1

The Puzzle of Electoral Continuity

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The general elections that were convened in Zambia on August 11, 2016, were the eighth multiparty presidential elections and the sixth legislative elections convened since democratization in the early 1990s restored multiparty politics in that country. Between independence and 1991, Zambia had convened only one competitive presidential election and just two legislative elections that involved more than a single party. President Edgar Lungu of the Patriotic Front (PF) party was reelected narrowly over Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development (UPND).[1] The campaign rhetoric of the two parties was sharply different. Hichilema lamented the decline of democratic norms under PF rule and criticized Lungu's management of the economy, brandishing his own record as a successful businessman to argue that he would do much better. By contrast, President Lungu highlighted the administration's record in infrastructure development and contrasted his own humble background and religious faith with his opponent's arrogance, wealth, and "godlessness" (Fraser, 2017, p. 466).

The results suggested an evenly divided country, with the eastern and northern regions voting overwhelmingly for the incumbent and the southern and western regions strongly supporting Hichilema. International observers publicly declared the election to have been free and fair, although they did lament the climate of violence in which the campaign

[1] The present account is based largely on various newspaper accounts; see also *African Arguments* (2017), Beardsworth (2017), and Fraser (2017).

proceeded, including several significant clashes between supporters of the two parties. Observers also criticized the government for having suspended *The Post*, the main opposition newspaper, in the run-up to the election. In addition, the government jailed key leaders of the UPND, accusing them of trying to create a private militia, presumably to contest the electoral results – charges that the opposition categorically denied.

Hichilema contested the electoral results vigorously, accusing the national electoral commission of having conspired with the government to alter the results. His unwillingness to accept the results led the PF to accuse him of treasonous behavior, and he was jailed from April to August 2017 in a clear attempt to intimidate him. Pressured notably by the Commonwealth of Nations and the Zambian Conference of Catholic Bishops, President Lungu did not follow through on the indictment and eventually released Hichilema unconditionally.

International reporting on the Zambian election expressed concern about the evolution of the country's democracy. The BBC's accounts of the election characteristically lamented a decline of democracy in Zambia and argued the country was at a "crossroads,"[2] while *The Guardian* lamented the decline of popular support for democracy in Zambia.[3]

When observers such as Freedom House bemoaned the global decline of democracy in 2016, the Zambian elections were invariably offered as an example (Puddington and Roylance, 2017). Yet by Freedom House's own rankings, Zambia's record as a highly flawed electoral democracy has been fairly consistent over the past two decades. It is a "partly free" regime, in Freedom House's terms, with a long record of highly imperfect elections. Since the transition to multiparty rule, incumbents in Zambia have consistently resorted to illiberal strategies to win elections, with pressure on the independent press and attempts to intimidate the opposition.

Not all elections in the region in 2016 were as problematic. Ghana's general elections in December 2016 resulted in the victory of opposition leader Nana Akuffo-Addo and his New Patriotic Party over incumbent President John Mahama and the National Democratic Congress Party.[4]

[2] "Hakainde Hichilema's Treason Trial Puts Zambia at Crossroads," Thursday, August 11, 2016, accessed at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-40020950.

[3] "Zambia Goes to Polls to Elect Next President after Hard-Fought Campaign," accessed at www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/10/zambia-goes-to-polls-to-elect-next-president-after-hard-fought-campaign

[4] This account is derived from several sources, including "Ghana: A Turning Point Vote for the Black Star," (2016); Sarah Brierley and George Ofosu, "9 Things You Should Know about Ghana's Election," in *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2016, accessed at

Despite worries about violence and fraud, given the highly partisan electoral campaign conducted by the two main parties, the election proved to be trouble free, and Mahama conceded defeat soon after the National Electoral Commission announced the results. One reason for the lack of contestation was the elaborate effort by the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers, an alliance of thirty-four civic associations, to deploy a network of 12,000 election observers and then produce an immediate estimate of the results on the night of the elections. Thanks to smartphone and Internet technology, this estimate proved to be virtually the same as the official results reported by the commission and helped to legitimize it. Mahama's government had engaged in a spending splurge in the months before the elections in hopes of improving a worsening economic situation, but attitudinal surveys suggested that Ghanaians were disgruntled about the economy's slowdown and dissatisfied with the direction the country was taking. The Ghanaian general elections of 2016 were the seventh presidential and legislative elections since the return of multiparty politics in 1992.

The December 2016 Gambian elections also witnessed the defeat of an incumbent, but it occurred after a vitriolic campaign in which the government engaged in extensive intimidation of the opposition.[5] Unlike his Ghanaian counterpart, President Yahya Jammeh refused to accept the result, vowing to remain in power, a stance that was soon buttressed by the support of the army. Jammeh had been in power since a military coup in 1994, and his rule was characterized by regular elections combined with little respect for civil and political rights. Eventually, neighboring states were able to negotiate a diplomatic exit for Jammeh from the presidency so that the challenger, Adama Barrow, could take office. However, without the intervention of the Economic Community of West African States, Jammeh would likely still be in power.

In sum, 2016 provided the full panoply of African elections, from the admirably democratic to the evidently fraudulent. In all, there were some fourteen direct multiparty national elections on the continent that year.

www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/07/nine-things-you-should-know-about-ghanas-election/?utm_term=.891f3ce3005c; and Sean Lyngaas and Dionne Searceydec, "Ghana Presidential Vote Hinges on Economic Perceptions," in *The New York Times,* December 6, 2016, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/africa/ghana-election-john-mahama.html?_r=0.

[5] See "Jammeh Tilts the Playing Field"(2016); "The Gambia's President Jammeh Concedes Defeat in Election," in *The Guardian,* December 2, 2016, accessed at www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/02/the-gambia-president-jammeh-concede-defeat-in-election.

Such a busy electoral calendar was no longer exceptional in an area where elections had once been rare events. Indeed, several hundred multiparty elections have been held in forty-six of the forty-nine countries of sub-Saharan Africa[6] since a wave of democratization swept across the region in the early 1990s. How typical were the very different 2016 elections in Ghana, Gambia, or Zambia? How have African elections changed in the past twenty-five years? How have parties and party systems evolved? Have elections helped to strengthen democracy in Africa, or have they contributed to political instability? What do Africans think of these elections? What do political campaigns actually look like?

In this book, we analyze a quarter-century of multiparty electoral politics in the region. Every year since the early 1990s, a dozen or so African countries have organized multiparty elections. Many of these elections have included illiberal practices, from voter intimidation to vote buying and violence. But, as is less often remarked upon, much has been normal about these elections. For example, political parties canvas and put up posters to make voters aware of predictable electoral pledges. Candidates engage in standard political rhetoric at mass rallies and undertake campaign stops around the country. Many candidates use social media to communicate with citizens. Voters reward officeholders who have delivered good economic performance, and they pay attention to the professional backgrounds and personal qualities of candidates in addition to their policy promises. Opposition parties win legislative seats and subnational offices, and more rarely, the presidency, albeit. Citizen participation in these elections has also been routinized, with varying but mostly unremarkable turnout rates in comparative terms. Moreover, these participation rates have remained fairly stable for more than two decades.

In summary, multiparty elections have been institutionalized during this quarter-century. However, we do not observe broader democratic consolidation in most of these countries. Instead, the democratization of the early 1990s remains incomplete in much of the region. Our referring to *multiparty* elections rather than *democratic* elections is intentional because, as we shall argue, many if not most of these elections either were not free and fair or were not organized in a democratic context. Despite much apparent change since 1990, many of the same men and rather fewer women remain in positions of power in the region. On the whole,

[6] Throughout the text, we refer to "Africa" and "sub-Saharan Africa" interchangeably, to refer to the forty-nine countries south of the Sahara.

with a few notable exceptions, the same political class that dominated national politics before transitions continues to do so.

Some elections have been free and fair and have been held in political systems with recognized civic and political rights. More elections have been manipulated by incumbent regimes and their presidents, who can leverage the advantage embedded in disproportionate executive power or, in some instances, act in a manner that is totally at odds with the procedures and spirit of democracy. Even when elections are relatively free and fair, most African political systems continue to be characterized by abuses of power and a less-than-stellar respect for the political rights of citizens. As in the postindependence era, power has remained skewed toward the executive, and we observe limited growth and institutionalization of other branches of government in most countries.

The extent to which regular multiparty elections have coincided with undemocratic practices is suggested by the examples with which we began this introduction. Despite different electoral histories in Gambia and Zambia, both the Jammeh and Lungu regimes were resorting to well-established political practices to circumvent the will of the people as expressed through the ballot. These practices suggest that not much had changed in Africa. Yet the Gambian and Ghanaian cases show that elections of varying quality can nonetheless generate opportunities for political challengers to gain executive power.

Why has the move to routine and regular multiparty elections not promoted more political change in Africa? Why did it not generate democratic consolidation? These are the puzzles we seek to unravel in this book. Many observers may not agree with the argument we make about the role of elections in ensuring political continuity. As a result, our first task, to be undertaken in the next chapter, will be to demonstrate the high degree of electoral continuity. In the rest of the book, we will use a broad survey of electoral politics in the region to explain that continuity. Both optimist and, increasingly, pessimist observations about the region disagree with our argument of continuity. This is partly because news accounts of political trends in Africa usually overinterpret the results of an individual election in a single country and extrapolate from it a striking trend for the entire continent. For instance, in August 2016, *The Economist* published a gloomy assessment of electoral democracy in Africa. "African democracy has stalled – or even gone into reverse," *The Economist* argued, pointing to the August 2016 elections in Zambia, which it viewed as marred by fraud and intimidation by incumbent President Lungu (*The Economist*, 2016). This article contrasted starkly

with two more optimistic assessments of African democracy published in that magazine in the previous decade (see *The Economist*, 2002, 2010). Each of these three articles was based on one or two national elections in a region of some forty-nine countries. The fact that the news magazine could not decide whether democracy in Africa had not progressed or had actually regressed made *The Economist*'s editorial line comparatively sanguine about Africa. Elsewhere in the press and in the foreign affairs literature, a more pessimistic view has often prevailed in which a "roll-back" of the wave of democratization is either described or predicted.

Gloomy academic assessments are even more common, and they are long-running, having started as the wave of democratization was still taking place in Africa and continuing since. Most scholars viewed the democratic reforms as too superficial, too ephemeral, and/or too unsustainable to be truly meaningful (Chabal, 1998; Joseph, 1998; Chabal and Daloz, 1999). Others, such as Ake (1991) and Monga (1997), argued that electoral democracy would not much affect the lives of ordinary Africans. Much contemporary academic commentary has argued that the level of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa has been regressing since the high point of the Third Wave of democratization (Diamond, 2015; for a discussion, see Bratton, 2013). Not only Africa but also the rest of the world has been affected by the Third Wave, from Eastern Europe to Latin America (see Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Fukuyama, 2015).

In contradicting these arguments, we employ various types of quantitative and qualitative data to show that the striking characteristic of the region that needs to be explained is how little negative or positive regime change has actually taken place since the conclusion of the democratic transitions of the mid-1990s. Once countries started holding regular multiparty elections, they have largely continued to do so. Military coups that used to lead to lengthy periods of nonelectoral politics now get overturned quickly as the result of both local and international pressures. Regular elections have become the default option of politics. In this book, we will often lament the inconsistency and thinness of democratic procedures across the continent. But let us be clear from the start: The turn to multiparty competition across the region in the early 1990s constituted a political and institutional revolution that should not be underestimated.

Equally striking is the paradoxical continuity that can be observed since the end of the transitions of the 1990s. Governments are more responsive, but the weight of corruption and clientelism on growth remains heavy. The authoritarian tendencies of the executive have not changed as much as might have been expected. The composition of the political class

remains very similar to what it has been since 1990. Although high levels of volatility continue to characterize party politics, we observe patterns of elite circulation or *transhumance*,[7] in which the same individual politicians and networks of politicians reappear in new parties. Indeed, in a continent of youths, the political class seems to continue to be getting older.

This stasis in political life despite the introduction of multiparty elections is all the more puzzling in light of the dramatic social and economic changes that Africa has experienced during the past quarter-century at least in part, as we show in Chapter 8, because of the beneficial impact of regular multiparty elections. Two decades of steady and rising economic growth have transformed most African countries. Regular growth has swelled the ranks of the African middle class. Governments have seen their fiscal resources increase, and they have invested in new infrastructure and services and have hired more civil servants, who – in sharp contrast to the 1970s and 1980s – are more likely to get paid a living wage on a regular basis. Concurrent with the introduction of regular electoral competition have been urbanization, a rising middle class, a growing youth bulge, and the unprecedented growth of traditional and social media, as well as telephone expansion on the continent. Remarkably, urbanization continues at breakneck speed – above 3 percent annually – so towns all over the continent are expanding, and more than half of all Africans live in urban centers. The greater density of cities has created new media markets, bringing about an explosion in old and new media outlets. The increased purchasing power of Africans has also come to the attention of foreign investors, who have dramatically increased their investments in the region. In 2015, foreign direct investment levels reached a historic high in Africa, with US $61 billion yearly,[8] up from just above US $1 billion a year in the late 1980s. We argue that positive economic growth rates provide fodder for incumbents to boast about their economic management, but the rise in the middle class also suggests an increase in the numbers of more informed, independent, and empowered voters.

The radical changes in the media landscape in the past quarter-century are particularly noteworthy. In 1990, the big media innovation in Africa was the emergence of satellite news channels such as CNN, which were

[7] This French term, which designates the practice of moving livestock from one grazing area to another, is commonly used in French West Africa to refer to the tendency of individual politicians to migrate from party to party.

[8] See "Foreign Direct Investment in Africa Surges," in *The Financial Times*, May 19, 2015, accessed at www.ft.com/content/79ee41b6-fd84-11e4-b824-00144feabdc0.

undermining government monopolies over information in new ways. During the wave of democratization that was then hitting the region, debates focused on whether the recently invented fax machine provided an advantage to prodemocracy groups, which could use faxes to better coordinate their action. By 2000, the explosion of cellphones all over the continent made this debate seem quaint, but even then, the Internet was in its early infancy in Africa. Today, the role of social media has dramatically expanded and influences all aspects of electoral campaigns and, presumably, how basic political news travels within African political systems. While political learning is happening at the elite level as well and incumbents are learning how to track, manipulate, and block access to these technologies, what seems incontrovertible is the increasing expansion of the availability of political information.

As we demonstrate in Chapter 7, over the past two decades, African citizens have gained unprecedented access to various media from newspapers to television and the Internet. These individuals are also increasingly likely to be members of a self-help association. While there is still tremendous variation across countries, we observe increases in citizens' political knowledge about municipal and legislative officials over time. Finally, we see gains in political interest in the 1990s and early 2000s, followed by a stabilization of interest that appears to have remained steady.

A usually unexamined presumption in much work on democratization in Africa is that progress or regression in democracy is happening as fast as in the socioeconomic arena. In fact, we will argue that there is a striking and paradoxical disjuncture between the great changes in African society and the relative stagnation in its politics, even as we recognize the change brought on by the introduction of hundreds of competitive elections over the past two decades. In this book, we will both document this disjuncture and investigate its implications for electoral politics.

1.2 Explaining Political Continuity: Presidentialism and the Liability of Newness

Given the regularization of multiparty elections coupled with changes in the media landscape and demographic trends that include higher growth rates, urbanization, and unprecedented access to schooling, why do we observe relative political stasis? We argue that two key factors promote continuity: presidentialism and the "liability of newness."

1.2.1 Presidentialism

The primary lens through which to understand political continuity is the persistence of presidentialism, by which we mean that most of the political systems in Africa remain characterized by dominant and often unaccountable executive power. Following the turn away from electoral politics after independence, African strongmen typically adopted presidential institutions, through which they personalized power to a considerable extent and weakened legislatures and judiciaries in order to escape accountability. Dominant and even abusive executive power came to characterize most African states. To be sure, the reach of these "presidents for life" was often constrained by low levels of capacity in the states they oversaw, but in political terms, the strongmen towered over the polity.

As we will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, the transitions of the early 1990s included debates about constitutional issues and some significant changes, notably in electoral rules, but not a single country in the region decided to abandon presidentialism for parliamentary government. Not only do presidential constitutions continue to dominate the national institutional landscape, with considerable formal power vested in the presidency, but also informal institutions continue to tend to favor the executive branch of government. The executive branch continues to dwarf other branches of government in financial and political resources. Legislatures have been slow to seize the powers they have been formally granted, while the judiciary's low levels of professionalism and resources have typically subordinated them to the executive branch of government even when the country's constitution grants judicial independence.

Although the degree of presidentialism varies somewhat across the countries of the region, the variation is not related to other indicators of the level of democracy. We will also examine the handful of parliamentary regimes in the region, which are often the most stable and pluralistic democratic systems in the region – Botswana, Mauritius, and South Africa, for instance – but which also have exhibited a tendency toward executive branch dominance.

One of the striking trends in sub-Saharan Africa over the past quarter-century is the very low rate of executive alternation as the members of the old guard of nationalist politicians pass from the scene and the political class becomes younger. As we will argue, the rate of alternation may be increasing, but so far, in most African countries, incumbents seem to get reelected regardless of their performance in power.

This electoral success results from the uneven playing field that confronts would-be political challengers, who find that sitting presidents enjoy all sorts of advantages, from control of national institutions to access to state resources. Presidentialism exacerbates incumbency advantage in numerous ways, making it challenging for new actors to penetrate elite political circles. First, the president holds a substantial valence advantage in having more experience in office, controlling central levels of clientelistic redistribution, and maintaining relationships with donors and other important international stakeholders. This political dominance of the executive makes it difficult for voters to imagine a different leader governing with comparable resources and competence. As we show in Chapter 6, the preponderance of valence discourse in political debate during electoral campaigns favors the incumbent, particularly in relation to the central concern of economic development and public goods provision.

Second, in some systems, incumbents have consistently manipulated electoral processes to their advantage. This can happen through subtle control of the press, the use of state institutions for partisan purposes (Levitsky and Way, 2010), or more blatant forms of voter suppression and ballot rigging.

Third, many African economies remain state-centric, with relatively little dynamism in the private sector and a state that too often seeks to mitigate its low levels of capacity through a surfeit of regulatory ambitions – dynamics that may have their origin in the colonial state (Herbst, 2014). Thus dominant state executives can utilize state resources and rents, including foreign aid and mineral wealth, to their own advantage. Incumbents' control over state resources, including contracts and bidding processes, makes it difficult for moneyed challengers to emerge without ties to the president or party in power (Arriola, 2013). Some dominant parties have managed to exert a stranglehold on private sector development so that all new development goes through the party (Pitcher, 2017).

Finally, a key manifestation of incumbency advantage lies in the nature of party systems in the region, which also limit the prospects for political change. Relatively weak parties are buttressed when they benefit from incumbency and control of the executive. Though these parties often appear to be strong, they have quickly atrophied and in many cases completely disappeared if and when they have lost the benefits of state resources. While in power, however, they dominate the political scene, and regimes use incumbency advantage to weaken and fragment opposition parties. As a result, the turn to multiparty politics has only unevenly and very slowly enhanced party system institutionalization. Instead, we continue