PART I

TOWARD A NEW THEORY OF CHIEFS

1

The Paradox of Chiefs

On the eve of African independence, traditional chieftaincy appeared on the verge of being brushed away by a new democratic politics. Most of the new nationalist leaders shared the view that chiefs were antidemocratic local despots. In the words of the Ghanaian Minister of Local Government, "Democracy … implies the transfer of power from the official and the chief to the common man."[1] In Mozambique, the first president of the Frente de Liberação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) agreed, stating that traditional government "cannot form a satisfactory foundation for the needs of a modern state.… The survival of such systems is obviously a hindrance to the progress of a revolution that aims at social and political equality."[2] A young Nelson Mandela drew a similar contrast between chieftaincy and democracy when he told his nephew, a traditional chief, "the people want democracy and political leadership based on merit not birth."[3]

The institution of chieftaincy clashed with the nationalist movements' calls for political equality and democracy. In addition, the administrative functions these hereditary leaders had performed for the colonial state had delegitimized them in the eyes of the independence movement leaders. Across Africa, nationalist leaders called for the removal of chiefs and the transfer of their power to efficient new bureaucracies overseen by elected politicians. The removal of traditional chiefs was seen as a prerequisite for the modern democratic states that the new generation of leaders intended to build.

The campaigns against chiefs after independence were not just rhetorical. Laws were passed abolishing the positions of chiefs shortly after independence in Guinea, Mozambique, and Tanzania. Kings were deposed in Burundi and Uganda. The governments of Burkina Faso and Benin temporarily banned the

[1] Quoted in Rathbone (2000: 31).
[2] Mondlane (1969: 169).
[3] Mandela (1994: 160).

replacement of chiefs following their death for periods in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively. Even when chiefs were not whole-scale eliminated, as in Ghana and Zambia, the independence-era governments reduced their judicial and administrative roles, transferring powers they had previously held to official courts or local councils.

Yet, more than fifty years later, most efforts to replace chiefs have failed. Across Africa, traditional leaders run court systems, allocate land, and organize local labor gangs. Furthermore, the leaders of the same political movements who objected so passionately to the positions of traditional chiefs in the 1950s and 1960s have actively increased the power of chiefs during their countries' transitions to democracy. Chiefs currently have more administrative power in Africa's more democratic states.

Ghana, Mozambique, and South Africa provide striking examples of this. In Ghana, the government of Kwame Nkrumah attempted to break the power of traditional chiefs in the 1950s, dethroning important chiefs and transferring their powers over land to local governments. However, by the 1990s, the Ghanaian government was actively cultivating the support of chiefs by constitutionally recognizing their right to allocate land. In Mozambique, FRELIMO targeted chiefs for assassination during the country's long-running civil war. Yet, in the early 1990s, its Minister of Culture acknowledged that "we will have to restore some of the traditional structures that at the beginning of our independence we simply smashed, thinking that we were doing a good and important thing."[4] In 2000, the government passed a law not just recognizing many traditional leaders but tasking them with responsibility for justice enforcement, policing, taxation, land allocation, population registration, and development project implementation. The transformation in attitudes toward traditional leaders was equally striking in South Africa. As late as 1988, the African National Congress (ANC) National Executive passed a draft constitution calling for the elimination of hereditary positions. Yet, less than a decade later, the party oversaw the drafting of a new constitution that both recognized traditional chiefs and permitted provincial monarchs such as the Zulu king.

The experiences of Ghana, Mozambique, and South Africa reflect a broader pattern in sub-Saharan Africa. Competitive elections have led to a resurgence in the power of chiefs, and traditional leaders currently have more power in Africa's more democratic countries. Indeed, incidents of the revival of traditional institutions during democratic transitions can be found worldwide. This pattern is observed in countries as diverse as Mexico, where local communities adopted indigenous governance structures during the country's democratization in the mid-1990s, and Indonesia, where villages revived customary institutions in the post-Suharto era.[5] Although a number of scholars have noted the recent revival of traditional leaders, the relationship between democracy and

[4] Quoted in Hall and Young (1997: 164).
[5] Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Ruiz-Euler (2014); Henley and Davidson (2008).

the return of chiefs has not been systematically documented, and the consequences of this chiefly revival for the connection between citizens and elected political leaders have not been analyzed.[6]

This book seeks to understand the logic behind and the effects of allowing traditional leaders increased authority in developing democracies. What effects has the resurrection of traditional leaders had on democratic accountability? Has the power of chiefs crippled democracy, as postindependence leaders initially suggested it would? When traditional chiefs endorse political candidates, does this harm the democratic connection between voters and politicians?

In contrast to the conventional wisdom, this book suggests a paradox: the empowerment of unelected traditional leaders often improves the responsiveness of democratic governments. For all their autocratic warts – and for the most part, the process by which they inherit power falls well short of being participatory – traditional chiefs can facilitate the accountability of higher-level elected leaders to their constituents. This is because traditional leaders have a capacity to organize responses to rural problems that elected politicians and state institutions lack in weak states. Furthermore, the reason they have this capacity is because their longer time horizons – a result of the permanency of their positions – encourage investment in local institutions that can solve social dilemmas. This is the paradox referenced in this book's title: elected politicians can respond most effectively to rural constituents through institutions constructed and maintained by unelected leaders who are unconcerned about losing power. Traditional chiefs can improve the responsiveness of elected representatives.

The empirical focus of this book is Africa, where the power of traditional chiefs and the weakness of other state institutions are particularly evident. However, the book's argument has implications for how we understand the role of traditional leaders and the relationships between voters and elected representatives in developing countries more broadly. In poor democracies, voters are often described as political pawns of local elites, forced or manipulated into voting against their political interests through threats or material inducements.[7] In contrast, by emphasizing the importance of local leaders in facilitating the delivery of local public goods, this book not only casts these leaders in a more positive light, it also forces a reevaluation of the mechanism by which they exert political influence over other voters.[8] It opens the possibility that voters consider the political opinions of chiefs when deciding which candidate to support not because of pressure or coercion but because they are trying to figure out which candidate will perform best in office: if local elites must facilitate the projects initiated by elected representatives, it makes good sense

[6] On the revival of traditional leaders, see Buur and Kyed (2007) and Englebert (2002b).

[7] Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007); Schaffer (1998); Stokes (2005).

[8] As is common in the literature in political science, I use the looser definition of *local public goods* as goods that are geographically targeted and confer benefits on multiple community members. Examples include public schools and wells. For the stricter definition, see Tiebout (1956).

for voters to consider which candidate will work best with their local leader, if elected. If traditional chiefs play a constructive role in facilitating the responsiveness of governments after elections, this opens the possibility that their political influence during election campaigns also may be constructive. This deepens the paradoxically positive effects of unelected chiefs in democracies.

Chiefs as Undemocratic Leaders

Traditional leaders are rulers who have power by virtue of their association with the customary mode of governing their communities. The processes by which these leaders are selected are not timeless and unchanging, but they are part of popular conceptions of tradition. Chapter 2 expands on this definition and discusses the characteristics of these leaders at greater length. Traditional leaders exist across sub-Saharan Africa and at multiple geographic levels, encompassing various positions from village headman to king. In the theoretical sections of this book, I use the terms *traditional leader* and *chief* synonymously.

It is not difficult to see why postindependence leaders thought that chiefs were incompatible with democracy. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, the "traditional" methods used to select chiefs were typically nonparticipatory. In most cases, traditional chiefs inherited their position from family members or were appointed by higher-level chiefs. Even in cases that allowed some community participation in the selection of leaders, the consultation process fell well short of modern conceptions of democracy.[9]

Not only was the position of traditional leaders historically not elective, but it was also considerably altered by autocratic colonial administrations during the first half of the twentieth century.[10] Many traditional leaders lost virtually all their status and power following the colonial conquest. Leaders who obtained official recognition from colonial governments usually had their powers augmented.[11] The colonial governments were preoccupied with both reducing the cost of empire building and mobilizing resources to support their administration. As a result, they typically increased the coercive powers of chiefs to collect taxes and organize forced labor. In many places, chiefs were given increased powers to punish individuals who did not obey their orders, and those who disputed the chief's commands had little recourse.[12]

Thus the power of traditional chiefs lacks a democratic basis, has been altered by autocratic foreign administrations concerned primarily with serving the interests of colonizing countries, and is underpinned in part by coercion.

[9] Women, in particular, were typically excluded. See Mandela (1994).
[10] Indeed, the long history of traditional chiefs means that many of them have been associated not just with autocratic colonial administrations but also with homegrown dictators. For example, Mamdani (1996) has described their complicity with the apartheid regime.
[11] For more details, see Crowder and Ikime (1970).
[12] Chanock (1985); Geschiere (1993); Mamdani (1996).

FIGURE 1.1. Model of electoral responsiveness.

This makes the resurgence of traditional leaders in Africa's fledgling democracies both incongruous and potentially concerning.

Traditional Chiefs and Electoral Responsiveness

One of the most important recent developments in sub-Saharan Africa has been the spread of democratic politics. Since the early 1990s, elections have become the accepted mode of selecting national leaders across most of Africa.[13] Despite initial fears that elections would just be "window dressing" behind which dictators could hide, many elections have been genuinely contested, with incumbents facing real chances of losing. Incumbent parties lost power in 20 percent of elections in Africa held between 1989 and 2008.[14] Thus many African countries now meet a minimalist electoral definition of democracy. They are democracies by Joseph Schumpeter's criterion that political leaders are selected "by means of competitive struggle for people's votes."[15] At the national level at least, governments are chosen through elections that are lost relatively frequently.

These countries are democracies in the minimalist sense (or "electoral democracies") because citizens' votes determine who takes power, and, as a result, politicians must find ways of competing for them.[16] However, questions remain about the quality of democratic accountability and the responsiveness of these states to the interests of their citizens. States can be said to be responsive to citizens' interests when they implement policies demanded by the public (or, at least, a majority of the public).[17] A simple model of electoral responsiveness is illustrated in Figure 1.1. Elections are thought to facilitate responsive government by allowing voters to select and remove leaders based on whether they adopt policies and programs that are in voters' interests. State bureaucrats are then assumed to implement the policies adopted by elected politicians.

This model can break down in several ways, resulting in a disconnect between voters' interests and the policy implemented by states. In many developing

[13] These trends are well documented in Lindberg (2006) and Posner and Young (2007).
[14] Baldwin (2010: 295).
[15] Schumpeter (1976: 260). For another minimalist electoral definition, see Przeworski et al. (2000: 16).
[16] Diamond (2002) proposed the term *electoral democracy* for these types of systems.
[17] See Dahl (1971: 2). Note that some scholars use the term *government responsiveness* exclusively to refer to arrow A in Figure 1.1. See Manin et al. (1999: 9).

countries, observers worry that vote buying and ethnic loyalties lead voters to select politicians without regard for the policies and programs they propose to implement, thereby disrupting the connection between voters' interest and enacted policy at arrow A.[18] But policy responsiveness requires not just that politicians have an incentive to enact policies that benefit the majority of voters. It also requires that the state can implement these policies.[19] In many developing countries, the capacity of the state to implement the policies proposed by politicians cannot be assumed. As elections have spread across the globe, competitive elections have been introduced before states have modernized.[20] In communities where state institutions are largely absent, the challenge of ensuring that the state implements proposed policy is likely to be an equal or bigger challenge than ensuring that elections result in political leaders whose interests align with those of the electorate. As a result, responsiveness frequently breaks down at arrow B.

The existence of powerful traditional leaders is typically thought to reduce government responsiveness by breaking the connection between voters' policy interests and the programming adopted by elected representatives at arrow A. Chiefs are sometimes viewed as their own interest group, which has reemerged in democratic openings only to lobby for aristocratic privileges at the expense of the interests of citizens more broadly.[21] In this view, traditional leaders harm political accountability by redirecting politicians' attention from the electorate to a well-organized lobby of chiefs.

Even more frequently, chiefs are described as breaking the connection between voters and politicians at arrow A by exerting pressure on citizens to vote against their political interests.[22] According to this argument, chiefs use their positions of power within their communities to ensure that voters turn out for the chiefs' preferred candidates. This view of chiefs sees them as African variants of the political brokers that buy votes for clientelistic parties around the world.[23] They control valued resources within their communities, they are deeply inserted into local social networks, and their office is typically accorded great respect. As a result, they are well positioned to act as vote brokers, promising favored treatment contingent on voting a particular way. Given

[18] See Horowitz (1985); Stokes et al. (2013); and Weitz-Shapiro (2012).
[19] On this point, see Lipsky (1980) and Putnam (1993).
[20] See Rose and Shin (2001) for an argument that the third wave of democratization has proceeded "backward" for this reason.
[21] On the link between democracy and the rise of interest groups, see Olson (1982). The view of chiefs as an organized interest group is particularly common in South Africa, where the Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa (CONTRALESA) has successfully lobbied for increased status for chiefs. See Williams (2010) and Oomen (2005).
[22] For examples, see Boone (2014); Cruise O'Brien (1971); de Kadt and Larreguy (2014); Koter (2013); Lemarchand (1972); and Schatzberg (2001).
[23] For descriptions of political brokers in other contexts, see Calvo and Murillo (2013); Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007); and Stokes et al. (2013).

the cultural deference toward chiefs and their penetration of social networks, traditional elites are hypothesized to be able to use clientelistic exchanges to mobilize votes despite the secret ballot.[24]

In this case, too, traditional leaders reduce democratic responsiveness. They allow politicians to mobilize support through clientelistic exchanges with voters and can cause voters to cast ballots for candidates they would not support in the absence of this pressure. The result is that politicians no longer need to be responsive to the underlying interests of voters – they just need to ensure that the chief is on board.

Thus scholars focused on arrow A in Figure 1.1 generally worry that traditional leaders undermine democratic responsiveness. But responsiveness also can break down at arrow B because weak states do not have the ability to implement policies. Elections conducted under the secret ballot give politicians strong incentives to respond to voters' demands, but elections do not change the capacity of the state to implement proposed programming. In contexts in which political leaders wish to respond to voters' demands but lack the capacity to do so, traditional leaders may play a positive role. As the next section explains, they can facilitate democratic responsiveness by providing a technology by which elected leaders can implement the programming demanded by voters.

Toward a New View of Chiefs: Development Brokers

One Zambian Member of Parliament (MP) I knew well and interviewed multiple times was very concerned about maintaining good relationships with the chiefs in his community. However, it was not because they were powerful lobbyists; the MP explicitly told me it would be against protocol for the chiefs to visit him in his office in Lusaka, emphasizing their limited political weight on the national stage. In addition, he did not believe chiefs could direct voters to support him against their will because each citizen's vote is, in his words, "so hidden."[25] Instead, he emphasized the importance of having good relationships with chiefs so that he could work with them to implement community projects while in office. He explained, "Once elected, it is easier to perform well and accomplish development projects if you have the chief's support, because the chief plays a key role in implementing projects."[26]

As an example, the MP told me of a project to build houses for teachers in his constituency. He had managed to secure some funding from the central

[24] In fact, powerful chiefs may be able to mobilize support for particular politicians without additional material inducements from the politician; they may independently have sufficient resources and power that they can deliver the votes of their communities to their preferred candidates through pressure or threat of punishment. For a model of how powerful local patrons can use their monopoly over local resources to mobilize votes, see Medina and Stokes (2007).

[25] Author's interview, Lusaka, November 10, 2008.

[26] Ibid.

government for the project, but the community needed to provide labor, specifically by molding bricks for the houses, for the project to succeed. Although well known and popular in his constituency, he did not think he would get a large turnout if he tried to organize the unpaid labor by himself. Instead, he asked the local chief to mobilize the community to mold bricks, explaining, "Once the chief says something, there is no debate … whether they are doing it willingly or doing it for fear."[27] Indeed, the chief had no trouble organizing community members to make bricks for the houses, and the project was a success.

The MP's observations suggest limits to the ability of traditional leaders to get citizens to vote against their private preferences. Voting is secret, and each voter will ultimately decide which candidate to support on his or her own. However, chiefs can use their powers to facilitate the implementation of development projects in their communities. In this particular case, the effect of the chief was more important at arrow B than at arrow A in Figure 1.1, giving him a net positive effect on democratic responsiveness.

Thus this book presents a new view of chiefs' role in mediating the relationship between politicians and citizens. They are not primarily vote brokers but *development brokers*, facilitating the delivery of *development projects* in the sense this term is used colloquially in Africa to refer to local public goods and services. In playing this role, they can actually increase the responsiveness of governments to rural voters.

Key to this argument is an acknowledgment of the weakness of the African state. Most African voters still live in rural areas, where bureaucratic institutions are largely absent. Furthermore, states in Africa have weak fiscal bases, so many state-sponsored development projects are underfunded and require community contributions. In this context, traditional chiefs can help government responsiveness by providing the local organizational structure that allows elected representatives to respond to voters' demands. They can help politicians implement geographically targeted programs in the absence of a strong state by organizing communities to compensate.

Why do unelected traditional leaders have an incentive to do this? This book does not take a romantic view of chiefs. They are, like most politicians, mainly self-interested, but most local chiefs have an incentive to organize local public goods because they are deeply economically and socially embedded in their communities. Their own well-being is closely linked to the economic development of their communities, where they live and make their livings. Furthermore, unlike elected politicians, they expect to rule for life. As a result, they have more incentive than elected politicians to make up-front investments in institutions that will improve the ability of their communities to act collectively over the long term. Because of the relative permanence of traditional leaders, both as individuals and as institutions, they are able to facilitate the implementation

[27] Author's interview, Lusaka, July 23, 2007.