalesce to compete. These pressures forced party organizations to emulate the incumbent's party, leading to fewer parties and discrete incumbent and opposition camps. These pressures made party systems more highly institutionalized in the democratic era. On the other hand, where authoritarian incumbents were weak, they lost control of the transition agenda, allowing new players to contribute in uncoordinated ways to press for more open participation. New parties organized along different lines in a party system open to reinvention and party proliferation. The result in these countries was that weakly institutionalized party systems persisted.

I test this explanation using a variety of data and multiple methods covering the entire region and also focusing on the specific cases of Benin, Ghana, Senegal, and Zambia. Although scholars have so far focused on factors such as economic development, ethnic demographics, and electoral institutions to explain why some party systems are more institutionalized than others, my analysis finds these explanations wanting. Instead, authoritarian power on the eve of democratic transition is central in shaping new party systems. How democracy operates depends not only on characteristics of the regime itself, but also on the existing relationship between national and local power brokers. During democratic transitions, these existing relations condition whether or not incumbents can maintain power and set the new rules of the game. These rules in turn influence how party systems develop. Because political competition encourages parties to homogenize, powerful authoritarian incumbents at the moment of transition create incentives for opposition parties to emulate them. That leaves some party systems with persistently high levels of institutionalization and others with more

fragmentation and weak institutionalization. What this sequence of factors highlights is that democratization is not a tabula rasa: legacies from the past, specifically authoritarian strategies for maintaining power, play a major role in determining how democracy operates not only in Sub-Saharan Africa but also in other new democracies around the world.

Acknowledgments

When asked by new acquaintances how it came to be that I study political party systems and democratic representation across Africa, I often remember the critical choice in college at the University of Wisconsin–Madison to determine where I would spend my junior year abroad. I had "narrowed down" the options to Asia, Africa, or Latin America and from there I selected the program where I would take university courses in French and live in the dormitories with other regularly enrolled students from that country. Only after living in Senegal for the better part of a year did I learn that one of the finest scholars of African politics was at my own institution in the United States. Upon returning for my senior year, Crawford Young allowed me to enroll in the last course he taught, a graduate seminar on ethnicity, race, and nationalism. Although I did not yet know it, participating in this lively academic community that Young created allowed me, years later, to adopt the labels of comparativist and Africanist. I keep his impeccable example with me as I now interact with colleagues and students; he remains a source of inspiration.

Mentors at Princeton University, too, have indelibly shaped my research, and I remain indebted to them for their kindness and tough critiques throughout my doctoral studies. My advisory committee – chaired by Evan Lieberman and joined by Jeffrey Herbst, Atul Kohli and Deborah Yashar – provided a masterful blend of support, good humor, and incisive feedback. I have had the great fortune to learn from their extraordinary work and to benefit from their intellectual guidance. I am very appreciative of the time, effort, and generosity of these esteemed scholars. The ideas they share with countless students – through comments in a seminar, discussing a recent lecture, or notes scribbled in the margin – have a ripple effect, creating a cascade of new projects and research agendas that continue to shape the field. At different moments, each of my advisors made this journey possible, and I will always be immensely thankful. Nancy Bermeo, Amaney Jamal, Grigo Pop-Eleches, Jonas Pontusson,

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