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Elections Without Democracy

AFRICA'S RANGE OF REGIMES

Nicolas van de Walle

Nicolas van de Walle is a Fellow at the Center for Global Development and professor of political science at Michigan State University. He is the author most recently of African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979–1999 (2001).

In the first half of the 1990s, great political changes swept sub-Saharan Africa. All through the region, single-party regimes found themselves pressed by domestic critics and global trends into allowing legal opposition parties, press freedom, and competitive elections. Multiparty races, which had been rare since the immediate postindependence era three decades earlier, became routine. Opposition candidates began consistently to win legislative seats. In a few countries such as Zambia, opposition politicians who came out ahead in the voting were actually allowed to assume the reins of government.

These unexpected changes raised hopes that a region long known for political and economic failure was about to turn a corner. For a time, the sheer romance of it all hid the truth of how hard it would be to set up stable democratic governments in countries long beset by poverty, authoritarianism, low administrative capacity, and ethnolinguistic divisions. In many of these countries, electoral politics has proven disappointing as corruption, abuses of power, and economic crises continue to plague national life.

Over much of Africa, therefore, *fin-de-siècle* optimism has given way to early-twenty-first-century gloom. Leaving behind the romance of transition, we have entered the era of “democracy with adjectives” as observers strain to invent qualifiers that capture the actual quality and texture of multiparty politics as it is practiced in the region.¹

Such a swing of the pendulum may be inevitable, but the current gloom holds at least three dangers. First, it tempts us to underrate the gains realized over the last decade. Obvious imperfections should not blind us to the clear improvement in competition and participation that

the 1990s have brought. We must not forget that even if day-to-day politics falls short of democratic ideals, the typical sub-Saharan country is measurably more democratic today than it was in the late 1980s.

Second, the gloomy view tempts us to hold African democracies to impossibly strict standards of liberal democracy, standards that even mature Western democracies cannot meet consistently. Political patronage and electoral irregularities, both causes for much hand-wringing when they come to light in fledgling democracies, are hardly unknown in the West, as the U.S. presidential election of 2000 reminded us. Nor are vacuous campaigns and overly partisan contenders found only in young democracies. Even if the shift to democratic procedures cannot instantly transform sociopolitical norms, it is still to be desired and sought after.

Third, disappointment tempts us to group all of sub-Saharan Africa's several dozen multiparty polities into the same category of "imperfect democracy," though even a cursory analysis shows that politics is practiced quite differently from country to country, and that they hardly appear to be all on the same path. In fact, a careful comparison of political systems is precisely what we need if we want to grasp why some countries have made substantial democratic progress while others have not.

The Rise of Multipartism

Between 1989 and the end of 2000, sub-Saharan Africa witnessed 70 presidential elections (spread across most of the region's 48 countries) involving more than one candidate.² Over the same period, legislative elections involving at least two parties were held at least once in 42 countries—an average of more than seven elections a year. By the late 1990s, national legislatures in 39 of the 48 sub-Saharan countries contained representatives from at least two political parties. Only Congo-Kinshasa, Eritrea, Rwanda, Somalia, Swaziland, and Uganda held no multiparty elections whatsoever.

How much progress was this? A great deal when compared with the period from 1985 to 1989, when only nine of these countries held competitive multiparty elections. From 1989 to 2000, moreover, 35 countries managed to hold more than one cycle of competitive elections, in nearly every case after the incumbents had reached the prescribed end of their constitutional mandate. Ten countries convened three such elections; Niger even held four. Clearly a pattern of regularization was forming. It presented a sharp contrast with previous periods when competitively elected legislatures more often than not fell prematurely in the face of military coups d'état.

Broadly speaking, then, we can say that the vast majority of African states are now multiparty electoral regimes. A closer look, however, reveals polities that vary from relatively liberal democracies to thinly

veiled personal dictatorships. The classification of regimes by Freedom House is roughly correct. Of the 39 countries in sub-Saharan Africa that qualified as multiparty electoral systems as of the end of 2000, Freedom House rates 9 as "Free," 22 as "Partly Free," and 8 as "Not Free."³ This means that at one extreme, a few countries can claim to have established reasonably genuine democratic governance. This includes Botswana and Mauritius, which have relatively long experiences of multiparty rule and are perhaps Africa's only consolidated democracies, as well as countries that democratized in the 1990s (Benin, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and perhaps Mali). These countries exhibit reasonably effective instruments of horizontal accountability, usually in the form of a court system or a national legislature that has shown itself willing formally or informally to challenge a constitutionally dominant executive. Voters have recently turned out executive incumbents in Benin, Mauritius, and São Tomé and Príncipe; the presumption is that this could happen in the other states as well. The press and civil society groups may be thin on the ground and weak by Western standards, but their independence is beyond dispute.

At the other extreme, putting aside openly authoritarian states that permit no opposition, we can identify states such as Cameroon, the Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, and Togo where the recent wave of democratization has resulted in little more than grudging tolerance on the part of the incumbents for a type of multiparty electoral rule that does not threaten their hold on power. What used to be the sole legal party remains the dominant ruling formation and keeps a tight grip on parliament, even if opposition candidates are allowed to win a minority of seats. The president's party benefits from egregious gerrymandering, the manipulation of voter registration, and a monopoly of television and radio coverage. Those oppositionists who do manage to win legislative seats find that their branch of government has severely circumscribed powers, while the constitution gives the president broad decree powers. The judiciary similarly lacks the authority, resources, and independence to rule effectually against the executive in any important matter. The imbalance among branches of government means that there is little or no horizontal accountability: The president and his lieutenants are mostly above the law.

At the same time, there is little vertical accountability despite the regular elections. Vote fraud is common. Violence against the opposition goes unpunished. Civil society and the press are repressed, further insulating the government from the citizenry. There are independent newspapers, another gain of the transition period of the early 1990s, but journalists can be arrested, newspapers seized, or news organizations undermined by harsh taxes and regulations. Civic organizations can multiply, often with funding from abroad, but the government finds ways to keep them from spreading their influence beyond the capital and a

few other big towns while using various legal, financial, and political stratagems to restrict their influence.

Most of Africa's multiparty systems—some two-dozen states—do not fit easily into either the “full-fledged democracy” or the “electoral autocracy” category. Typically, these “in-between” states display features of each extreme. They have too much regard for rights and too much vertical accountability to be called autocracies, but also less horizontal accountability than the genuine democracies. They are truly “hybrid regimes.”⁴ In both Benin (a hybrid regime) and South Africa (a full democracy), judges can enforce some constitutional limits on presidential power; in the electoral autocracies of Togo and Zimbabwe, this is not the case. In Botswana's genuinely democratic system, the prosecution of high-level corruption resulted in the resignation of the sitting vice-president and presidential heir-apparent in 1992; such a chain of events would have been unthinkable in Daniel arap Moi's Kenya or Omar Bongo's Gabon. In a handful of states, the legislature effectively shapes political debate, and in three (Mauritius, Botswana, and South Africa) it is constitutionally sovereign. In all the other states, the legislature cannot check the president. Yet even here a closer look reveals differences. In Zambia and Tanzania, for instance, legislators at least *try* to exercise policy and budgetary oversight, while in Cameroon they focus on patronage and scarcely even make a pretense of questioning the executive.

In most African countries, power lies with a president and a small ruling circle who use the state's resources to keep the support of large networks of political clients. Such neopatrimonial rule is inherently antidemocratic because it is based on the private appropriation of public goods. Yet here again, there are differences from country to country. In the countries with the oldest democratic institutions, clientelism remains significant—political patronage is common even in Western democracies—but it is restrained. The distinction between public and private is well established, and there is a press and an opposition that can take top officeholders to task for misdeeds. In countries such as Botswana, South Africa, and Mauritius, clientelism persists, but within increasingly tighter boundaries. It is no longer a system of rule. In more autocratic Zimbabwe, Chad, and Guinea, by contrast, presidents still freely conflate their own personal and partisan interests with those of the state, and are not held to answer for doing so.

Once again, most African states fall between these extremes. Despite their reliance on clientelism, many countries are reining in the worst excesses of the past. Property rights command respect. Officials are not free to act as autocrats and expropriate private businesses. In many of these middling or hybrid regimes, in fact, the fight against rent-seeking and official abuses of power is often the cutting edge of the larger political struggle for greater democratization.

A final distinction concerns the possibility of electoral turnover. In a few countries, observers generally agree, elections are competitive and uncertain enough that an incumbent can lose, as have the presidents of Benin, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Senegal. In Cameroon, Guinea, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, by contrast, presidents have resorted to force and fraud before, during, and after elections rather than give up power. In the middle is the familiar ambiguous set of two-dozen countries where electoral contests are tilted against the opposition, but where democratic procedures seem deeply rooted enough to make it unlikely that an incumbent could withstand a landslide vote for the opposition.

Explaining the Differences

There is not enough space in the present essay to explore fully the reasons for these political variations among African countries. Therefore I will simply highlight a few critical but often poorly treated or misunderstood points.

The first of these has to do with modernization theory, which tends to explain the level of democracy in a polity by reference to its socioeconomic structure. The theory is not of much help in this instance. Several of sub-Saharan Africa's most democratic states, including Mauritius and Botswana, are indeed among its richest. But they were poor when they became democratic several decades ago, and only since then have they enjoyed rapid economic growth. In West Africa, the more democratic Mali and Benin have essentially the same type of economy and social structure as their less democratic neighbors Togo and Burkina Faso, and are among the poorer countries on the whole continent. The least democratic states include not only desperately poor Equatorial Guinea and Chad, but relatively developed Kenya and Cameroon.

In sum, the region offers evidence to support the thesis of Adam Przeworski and his colleagues that a transition to democracy can occur at *any* level of development.⁵ They also argue that democratic gains are more likely to endure in countries that are richer or enjoying rapid economic growth. Do the data from Africa warrant a conclusion similar to this one, which Przeworski and his colleagues base on their study of countries around the world?

Sub-Saharan Africa has 13 countries that could claim to have gone through a complete transition during the first half of the 1990s. Taking their Freedom House ratings during their peak transition years and comparing those to their 2001–2002 ratings, we see that four countries (Benin, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Mali) have sustained or even improved their democratic gains while three others (Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea-Bissau, and Zambia) have suffered serious setbacks.

Clearly, this picture offers little support for conventional modernization theory. The successful cases were among the region's

least economically developed countries, while oil-producing Congo-Brazzaville was one of the richest and most urbanized, and Zambia remained one of the most urbanized and industrialized, even if it was among the poorest as a result of longstanding economic stagnation.

A second key issue has to do with the nature of the transition in each country. The early 1990s were a time of great political ferment. Looking back after a decade, it is easy to make the profound mistake of conflating the various national experiences into a single “African” transition. From 1990 to 1994, there was enormous pressure to democratize. Domestic protests waxed, often drawing international support.⁶ Few leaders willingly gave up power, but not all could ride out the democratic wave. In Benin, a dreadful economic crisis and the unwillingness of the donors to bail him out sealed President Mathieu Kérékou’s fate. Some leaders misjudged the level of mass support they enjoyed. Both Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda and Malawi’s Hastings Kamuzu Banda seem genuinely to have believed they would win the elections they convened, and to which they invited international observers. Other leaders failed to nail down military support. In some way, in other words, old leaders made way for new ones. In all, the old single-party regimes and its their presidents were pushed from power in 14 countries. In all but four of these, sitting presidents were beaten at the polls, often in the first multiparty elections of the postcolonial era.

These 14 cases can be sharply distinguished from the others where the single-party regime managed to stay in power despite the transition to multiparty competition. In Burkina Faso, Kenya, Cameroon, Tanzania, and Côte d’Ivoire, the 1990s witnessed the first competitive elections in a generation. In each case the longstanding incumbent came out ahead, even if by a slim margin. In Kenya, President Moi’s wily maneuvering allowed him to survive in power, despite winning just under 37 percent of the vote in December 1992. Similarly, in Cameroon, President Paul Biya claimed victory with 40 percent of the vote in dubious October 1992 elections. In both countries there had been half a dozen previous electoral exercises, but never had the president found himself forced to face another candidate. In the ten African elections that ended with the incumbent being unseated, the voting was free and fair. In countries like Kenya and Cameroon, it was not. In all, the end of the year 2000 found 19 of sub-Saharan Africa’s 48 countries being ruled by the same figure who had held power in the single-party days before 1990.

Countries where incumbents went down in the transition maelstrom are significantly more democratic today than countries where the dictator rode out the coming of multiparty politics. In 2001–2002, the first set of states averaged Freedom House scores of 3.2 and 3.4 for political rights and civil liberties, respectively. If we drop from this group Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, and Niger—each of which suffered a military coup and a partial return to the old regime—the Freedom House average scores

improve to 2.7 and 3.1. And what of countries where the old ruler stayed in power? Their 2001–2002 average Freedom House scores were a clearly less democratic 5.5 and 5.4. Given the deeply personalized politics of Africa, it makes sense that individual leaders would exert such a powerful effect on political outcomes.

These facts also reveal that the effects of the early-1990s transitions are still important. Thomas Carothers is probably correct that the “transitions paradigm” is no longer a useful framework for understanding the situation of democracy in the world today.⁷ Yet at least in the case of Africa, he seriously underrates the continuing importance of what happened during the transition period, a watershed in the political history of the continent. When countries were able to dismiss autocratic incumbents, the victory for democracy was incomplete but still highly significant. Getting rid of the old ruler opened space for new political actors and organizations, spurred competition, set a precedent for future elections, and often reinforced the legislature and judiciary relative to the executive branch. Ten years later, it continues to matter.

The Importance of Political Competition

Another still-influential dynamic of the transition relates to the competitiveness of the first multiparty elections. Across the region, the first election set patterns that persisted during the rest of the decade. If opposition forces established themselves in this first election, they usually remained significant in national politics during the decade. Either the leading opposition party was able to get at least a third of the seats in the legislature, or the combined forces of all the opposition parties were able to stop the president’s party from gaining a clear majority.

Political competition can spawn instability and conflict. Personality-driven disputes, weak parties, and pervasive clientelism make for highly volatile legislative politics. The way is open to ethnic polarization, parliamentary paralysis, and the discrediting of democracy. Governments may be tempted to use repression and manipulation to weaken the opposition. In the Central African Republic and (to a lesser extent) Madagascar, government-versus-opposition standoffs have undermined democratic stability. Likewise, the military coups in Niger and Congo-Brazzaville came about in part because wrangling between government and opposition helped to rob democracy of its legitimacy.

African strongmen, of course, have long made the self-serving argument that democracy will breed uncontrollable conflicts, and hence is too dangerous to try. But Africa’s postcolonial history gives the lie to the notion that a dictator who feels secure is a dictator who will feel like making concessions. Instead, it seems that steady pressure from a legitimate, peaceful opposition is important in explaining the quality of

TABLE—TRANSITION DYNAMICS AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

	PARTY COMPETITION NOT COMPETITIVE	PARTY COMPETITION COMPETITIVE
INCUMBENTS NOT OUSTED	STATUS QUO: Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Mauritania	CONTESTED AUTOCRACY: Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Togo
INCUMBENTS OUSTED	DOMINANT EXECUTIVE: Mali, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia	CONSOLIDATING: Benin, Malawi, São Tomé & Príncipe

present-day multipartism. The stronger the opposition, the brighter democracy’s prospects appear.

Here again, the role of the opposition proves to be quite different depending on whether the old incumbent survived into the multiparty era. The table above illustrates the argument.

The box at top left holds the *status quo* category; it includes countries where no effective opposition emerged in the 1990s, and where the old autocratic rulers remain in charge. In Mauritania and Guinea, for instance, the absence of a significant local opposition has allowed the *ancien régime* to hang on by means of nothing more than small cosmetic reforms designed to keep the foreign aid flowing. In the lower righthand box are *consolidating* multiparty regimes such as those in Benin and São Tomé and Príncipe. Here the old ruler fell, an effective opposition emerged, and the winning party was held to a plurality or a bare majority. These are usually the most democratic of the new multiparty states in the region. The incumbent’s fall and the rise of party competition seem to have paved the way for restraint of the executive and the establishment of mechanisms of accountability.

The Table’s remaining two boxes contain most of the region’s hybrid regimes. The top righthand quadrant includes the small set of countries where the incumbent survived the transition in the early 1990s but could not stop a significant parliamentary opposition from arising. I label these the *contested autocracies*. They include volatile countries—Kenya, Togo, Chad, and Cameroon—where the presidential party is clearly in the minority and the regime could not survive a reasonably free and fair election against a united opposition. All four of these regimes have suffered foreign-aid cutoffs over the last decade as punishment for the repression and underhanded “divide and rule” strategies that they have used to stay in power. To avoid pariah status and make progress on things such as foreign-debt forgiveness, they will have to keep holding elections and permitting a nominally free press, even while knowing full well that real liberalization would spell their end.

Finally, in the lower lefthand quadrant are the *dominant executive* systems. In these countries the early 1990s brought a real regime change, but the new president’s party emerged from the first multiparty election as dominant. A good example is Zambia, where Frederick Chiluba

unseated Kaunda in 1991 and then sought to consolidate power by imitating many of the favorite tactics of his authoritarian predecessor—a job made much easier by the lack of any effective opposition to Chiluba’s party in the National Assembly.⁸ Chiluba retired after the end of his second term in 2001 (his handpicked successor won a highly controversial election), so perhaps this pattern will change, but there is no question that executive dominance has eaten away at Zambian democracy. Something similar might be said about Mali, where the dominance of the chief executive’s party has fueled an antidemocratic drift even though most observers rate President Alpha Oumar Konaré himself as a fairly sincere democrat.⁹ These regimes are not necessarily about to reverse the democratic gains of the early 1990s, but executive dominance may well be the biggest barrier to further progress.

The Dynamics of Change

This analysis brings us to the question of what will have to change if sub-Saharan Africa’s two dozen or so “hybrid” states are to escape their in-between status and make the shift to real liberal democracy.

Many observers stress the role of external actors in shaping the third wave of democratization.¹⁰ Some argue that African democracy has been mostly imposed from abroad. Others advance the “presentability hypothesis,” which holds that international pressure has produced “pseudo-democracies” because the West, given its other goals in the region, will settle for an outward show of democratic forms by African governments, no matter how superficial.¹¹ Still others complain that the donors, however sincere, do not more vigorously use the enormous leverage that they can bring to bear in order to move African governments toward democracy.

It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate the capacities of “the donors”—to use a hopelessly vague catchall term for what are in reality dozens of embassies, bilateral agencies, and multilateral organizations that rarely coordinate their efforts or speak with one voice. The threat of donor sanctions probably helps to pry open political space for opposition groups, but donor governments tend to have a natural bias in favor of the incumbents whom their funding buttresses, and are loath to make the kinds of partisan choices that promoting real change would typically require. The best hopes for democratic progress almost certainly lie elsewhere.

One place to look is the phenomenon of institutional learning. Since genuine democracy involves acquired behavior on the part of both individuals and institutions, it stands to reason that the more experience a country has had with democratic decisions (whether taken by voters, lawmakers, judges, or the press) the more likely it is to experience democratic learning. This is good news, particularly as this learning is likely to occur *even if* those processes are imperfect. Thus it has been

shown that the number of elections that an African authoritarian state held between 1960 and 1989 helped to explain the likelihood of its democratizing in the 1990s. The higher the number of elections—no matter how uncompetitive—the greater the likelihood of subsequent democratization.¹² Similarly, long experiences with constitutionalism in the settler countries of southern Africa have proven crucial to the consolidation of democracy since the fall of apartheid, even though these constitutions excluded large numbers of people from full political participation on racial grounds.

Extending this logic to the 1990s suggests a certain optimism regarding Africa's hybrid regimes. However flawed, the several dozen elections that have been conducted represent a significant stock of experiential capital that can underwrite future democratic progress. Electoral commissions, political parties, journalists, and of course voters have all profited by the lessons learned.

It seems hard to reject the well-known idea that a healthy and growing economy will in time make democratic progress more likely. Standard modernization theory, as we have seen, assumes the level of economic development as a key explanatory variable. The problem in using this model to explain African democratization is that there is so little socioeconomic variation across the region. By world standards, the whole continent south of the Sahara is poor, heavily rural, mostly illiterate, and home to only a tiny middle class. Nonetheless, modernization theory would predict more democratic outcomes in Africa's east and south, since the countries in those areas feature higher levels of literacy and urbanization. Similarly, and all other things being equal, the wealthier and more industrialized coastal countries should be more democratic than the poorer landlocked countries of the interior. It is unfortunately too early to tell whether such predictions will prove well-founded.

Certainly the economic success of Botswana and Mauritius helps to explain the stability of democracy there. One may similarly surmise that the relatively positive economic results registered by Mali and Benin during the 1990s have helped those countries' young democracies to find their footing. Of course, economic outcomes depend somewhat on political dynamics: Certain types of regimes promote growth better than others. At the same time, it is hard to argue with the general idea that strong economic performance facilitates peaceful movement toward greater democracy. It is, however, wishful thinking to assume that we are witnessing a "virtuous circle" of wealth-creation and democratization in these countries. The truth is that most African economies will, for the foreseeable future, remain highly vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather and international commodity prices, regardless of their form of government.

A more salient structural variable for the future of democracy, however, is likely to be the governing capacity of the central state.

Decades of economic failure, foreign-aid dependency, and official venality and incompetence have taken a terrible toll on many African states' ability to handle the basic tasks of governance.¹³ Compared with states in other regions washed by the third wave, Africa's central governments appear small and underdeveloped. In the typical sub-Saharan country, state employees make up only 2 percent of the total population, compared to 3 percent in Latin America and just under 7 percent in the states of the former Soviet bloc.¹⁴ African governments also appear to have a harder time gathering tax revenues. For all their domestic political predominance, these governments are relatively weak and vulnerable. And they will remain so as long as sustained economic growth remains elusive—with implications that are negative for both political stability and real democracy. Africa's states at present can do little to improve people's lives, which means that their legitimacy and stability will remain in doubt.

State decay subverts genuine democracy all over the region, but the prospects are bleakest where the decay is the furthest advanced, as in Chad, the Central African Republic, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger, and the island republic of the Comoros. Even if the central state has not fully collapsed there, as it has in Somalia, for example, state administrations are thinly staffed, unprofessional, and virtually helpless. Foreign donors and private charities provide whatever public services exist, and the state cannot even assert sovereignty over the whole of its territory. Lower and middling officials answer neither to their nominal superiors in the government nor to the citizenry. Soldiers and police officers use their arms to prey on rather than protect the populace. Foreign donors provide about two-thirds of the development funds, and dominate the public-policy process through parallel structures over which neither the executive branch nor the national legislature has control. In states this severely collapsed, genuine democracy is unrealistic even if remarkable individual leaders somehow arrive on the scene. In sum, these countries lack the minimal level of state capability that is necessary for democracy.

The Fate of Incumbents

Another key question is how deeply the incumbents have dug themselves into power. The longer a leader has been in power, the more personalized the regime is, and thus the harder it will be to institutionalize democratic procedures. This is particularly true of rulers who came to power in an undemocratic manner. The retirement of such longstanding personal rulers as Cameroon's Biya, Kenya's Moi, Zimbabwe's Mugabe, Togo's Gnassingbé Eyadema, Burkina Faso's Blaise Campaoré, Guinea's Lansana Conté, Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Nguema, and Gabon's Omar Bongo is a necessary—though hardly a sufficient—condition for improved governance and fuller democracy in their respective countries.

In each of these regimes, the main current obstacle to democratic progress is the resistance to it orchestrated by the incumbent president and his circle. A partial exception to this generalization is the case of Senegal, where after a long and gradual reform process longtime president Abdou Diouf actually stepped down after losing a free and fair election in March 2000.¹⁵ Otherwise, it is striking that all of the veteran rulers who managed to survive the initial transition wave of the early 1990s remain in power to this day.

Other factors will affect the long-term prospects for democracy in Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, to cite just three of these countries. Ethnic polarization may in some cases complicate the process, for instance, while substantial disparities in the institutional legacy available to successor regimes will favor the process more in some countries than in others. Thus, once Mugabe is gone, Zimbabwe will benefit from a much stronger constitutional tradition than a country such as Equatorial Guinea, which has never known anything but personal rule. Yet the enormous personal power accrued by Nguema, Moi, and Mugabe will be hard to transfer even to handpicked successors, and so the power of the other branches of government should rise accordingly. However personally obdurate new presidents may be, it will be harder for them to hold on to *all* the power they will have inherited.

Positive political change will be easier to achieve in countries without long-entrenched personal rulers such as Mozambique and Tanzania, where slow, incremental, and still somewhat precarious democratization processes unfolded over the 1990s. A hopeful precedent was set in Ghana in late 2000 when President Jerry Rawlings retired and his chosen successor lost the December election.¹⁶ Whatever Rawlings's personal motives may have been for stepping down, the prospects for genuine democracy brightened significantly when he decided not to run again.

Africans themselves appear to understand this, if the increasing calls for presidential term limits are any indication. One of the typical features of the transition-era constitutions of the 1990s was a provision limiting the president to two consecutive terms. A number of democratically elected presidents have quietly respected this norm. President Miguel Travoada of São Tomé and Príncipe retired following the end of his second term in July 2001, while Mali's President Konaré has announced that he will retire when his term expires in June 2002. Several of the strongmen who survived the early 1990s agreed to term limits, though they usually were able to "grandfather" themselves in by having their time in power prior to the first multiparty election left out of the counting. Thus Togo's President Eyadema is officially still in his second term even though he took power in 1967.

Despite the good example that Rawlings set, most of his fellow strongmen are now contesting these term limits. Sam Nujoma of Namibia was able to get the constitution changed to allow him a third five-year

term in 1999, although he has since then promised to retire in 2004. Other presidents, however, have found that public opinion—with clear donor support—is extremely hostile to such proposals and wants to keep term limits. Zambia’s President Chiluba had to drop his own effort to flatten term limits when even his own party complained. Presidents Conté, Eyadema, Moi, and Malawi’s Bakili Muluzi have all run into stiff resistance as well.¹⁷ In each case, a fraudulent referendum or other presidentially engineered shenanigans may get a revision passed, but it is clear that the idea of a time-limited presidential mandate is establishing itself as a new political norm in the region, imposing high costs on anyone tempted to disregard it. Each time a longstanding president retires, the prospects for improved democracy will be advanced throughout the continent.

Norms and Lessons

More than a decade ago, Daniel Levine admonished his fellow political scientists to study more carefully the social bases of the new democratic politics in Latin America, pointing out how unclear were the “organized relations among mass publics, social movements and groups, and elements of leadership, motivation and legitimacy.”¹⁸ These words ring true for scholars of Africa today. Western observers did not expect the wave of democratization that washed over Africa in the early 1990s. Today, we are still struggling to make clear the dynamics and emerging norms that are shaping African politics.

We will need a better understanding of these dynamics if we are to have any success at predicting the future course of democracy in Africa. A case in point is the emerging norm in favor of term limits. Such norms determine a regime’s legitimacy, which in turn significantly conditions the evolution of all but the most totalitarian states. As we have seen, even relatively authoritarian rulers must take these norms into account when estimating what their citizens will put up with. Another example is provided by my argument that the quality of political competition and the power of the opposition in part determine the quality of the democracy that emerges. Of course I overlook some obvious questions: What determines the power of the opposition in a given country? Why are opposition forces better able to organize in one country than in another? Why is the opposition in some countries persistently undermined by divisions and infighting? Why do ethnic divisions appear critical in some countries but not in others? We must be able to answer these questions before we can say that we really understand why Africa’s fledgling multiparty systems are moving in such disparate directions. It promises to be no easy task.

This brief survey of Africa’s political evolution nonetheless suggests several important lessons. First, the chaotic events of the early 1990s

were a true fork in the road: They set countries on distinct paths and continue to have important ramifications. Second, out of the region's divergent national experiences arose two-dozen or so hybrid regimes, in which genuine progress toward democracy coexists with a tincture of authoritarianism strong enough to raise doubts about future democratic outcomes.

Finally, since structural variables have little explanatory power when countries are so similar socioeconomically yet so different politically, we should shift our gaze away from the statistical in this instance and acknowledge that political outcomes will depend to no small degree on what important individuals think, do, and say. In Africa's highly personalized and poorly institutionalized polities, with their shaky constitutional arrangements and sturdy habits of clientelism, the fate of democracy may hinge on whether civil society groups, opposition parties, and ordinary citizens can match wits and strength with resourceful rulers who aim to keep power and are not all that particular about how they do so. The ability of Africans themselves to put a final period to the era of the "president for life" will in most countries constitute the biggest step yet taken on the long road to genuine democracy.

NOTES

1. David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovations in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49 (April 1997): 430–51.

2. The November 1989 transitional elections that went forward under UN auspices in Namibia are widely held to mark the beginning of Africa's democratization wave. For a general analysis of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa, see Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

3. In addition, the region has nine countries that do not include multiple parties in their legislatures: Angola, Burundi, Congo-Kinshasa, Eritrea, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, and Uganda. Freedom House rates the first eight as "Not Free." Uganda, whose national legislature is elected on what is officially called a "no-party" basis, is rated as "Partly Free."

4. This term was probably coined by Terry Lynn Karl, "The Hybrid Regimes of Central America," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (July 1995): 72–86.

5. Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

6. A comprehensive analysis of democratization in Africa is provided in Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*.

7. Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.

8. On Zambia's Third Republic, see Caroline Baylies and Morris Szeftel, "The 1996 Zambian Elections: Still Awaiting Democratic Consolidation," *Review of African Political Economy* 24 (March 1997): 113–28; and Julius Ihonvbere, "How Not to

Consolidate Democracy: The Experience of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in Zambia,” in J.M. Mbaku and J.O. Ihonvbere, eds., *Multiparty Democracy and Political Change* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1998), 219–40.

9. Zeric Kay Smith, “Mali’s Decade of Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 12 (July 2001): 73–79.

10. See, for instance, Samuel Decalo, “The Process, Prospects and Constraints of Democratization in Africa,” *African Affairs* 91 (January 1992): 7–35.

11. For instance, Richard Joseph, “Africa, 1990–1997: From *Abertura* to Closure,” *Journal of Democracy* 9 (April 1998): 3–17.

12. Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*.

13. I have elaborated this argument in my book, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979–1999* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

14. Nicolas van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 92.

15. Richard Vengroff and Michael Magala, “Democratic Reform, Transition and Consolidation: Evidence from Senegal’s 2000 Presidential Election,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39 (March 2001): 139–62.

16. This election is well described in Paul Nugent, “Winners, Losers and Also Rans: Money, Moral Authority and Voting Patterns in the Ghana 2000 Election,” *African Affairs* 100 (July 2001): 405–28.

17. See, for instance, “Des Souverains bien Inspirés,” *L’Autre Afrique*, 10–16 October 2001, 24–25.

18. Daniel Levine, “Paradigm Lost: Dependence to Democracy,” *World Politics* 40 (April 1988): 389.