

Democratization by Elections?

OPPOSITION WEAKNESS IN AFRICA

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Multiparty elections in Africa, since their emergence in the early 1990s, have proven to be both contagious and resilient. Before November 1989—the date of Namibia’s independence and the generally accepted beginning of sub-Saharan Africa’s democratic wave—only Botswana and Mauritius had held regular multiparty elections. Between 1989 and 2007, however, the region witnessed some 120 competitive presidential elections in 39 countries, and 137 legislative elections in 41 countries, in which multiple parties won seats.¹

More than half the countries in the region have sufficiently institutionalized multiparty elections to have convened at least four such presidential and four legislative elections during this period. The quality of these contests appears to be improving over time, and some countries have become more democratic since first convening multiparty elections. Despite advances, however, more than half the region’s multiparty systems are not democratic, even by the most generous definition, and only a few have made discernable progress toward liberal democracy. A number of indicators point to the limits of democratization. To name but one, few African incumbents have actually lost an election in which they competed.

This essay examines the impact of elections on democratization in the fledgling multiparty systems of sub-Saharan Africa, and especially the extent to which opposition parties in the region are able to compete effectively. Their strength and strategies are intrinsically linked to the dynamics of contemporary democratization in Africa. Fortifying opposition parties and their positions in the national legislature should therefore form a central component of any strategy of “democratization by elections.”

The regularization of elections since 1989 has not in itself served to strengthen legislative oppositions, and the continuing weakness of opposition parties presents a serious and complex problem. A stable and numerically viable opposition is a key requisite for horizontal accountability through legislative checks on executive power. Weak opposition parties are highly correlated with imperfect democratization, but the causality is not always clear. Broadly, it appears that autocratic rule over the last several decades has prevented the emergence of a viable opposition, which in turn bolsters the regime in power. Thus the persistent weakness of the opposition is both a consequence of democratic deficits and a cause of their continuation.

Opposition parties' evolving ability to compete politically should in theory correlate with the level and quality of democratic practice. Legislative dominance by one party over time often results from authoritarian tendencies, the misuse of state resources, or both. Electoral turnover and declining legislative control by one party should therefore have a positive effect on democratic competition and on the institutionalization of democracy more generally. Moreover, the incentives and resources available to opposition parties are different than those available to the party in power. Opposition parties tend to have limited access to state resources and thus little ability to distribute patronage, which has implications for both party organization and program development, as well as for the institutionalization of the party system as a whole.

Assuming that the ability of the opposition to win elections depended in large part on the existing degree of democracy in the political system, we expected to find a positive correlation between the strength of democracy or the progress made toward democratization, on the one hand, and the strength of opposition parties, on the other. The data suggest only a weak relationship, however. And despite a slight correlation between the level of democracy (as determined by Freedom House scores) and the strength of the opposition (based on the percentage of legislative seats won), opposition-party weakness is striking in even the most democratic systems.

Opposition Parties and Electoral Performance

Taking a look at how parties perform in elections reveals both progress and problems. By 2007, some 21 countries had convened a fourth set of legislative elections, which attests to the routineness of elections in Africa today. At the same time, the results of these contests, summarized in the Table on the following page, highlight the ongoing dilemma of opposition weakness.

Over time, the winning party (usually an incumbent party) has consistently gained handsome majorities of both votes and seats, though its margin of victory has remained fairly static. Likewise, the degree of disproportionality between votes and seats has not increased, although

**TABLE—AFRICAN LEGISLATIVE-ELECTION RESULTS,
BY ORDINAL NUMBER OF ELECTION, 1989–2006**

ELECTION	NO. OF COUNTRIES	WINNING PARTY % OF SEATS	WINNING PARTY % OF VOTES	NO. PARTIES IN LEGISLATURE	2 ND PARTY % OF SEATS
First	41	62.4	55.4	6.7	18.9
Second	38	68.0	60.4	6.8	16.2
Third	34	64.6	53.4	6.4	21.4
Fourth	21	61.6	56.5	6.8	27.5
Fifth	3	41.9	37.0	9.0	27.5

Notes: Fifth elections have been held in Benin, Niger, and São Tomé and Príncipe. These totals do not include elections in Botswana and Mauritius, the two countries in the region that regularly held competitive elections for at least a decade before 1989. In bicameral systems, the data concern only the lower house.

Source: Author's database of legislative elections.

the available data likely understate the level of actual disproportional-ity, since the cases for which data is not made publicly available are more likely to be the less democratic ones. On the other hand, given the region's significant economic problems, the persistence of poverty, and the poor performance of many governments, it is remarkable that incumbents have continued to do so well, and is probably indicative of the advantages of incumbency.

The most useful and least deceptive indicator for assessing the strength of the opposition is probably the proportion of seats going to the opposition.² In looking at this value, opposition parties appear to have gained in strength over time—if just barely—from under a fifth of total seats allocated in the first two elections held, to just over a quarter in the fourth elections. Still, their legislative presence remains relatively small.

Examining election results at the country level shows that there is only a slight relationship between the strength of the opposition and the quality of electoral competition, and illustrates the pervasive weakness of electoral opposition in Africa. We focus on three key indicators of opposition weakness: the small size of opposition parties, their limited staying-power, and the independent-candidate phenomenon.

First, as the Table suggests, the leading opposition party often has relatively little representation in the legislature compared to the government party. Even in the region's most democratic countries, the opposition often has fewer than half the number of seats held by the winning party: In Benin (2003), the opposition won 15 seats compared to 31 for the winning party; in Cape Verde (2006), 29 compared to 41. Moreover, because the majority party can often count on the legislative support of smaller parties and independents, these data understate the strength of the majority party relative to the opposition. Although most countries in the region have presidential constitutions with wide executive discretionary powers and no requirement that the parliamentary majority be the party of the president, divided government has been rare. The notable exceptions are Niger and São Tomé and Príncipe, where suc-

cessive presidents have not consistently been able to count on a stable parliamentary majority.

Second, there are a remarkable number of party changes from one election to the next. Well-functioning democracies require an institutionalized party system that enables voters to choose between alternative parties on the basis of their performance in previous elections.³ Yet in only a handful of African countries have the same parties—apart from the incumbent—contested all elections since the return to multiparty competition.

In Zambia, for instance, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy, which won the first multiparty elections in 1991, is the only party to have contested all four legislative elections since then. In the Gambia, not a single party has run in more than three legislative elections. Even Senegal, where the multiparty system is relatively institutionalized, has yet to see the majority of electorally significant parties represented in consecutive elections. According to Staffan Lindberg's compilation of registered parties in 44 sub-Saharan Africa countries, the number has ranged from a low of seven registered parties (Botswana) up to a hundred (Congo-Kinshasa), and more than half the multiparty democracies in the region have more than fifteen parties registered in legislative elections.⁴

Finally, although parties appear to dominate the political scene throughout the region, in countries as varied as Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, and Uganda, more than 10 percent of members of parliament (MPs) have been independents. In Madagascar's 1998 elections, independent candidates won a higher percentage of the vote (26.8 percent) than the largest party.⁵ In Uganda's 2006 multiparty elections, independent candidates gained the same number of seats as the country's largest opposition party. In Malawi's 2004 elections, independents won 20 percent of the vote and became the third-largest group in parliament. Of course, some independent candidates, once elected, join the presidential majority.

The functional difference between independents and parties represented by only a single parliamentarian is not entirely clear (especially as a party that fields only one candidate for the legislature is the equivalent in political effect of an independent candidacy). The large and apparently growing number of independents in legislative elections throughout the region serves to weaken all parties, however, since it lessens their discretion over candidate selection, and has a particularly negative impact on opposition parties' ability to contest presidential power.

Several motivations appear to be at the root of the independent-candidate phenomenon. First, many hopefuls do not believe that running as part of a party increases their chances of winning and instead choose to run on their own, counting on their personal prominence and resources to win. This suggests that parties do not always provide candidates with additional resources. Second, a number of independents first try to stand as members of a party but lose the primary or are not selected by the party. Disagreeing with this decision, they choose instead to run as independents.

The party that rejected them, of course, is unable to assert discipline and persuade them not to run. Finally, running independently is often done with an eye to joining the winning party after the election, perhaps to buttress the presidential majority or simply for personal positioning.

Attempts to curb this trend can backfire. In Malawi, for example, a constitutional provision intended to strengthen the role of parties likely led to an increase in the number of independent candidates. The provision prohibits MPs elected on a party ticket from changing party affiliation during the electoral term without having to recontest their seat. They may, however, leave their party to become independents, and MPs elected as independents may join an existing party.⁶ This creates an incentive for candidates to run as independents and then strike a bargain with a party after their election.

The Repercussions of Presidentialism

In sub-Saharan Africa's less-than-fully-democratic multiparty systems (and, presumably, in electoral autocracies in all regions of the world), legislative elections are largely a sideshow in what are highly presidential political regimes. The key political competition is for the presidency, which also commands a disproportionate amount of institutional power and resources. As H. Kwasi Prempeh recently argued in these pages, the African state continues to be characterized by "untamed" presidential power, and mechanisms to limit that power or to move toward a parliamentary system have barely been discussed since the wave of democratization first began nearly two decades ago.⁷ Thus the presidency influences opposition parties in countless ways, and the latter cannot be understood without reference to the former.

Three main factors appear to weaken opposition parties throughout the region: the advantages of incumbency that stem from executive dominance; the opposition's limited access to resources; and the low legitimacy of opposition politics in the region. Each results from both informal and formal mechanisms, and in each case there is clearly dual causality as well, insofar as the weakness of parties itself has allowed the continuation of old patterns of executive dominance in African politics.

The third wave of democratization in Africa has by and large resulted in only a limited increase in actual political competition. The dominant political parties before democratization (usually in competitive single-party regimes) systematically were more likely to remain in power after democratization, though this trend was tempered by the number of political parties in a given system and the degree of ethnic fractionalization.⁸ Across Sub-Saharan Africa, even where there has been real alternation, the weak institutionalization of legislative parties is linked to a political framework in which the presidency is overwhelmingly important.

Parliamentary office and control of committee leadership remain

poor platforms for promoting policies. The legislature—the one branch of government in which opposition parties stand a chance to gain a foothold and enhance their popularity—is, with only a few exceptions, institutionally weak across Africa, as indicated by scores on the Parliamentary Powers Index.⁹ Joel Barkan may be right to suggest that there are signs of increasing power and political influence in some African legislatures, but the modal legislature remains weak, and the balance of power remains strongly tilted toward the executive.¹⁰

The single biggest impediment to truly competitive democracy in Africa is the overwhelming dominance of the presidency. In the 1990s, as countries all over the continent transitioned to multiparty democracy, only Ethiopia, Lesotho, and South Africa opted for a parliamentary system, although many African states had emerged from colonialism with a parliamentary system. Furthermore, in many countries in the region the absence of regionally elected assemblies and the weakness of local government structures leave few alternative arenas where parties can groom prospective candidates or influence the formulation or execution of public policy. Thus the weakness of the parties, and in particular of the opposition, is embedded in the political system's excessive concentration of power in the hands of the executive.

Recent developments in Malawi exemplify the use of executive power to maintain control over the legislature. In February 2005, just eight months after winning the 2004 election, President Bingu wa Mutharika resigned from the United Democratic Front and formed a new party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). As a result, not only did the new president face a parliament without a single DPP representative, but the plurality party, the Malawi Congress Party, viewed Mutharika as an enemy. The president therefore maneuvered to limit parliament's power by cutting back legislative sessions and using cabinet appointments as an instrument of survival. Thus the number of cabinet posts increased from 24 in 2004 to 42 as of June 2007.¹¹ The cumulative effect has been costly—paralyzing parliament and increasing expenses.

Another source of presidential power is control over the electoral calendar. The data suggest that presidents have been able to defer having to face the voters, so that between 1989 and 2006, there were on average 1.5 presidential elections fewer a year than legislative elections. A number of the less democratic states, such as Cameroon, Gabon, and Rwanda, combined a seven-year presidential term with a five-year legislative term. In other cases, the constitution enabled the president to convene legislative elections earlier than the end of the president's own four- or five-year term.

The strong presidency and the authoritarian legacy of many African countries tend to weaken parties generally and especially oppositions. The democratization of politics in Africa is slowly changing the nature of political clientelism,¹² however, and this will likely strengthen the

position of political parties over time. The establishment of the firm rule of law, regular competitive elections, and greater vertical accountability does not eliminate clientelism—in even the most respectable democracies, various practices of patronage and influence-peddling are all too common. Instead, democratization shifts the locus of clientelism from the central state apparatus to political parties. In authoritarian regimes, the presidency typically controls clientelism. The exigencies of competitive elections, however, may force incumbents to shift clientelist practices to the parties to help them compete for votes. Moreover, it has been hypothesized that the movement to democratic politics should increase the level of redistribution through clientelism, expanding it beyond a small minority of elites to a wider portion of the electorate.

There are important caveats to this prediction. In the poor countries of Africa, with their stagnant economies, politically motivated spending and patronage possibilities are limited, and state structures are comparatively small and cheap. Thus the shift to electoral politics may stir up demands for expanded social services and patronage, but alone will not lessen the sharp fiscal constraints on governments that have never excelled at collecting taxes and are relatively dependent on external donors. Nonetheless, compared to the days of noncompetitive single-party elections and foreordained presidential referenda, the move to electoral politics does reinforce the importance of the party in power. To win elections, the president must strengthen his party—both in order to maintain party discipline and to campaign effectively. Doing so is not easy, however. Recent history shows that incumbent parties often struggle to maintain discipline and to mount nationwide campaigns, particularly in rural areas far from the capital. Still, incumbent parties, with their access to state resources and the countrywide state infrastructure, have huge advantages over opposition parties, which have access to neither.

Most African political parties are poor, with few resources and little organizational capacity or mobilizational capability. While parties in Eastern Europe and Latin America have developed in conjunction with interest groups—working-class parties tied to trade unions, Christian parties linked to the Catholic Church, or agricultural parties tied to farming interests, for example—few such linkages exist in Africa. Rather, incumbent parties' strength is often due to their access to public funds and their effective exploitation of state instruments. Thus the key to an opposition party's ability to compete is the degree to which it can sustain itself without access to such resources.

Uganda's 2006 presidential and parliamentary elections epitomize the near futility of running against incumbent parties that control state resources. In this case, the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) by virtue of calling itself a "movement" rather than a "party," had for years been the only political body exempt from massive restrictions on political activity. The so-called Movement System had effectively fused

the ruling party and the state. Thus the NRM was funded as a government entity through the 2006 elections and benefited from access to public resources, biased media coverage, campaign assistance from public servants, and the harassment of the main opposition candidate and his supporters. As a result, none of the opposition parties could challenge the NRM's hegemony in even a fraction of the 945,351 seats contested at various levels of government.

The third major challenge for opposition parties is establishing legitimacy—no small task, as the role of a legislative opposition has yet to be widely accepted in the region. In fact, while the Afrobarometer survey shows that most Africans now reject one-party rule and support multi-party competition, it paradoxically also reveals the incredibly low esteem in which opposition political parties are held.¹³ These results are borne out by reality. The Social Democratic Front (SDF) in Cameroon, for example, lost popular legitimacy when it agreed to enter into parliamentary opposition, because many—including even some rank-and-file SDF members—believed that a party out of power had only the possibility of gaining perks and prebends rather than playing any substantive role in governance.¹⁴

Numerous scholars of countries across the continent have noted that party formation is driven not by ideology but by political careerism, competition over spoils, and personal traits. Personal ambition and ethnic loyalty, as opposed to social and economic issues, tend to drive Africa's political parties. The lack of economic development and weak private sectors have long led the ambitious to view politics as the most realistic channel for upward mobility. Political positions are often the route to business opportunities such as obtaining licenses or state contracts.

Moreover, being in opposition is of limited political value in sub-Saharan Africa, where politicians are expected to bring benefits—material goods and services—to their constituencies. Politicians are the spokespeople and financial providers for their communities, and opposition politicians therefore have few incentives to coalesce because their chances of gaining access to state resources will be greater if they ally with the president's party.¹⁵

The Rules of the Game

Electoral rules and term limits, both of which tend to depend on the degree of executive control, have a huge impact on the opposition's ability to compete. First, electoral rules play a role in shaping the power of the presidency. Today, some 25 African countries use a two-round majority system (TRM) in their presidential elections, while 13 follow simple majority (SM) rules. Presidential contests are clearly more competitive in the TRM systems. The winner in these elections on average received 54.4 percent of the vote in the first round and 61.7 percent in the second round, compared to 67.5 percent of the vote for the winner

in the SM-system elections. The equivalent scores for the runners-up were 25.8 percent and 39.1 percent in TRM-system elections and 22.6 percent in SM-system elections. Similarly, of the 45 elections in which the runner-up won at least 35 percent of the presidential vote, only 5 were in SM systems.

Thus the TRM system is more favorable to presidential alternation and provides better opportunities for opposition parties. The electoral outcomes in Benin (2006) and Senegal (2000), for example, suggest that the TRM system of presidential elections increases the chances of an opposition coalition forming to defeat an incumbent. In both those countries, the vulnerability that the incumbent demonstrated in the first round created the sense that an opposition coalition could win the election, which encouraged a movement of defection from the presidential camp to the opposition. In addition, vote results from the first round act as a coordinating device for the opposition. They can determine who the most popular opposition-party candidate is and thus who has the greatest claim to be the coalition candidate for president. The first round also provides leverage for other parties who run well to claim positions in the cabinet and government, and the period between rounds allows time for deal making.¹⁶ In these countries, an SM system would have probably resulted in a plurality victory of the president over several opposition candidates.

In general, TRM systems are associated with Francophone states—the French Fifth Republic is thought to be the inspiration for this model—though a small number of Anglophone states, notably Zimbabwe, also use them. Interestingly, some of the less-democratic Francophone countries have moved to the SM system, including Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon. In 1992 in Congo-Brazzaville, incumbent president Denis Sassou-Nguesso lost power to Pascal Lissouba in a fairly democratic two-round election. Sassou-Nguesso came in third, with just under 17 percent of the vote, but returned to power in 1997 in an armed takeover and changed the electoral system to a simple-majority system. He won the next election with 89 percent of the vote, in a contest marked by intimidation and fraud.

Term limits—introduced in most African countries during the democratic transitions of the early 1990s to insure against future presidents-for-life—promote the alternation of power of both individuals and political parties. Mandating the periodic exit of officeholders curbs the advantages of incumbency, and successor candidates are more likely to meet with defeat than incumbents. In Ghana, for example, when Jerry Rawlings stepped down in 2000 after two elected terms as president, the opposition candidate won the election. In Mali, the two-term limit on the presidency produced fissures in the president's party when the party leaders were divided on the choice of successor Alpha Konaré. As a result, the 2002 legislative elections produced a parliament divided among a number of parties and without a clear presidential majority. In

Kenya, the 2002 elections broke the dominance of the Kenya African National Union, which had been in power since independence in 1963. With longtime president Daniel arap Moi bowing to international pressure and not running, the opposition was at last able to unite behind one candidate in the 2002 contest and win.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Latin American republics instituted term limits in an effort to limit executive powers in what were highly presidential and personalistic regimes. Term limits provided a pragmatic solution to dealing with the *caudillo* tradition of the region. Limiting the prerogatives of a sitting president was nearly impossible, but capping the length of presidential tenure became part of the formal rules. The same clear-eyed pragmatism appears to be at work in Africa's imperfectly democratic systems today.

Opposition Strategies

For opposition parties to have a chance at power, their first order of business must be to level the playing field. Accordingly, many lobby for formal institutions and measures that uphold competitive democracy and protect its participants, such as well-funded independent electoral commissions and constitutional reforms. Some parties, however, opt to accept the formal rules as a given and focus instead on informal mechanisms to compete in elections.

In addition to the many structural disadvantages facing oppositions, they must overcome the huge gap in resources. Opposition parties are adopting at least two pragmatic approaches to the funding quandary. First, they are seeking financing from private businesses. In Benin, for example, Yayi Boni, winner of the March 2006 presidential election, had headed the West African Development Bank for a decade before running for president. His campaign touted the Bank's Benin projects in the months before the election to enhance his technocratic image and show his ability to deliver the goods to the population. He also likely benefited from the financial support of business associates from his time at the Bank.

Second, opposition parties are contesting in local elections in order to use those offices as platforms from which to compete at the national level. In Uganda, John Ssebaana Kizito, head of the Democratic Party, served as mayor of Kampala and ran for president in 2001 and 2006. Similarly, former president Nicéphore Soglo of Benin became the leader of the opposition and mayor of Cotounou, the capital city, after leaving the presidency. Soglo, whose age excludes him from running for president again, is using the mayoralty to promote his son for high office. Controlling a mayoral office allows a party to distribute resources to its constituents and to cultivate a core base of supporters—both of which are indispensable when running for national office. Moreover, opposition parties poll best relative to incumbents in major urban areas,¹⁷ suggest-

ing that cities offer a natural springboard from which to run for national office. In addition, the budgetary and patronage resources available to opposition parties in urban areas tend to be greater.

Opposition parties not only are at a disadvantage in terms of resources but also sorely lack legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Serving in local office is one way to build legitimacy. Another is to abandon traditional clientelistic politics in favor of mobilizational political rhetoric that compensates for their relative inability to compete with the government party in material resources. Some parties also are beginning to exploit the absence of programmatic politics in the region and to experiment with a public discourse that would set them apart from the incumbent party and make them attractive to voters.

Two approaches appear to be emerging. First, there is a distinctive African populism that emphasizes class differences and economic nationalism to mobilize voters. Michael Sata and his Patriotic Front party in Zambia have used this approach, and the evidence from that country suggests that such rhetoric can be effective, particularly in urban areas.¹⁸ The discourse of Laurent Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front in Côte d'Ivoire also seems to fit this category, notably in its strident nationalism, although it has a strong ethnic component as well. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that manipulating ethnic identities will not combine effectively with economic populism as an electoral strategy. Nor is there much reason to believe that politicians like Sata and Gbagbo are particularly sincere in their rhetoric, or that they will not resort to traditional forms of clientelism if and when they obtain power. The point is that opposition parties can compensate for their weaknesses with rhetoric, and we should expect more and more parties to try to do so.

Another, more problematic approach is posed by the emergence of doctrinaire Islamic parties, especially in West Africa and northeastern Africa. A number of groups have sought to mobilize Muslim voters with an Islamic-tinged social critique of traditional politics, while delivering social services to prove their commitment and attention to the everyday concerns of voters. This approach has not yet yielded any electoral breakthroughs, but precedents in the Middle East suggest that it may well be a viable political strategy.

In the Western world, the adoption of programmatic politics was accompanied by major investments in party organization, which dramatically enhanced parties' mobilizational capacity. Superior organization, particularly when combined with a new and popular political rhetoric, was key in countering the incumbency advantages of parties in power. This was notably the case for the successful labor-based organizations that rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century. Such a model is unlikely to be replicated in sub-Saharan Africa, however, as African parties cannot rely on membership dues from a much smaller base to

fund organizational growth. In most countries, the structure of the economy militates against the emergence of large working-class movements, at least in the short to medium term.

Formal and Informal Institutions

The relationship between formal and informal institutions and its role in the democratization of sub-Saharan Africa deserve more attention. The impact of electoral rules and other formal institutions has recently been a favorite topic of recent research on political parties.¹⁹ Arguably, this turn to institutionalism has been a breath of fresh air for a literature too often marked by the parochialism of African exceptionalism. But an exclusive emphasis on formal institutions remains problematic. Using contemporary Western experience as the theoretical referent, this new scholarly literature has not tended to problematize the actual level of democracy in the political system. Yet in electoral regimes that are not yet fully democratic and are characterized by substantial incumbency advantages and abuses of power, formal political institutions are at least in part the endogenous product of the balance of political power in the system. Focusing on the impact of formal institutions on political outcomes, therefore, becomes problematic.

Moreover, in all political systems formal rules interact in a variety of ways with informal institutions that mediate how those rules shape political behaviors and outcomes. In some cases, informal political institutions like political clientelism undermine the formal rules of the game. In others, the working of formal political institutions is facilitated or accommodated by a set of informal rules and conventions. Competing informal institutions typically predominate in new democracies, while complementing informal institutions normally prevail in more-established democracies. In emerging democracies, informal institutions can have a positive effect on governance, however, especially in presidential systems with multiparty or fragmented party systems.²⁰ The key is whether or not they provide mechanisms and strengthen norms that promote accountability. That being said, it is important to assess these informal mechanisms and analyze their potential impact on emergent African democracies.

Studies of African democratic developments have tended to equate informality with nondemocracy and formal rules with democracy. As an electoral democracy in Africa matures, more weight will be given to rule-based behaviors, and formal political institutions will take pride of place. But democracy will thrive in Africa only if political actors develop a set of informal norms and standards that uphold, legitimize, and strengthen the formal rules. The real question regarding democratic consolidation on the continent, then, is whether such complementary informal norms are emerging through party competition, or whether competing informality largely undermines democratic development.

Our analysis of factors that may explain the weaknesses of opposition parties has emphasized the links between formal institutions and political strategies. Although Africans by and large are not attracted to the prospect of a return to authoritarian rule, the performance of opposition parties in the region indicates that we should question whether Africa's multiparty systems really are progressing. At the very least, the pace of democratic progress has been exceedingly slow.

Regardless of the nature and quality of electoral institutions, opposition parties have remained numerically weak and fragmented, and are typically not fully able to carry out their role of providing a political counterweight to the victorious party and president. As a result, an essential element of democratic accountability has not yet emerged in many cases. It is perhaps not surprising that some of the most stable political regimes in the region—and also some of the regimes now rated as “most promising” from a development perspective—are one-party-dominant regimes that have never experienced a regime turnover of government.

There are a number of reasons to question this tendency to favor stability over alternation in power. For one, the prospect of losing power dramatically changes the incentives of key actors. Truly faced with the possibility of losing an election, a ruling party might move to create institutions that would protect it when out of power—a strong independent judiciary, for example. In addition, studies of former communist countries suggest that businesses tend to invest less in buying influence in countries with party alternation. Thus there are strong empirical reasons to believe that alternation will increase the quality of governance by strengthening mechanisms of both horizontal and vertical accountability. Strong opposition parties and effective formal and informal institutions that enhance those parties' prospects for electoral success ultimately are critical for the success of democracy.

NOTES

1. The data set of legislative and presidential elections used for this essay is available from Nicolas van de Walle. Note that the data extend to the end of 2007. Elections in Botswana and Mauritius are not included.

2. The “effective number of parties” statistic is often used instead, but the huge number of independent candidates in some countries lessens its usefulness, because it is difficult to distinguish between small parties and independents, both of which are proliferating. To give just one example, in the 2006 elections in Congo-Kinshasa, 63 independents won seats, and 56 parties won five seats or fewer. “The effective number of parties is the number of hypothetical equal-size parties that would have the same total effect on fractionalization of the system as have the actual parties of unequal size.” See Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera, “‘Effective’ Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to West Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 12 (April 1979): 3–4.

3. Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, eds., “Parties, Party Systems and Democratic Consolidation in the Third World,” special issue, *Democratization* 9 (Autumn 2002).

4. Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy and Elections in Africa* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 13.

5. The numbers are reported at <http://africanelections.tripod.com/>.

6. Most independents elected in 2004 were previously in UDF but defected during the nomination process. After the election, most rejoined the UDF parliamentary group.

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8. John Ishiyama and John Quinn, "African Phoenix? Explaining the Electoral Performance of the Formerly Dominant Parties in Africa," *Party Politics* 12 (May 2006): 317–40.

9. M. Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig, *The Handbook of National Legislatures: A Global Survey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

10. Joel Barkan, "Progress and Retreat in Africa: Legislatures on the Rise?" *Journal of Democracy* 19 (April 2008): 124–37.

11. Siri Gloppen, Lise Rakner, and Lars Svåsand, "Political Paralysis in Malawi: Repercussions of Party Splits in a Weakly Institutionalized Democracy," paper presented at the ECPR General Conference, Pisa, 5–8 September 2007.

12. Nicolas van de Walle, "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss? The Evolution of Political Clientelism in Africa," in Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

13. Michael Bratton, Carolyn Logan, Wonbin Cho, and Paloma Bauer, compilers, "Afrobarometer Round 2: Compendium of Comparative Results from a 15-Country Survey," Working Paper No. 34, March 2004, 30, 32, 34. Available at www.afrobarometer.org/papers/AfropaperNo34.pdf.

14. Piet Konings, "Opposition and Social Democratic Change in Africa: The Social Democratic Front in Cameroon," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 42 (November 2004): 305–6.

15. Van de Walle, "Meet the New Boss."

16. We thank Devra Moehler for this insight.

17. Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz, "African Cities and Incumbent Hostility: Explaining Opposition Success in Urban Areas," paper presented at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association, San Francisco, November 2006.

18. Conroy-Krutz, "African Cities and Incumbent Hostility."

19. See Matthijs Bogaards, "Crafting Competitive Party Systems: Electoral Laws and the Opposition in Africa," *Democratization* 7 (Winter 2000): 163–90; Andrew Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Democratization in Southern Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Shaheen Mozaffar et al., "Electoral Institutions, Ethno-political Cleavages, and Party Systems in Africa's Emerging Democracies," *American Political Science Review* 97 (August 2003): 379–90.

20. Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, eds., *Informal Institutions and Democracy. Lessons From Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 11.

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