

**Donor Defence of Defective Democracy and
Electoral Authoritarianism in Africa**

Paper presented at the Conference on
“Democratization in Africa: Retrospective and Future Prospects”
University of Leeds
4-5 December 2009

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Western countries say they want to support democracy. Since 1990, virtually every single Western bilateral donor has expressed an explicit preference for providing development assistance to democracies, rather than authoritarian regimes (Brown 2005: 181-82). Many also provide significant funding for democracy promotion and support for democratization. Two decades later, the euphoria over what appeared to be a “second independence” in Sub-Saharan Africa has faded. Though outright dictatorships are now relatively rare, the number of stable democracies is relatively low. The vast majority of African regimes are either “defective democracies” or “electoral authoritarian regimes”, the two categories mentioned in this conference’s call for papers. As a result, most Western donors are engaging with “hybrid regimes”.

This paper asks how and why donors justify working closely with “hybrid regimes”, in spite of their strong declarations on the centrality of democracy (and the related concept of “good governance”). After a brief exploration of the notion of hybrid regimes and their prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa, this paper analyzes the methods of casuistry donor officials deploy to become apologists for regimes that regularly hold less-than-free-and-fair elections, systematically restrict civil and political freedoms, abuse human rights and otherwise exclude themselves from even the most minimalistic definitions of a procedural democracy. It finds that they do so by: 1) focusing on election day (free elections), rather than the campaign and conditions as a whole (fair elections); 2) setting the standard very low (don’t expect too much); and 3) setting a long time horizon (don’t expect it too soon). I then examine factors that help explain why donor officials are generally disinclined to be too critical of the government of the country where they are posted. The main ones are: short posting with a steep learning curve, career disincentives and concerns over the impact of criticisms on aid allocations. The findings are based on interviews and interactions with some 70 donor officials in several Western and African countries since 1997 and a review of the primary and secondary literature.

Hybrid regimes and the cases of Kenya, Malawi and Rwanda

By one count, only 20 out of 48 Sub-Saharan African countries can be classified as “electoral democracies”.¹ Of those 20, 11 are classified as “partly free”.² This leaves only nine that could be considered liberal democracies, of which fewer still have experienced an alternation between political parties. Though one can certainly quibble with the exact count and classification of individual countries, a stark fact remains: the vast majority of are neither liberal or consolidating democracies, nor straightforward autocracies, but rather somewhere

The various research trips (1997-2008) upon which this paper draws extensively were made possible by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, the University of Ottawa, the International Peace Academy, the Academic Council on the United Nations System, the Institute for the Study of World Politics, and the Quebec government’s Fonds pour la Formation des Chercheurs et l’Aide à la Recherche, to whom I owe many thanks. I am also very grateful to Rosalind Raddatz for excellent research assistance.

¹ Freedom House (2009) lists Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Cape Verde, Comoros, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Zambia.

² Freedom House (2009) identifies Burundi, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone and Zambia

in what Thomas Carothers (2002) calls the “grey zone” that lies between the two extremes of the continuum.

The litmus when assessing whether a country’s multiparty elections are sufficient to warrant the appellation of democracy is to ask: Would the ruling party permit itself to lose at the ballot box and transfer power the victorious opposition? In my mind, if the incumbent would not be willing to give up power, relatively free-and-fair elections are beside the point. If the ruling party would steal the elections if it needed to, the fact that it did not have to take any large-scale fraudulent measures—due to a split in the opposition or even to authentic popularity among voters—does not indicate anything more than an opportunistic commitment to democracy. Actors that play by the rules of democracy only because (and as long as) they favour their party do not accept the rules as binding. Though one could argue, as does Staffan Lindberg (2006), even substandard elections are a good thing and are likely to lead to more democratic ones in the future, this does not obviate the fact that the elections are taking place in hybrid regimes.

This paper focuses mainly on three specific hybrid regimes: Kenya, Malawi and Rwanda. I cannot claim any scientific selection criteria for this choice, nor can I prove that they are a representative sample. They happen to be the three hybrid regimes where I have made at least two research trips since 1997 and interviewed donor officials on, among other things, the nature of the regime and their relations with it. Not all of my semi-structured interviews with Western officials were designed to address directly these issues, so I do not have an equal amount of data on the same themes from the three countries. Still, the consistency in donor discourse in those three countries, regardless of where the regime could be placed on the democracy-to-dictatorship continuum (and of the country of origin of my interlocutors), suggests that my findings are much more broadly applicable.

These three countries have been since the early 1990s firmly in the “grey zone”, though they may have moving one way or the other on the continuum. The reasons they cannot be considered procedural democracies, including blatantly unfair elections and the lack of respect for basic civil and political rights, have been chronicled in a large number of scholarly works, a few of which are cited below, and reports by international human rights organizations (such as Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group and Amnesty International) and local NGOs, which I do not cite for lack of space. Here, I merely try to justify very briefly how these countries are either “electoral autocracies” or “defective democracies”.

Kenya

From the legalization of multipartyism in 1991, through the rigged 1992 and 1997 elections, right up the opposition finally won in 2002, Kenya was a liberalized electoral authoritarian regime (Barkan 1993; Barkan and Ng’ethe 1998; Brown 2001; Holmquist and Ford 1992; Rutten et al. 2001; Southall 1999; Throup and Hornsby 1998). Though the former single-party regime had permitted opposition parties to form, it did not allow them to operate freely or hold campaign rallies across the country. Voters were intimidated and disenfranchised, not least by state-induced violence that killed almost 2,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more between 1991 and 1998, almost all of whom belonged to ethnic groups that generally supported the opposition but who lived in zones dominated by the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) (Brown 2003). After the opposition National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) came to power in early 2003, Kenya could more accurately be labelled a defective democracy (Murunga and Nasong’o 2006). Since the disputed election of 2007 and the 2008 power-sharing agreement that ended the crisis and accompanying violence, but

undermined the notion of justice and subverted democratic procedures, it is particularly hard to say for certain what Kenya has become (Brown 2009).

Malawi

Malawi quickly transitioned from one of Africa’s most authoritarian regimes to a multiparty democracy where the opposition won the “founding” elections in 1994. Subsequent elections in 1999 and 2004, however, were far somewhat free but rather unfair and returned the incumbent president or party to power. The ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) showed little commitment to democratic principles, with high levels of intimidation prevailing (Brown 2004a: 713-17, 2008; Englund 2002; Phiri and Ross 1998), constituting at least a defective democracy. As it is not clear if the electoral results would have been significantly different had the playing field been more level, it is highly debatable whether multiparty Malawi is or has been an “electoral autocracy”. Its status as a hybrid regime, however, is difficult to contest.

Rwanda

Rwanda was a dictatorship from independence from Belgium in 1962 until the 1994 genocide. The 1993 accords which temporarily ended a civil war installed a transitional power-sharing government, but plans for multiparty elections were aborted by the genocide. After the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from its base in Uganda and ended the genocide, it set up a RPF-led coalition government. Presidential elections were held in 2003, but the opposition’s main contenders were either imprisoned or forced into exile, giving the incumbent Paul Kagame a staggering – and hardly credible – 95% of the vote. The ruling party does not tolerate criticism, be it by opposition parties, NGOs or the media. Critics’ organizations are shut down and they themselves are silenced, imprisoned or exiled, usually accused of the crimes of “divisionism” or “genocide ideology” (an almost Orwellian thoughtcrime); even donors are loath to publicly criticize the government (Brown 2010 forthcoming; Reyntjens 2004, 2006; Silva-Leander 2008). One official from a (friendly) Western government described Rwanda as having “a one-party system with aspects of democracy”.³ Rwanda is thus an electoral authoritarian regime, rather than a defective democracy.

Donor apologetics

Donor officials who work in or with the governments of Kenya, Malawi and Rwanda, with whom they generally have good relations, must rationalize their involvement in a way that prevents cognitive dissonance by minimalizing the deficiencies of these regimes. Donors thus become apologists for partner governments that do not meet their self-professed democratic norms. They do so in at least three major ways. First, their assessment of the quality of the multiparty elections focuses primarily on election day, stressing order and compliance with procedures, to the detriment of often decided unfair campaign conditions and the violation of basic civil and political rights. Second, they use ad hoc standards that are far lower than

³ Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Kigali, Rwanda, August 2007. I should note that a few countries, including Sweden and the Netherlands, are currently cutting their aid programs to Rwanda due to the government’s continued involvement in armed conflict with the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Oddly, donors enacted no such sanctions when the Rwandan armed forces invaded the DRC as an active party in the country’s two civil wars (1996-2003).

international norms of free-and-fair elections. Third, they invoke the need for more time and patience, assuming (or at least pretending) that the country is making its way to a democratic destination as fast as it can, ignoring evidence of movement in the wrong direction and that the long time horizon is not always necessary. Below, I explore in turn each of these forms of casuistry, beginning with the privileging of the polls themselves and the relative disregard of the campaign conditions.

Focus on election day

As all hybrid regimes depend on some degree of electoral competition to legitimize their rule, elections are key to the identification of procedural democracies. The belief that good elections are sufficient to constitute a democracy is known as the “electoralist fallacy”. What donors are prone to forgetting—or choose to underplay—is that elections may be free on election day, but take place under patently unfair conditions and thus fail the test. Donor assessments of elections tend to focus primarily on the vote itself at the expense of the fairness of campaign conditions.

Typically, electoral observers emphasize how voters queued in an orderly fashion, often for hours under a blazing sun. This has become a cliché and betrays Western observers’ expectations that Africans are likely to rush the polling station rather than form a line, resulting in fisticuffs. Such commendations on behaviour at the polls distract from the equally crucial issue of the fairness of the vote. No matter how impeccable the voting procedure and the count, an election may fail the fairness test before voting even begins. For instance, the ruling party may systematically interfere with voter registration so that the electoral rolls disenfranchise opposition supporters or allow dead or non-existent people to vote for the incumbent; it can deliberately use gerrymandering and disproportionate constituency sizes in its own favour; it may prevent opposition parties from having meaningful access to the media or not allowed them to campaign, including holding rallies; it may prevent individual opposition politicians from filing their candidacy papers or reject them arbitrarily; it may harass, threaten or detain opposition candidates and supporters, via “ethnic cleansing”. This list is not exhaustive, but all of these techniques have been used in at least one of the three countries being studied here.

Donor officials often shift the blame for subpar elections from the ruling party to a divided opposition or electorate. If all opposition parties had united behind a single presidential candidate, the argument goes, electoral results suggest that they would have prevailed. What the donor officials tend to forget or underplay is that, had the elections been any closer, the ruling party had the means to make sure that the count would have been in its favour anyway—or that it could have prevented a transition through unconstitutional means.

Most of my discussions with donors in Kenya took place in 1998, soon after President Daniel arap Moi, in power since 1978, had won his second multiparty election. At the time, the Kenyans I interviewed, whether working in academe, NGOs or the private sector, almost all agreed that there was no way Moi would have allowed his party, KANU, to be defeated. One critical donor official agreed.⁴ A Western diplomat asserted that the election results “confirmed that Kenya is a tribal society and no one can put together a better coalition than KANU”.⁵ A former Western official stated that, “The opposition could have won in ’92 if it had not split” because KANU was caught off-guard. In 1997, however, KANU officials were better prepared. They “wouldn’t have accepted the results because the stakes were too high. There would have had a self-coup”.⁶ A Western diplomat recognized that KANU’s four-seat

⁴ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Nairobi, Kenya, June 1998.

⁵ Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Nairobi, Kenya, March 1998.

⁶ Author’s interview with a former Western aid official, Nairobi, Kenya, July 1998.

majority in parliament may not have been legitimate, but argued that it was “meaningless because, had it been any less, they [KANU officials] could have bought a few MPs”.⁷

Despite these admissions, most donors—and not a few scholars—argued that the Kenyan opposition threw the elections by splitting. However, as recognized above and argued in greater detail in Brown (2001), KANU had the means and the will to win even if the opposition formed a united front in 1992 and 1997. In both cases, the divided opposition simply rendered additional measures unnecessary. The fact that the Kenyan opposition was far more united in 2002 helps explain its victory, but KANU’s implosion over who would lead the party after Moi retired was the crucial factor (Brown 2004). By adopting a specious argument, based on the hypothetical possibility of a firmly united opposition’s supposed capacity to win, donor officials minimize the importance of the ruling party’s abuses and apportion a significant amount of blame to the victim instead. This contributes to a weakening of the criteria for assessing elections, the subject of the next section.

Set the bar very low

Even if elections cannot be said to be free and fair, donor officials regularly invoke reasons why they are still “good enough”. Donor officials repeatedly downplay concerns regarding human rights and fundamental freedoms. Instead, they emphasize the achievement of stability, security and order and the (often overplayed) spectre of chaos and civil war, often citing a favourable comparison with the country’s neighbours and its history of conflict. In Rwanda and in Canada, a remarkable number of Western officials, while recognizing the authoritarian nature of the Rwanda regime, told me something to the effect that “At least they [the Rwandans] are not killing each other anymore” or “Things are far better here/there than next door in the [Democratic Republic of] Congo”. With a bar that low, the Rwandan government would enjoy almost complete *carte blanche*.

The donor officials I talked to repeatedly fell back on arguments that the government simply lacks capacity or that the abuses are not sufficient to warrant antagonizing governments. In 1997, for instance, a Western aid official in Malawi told me, “We have to work with governments, not against them. Some countries deserve the hard line; Malawi is not one of them.” He recognized the regime’s shortcomings, but felt that they were minor: “Donors tolerate [government] weaknesses, but are not unnecessarily soft on them”.⁸ A Western ambassador, while recognizing the importance of democracy in bilateral relations, denied that donors should raise issues of democracy at all: “Democracy is why [my country] is strongly supporting Malawi. Donors are not to play a watchdog role, even if domestic checks and balances are very weak. [Our] role is to assist Malawians in ways that they request.”⁹ This of course fails to problematize which Malawians get to make this request—top-level government officials, presumably the president or cabinet—and how legitimate and representative their views are. It is hard to imagine an authoritarian ruler requesting donor pressure on him to democratize.

One unusually critical Western aid official in Malawi told me that Western diplomats grew “complacent” after the first democratic elections in 1994, that “Donors rested on their laurels” and “didn’t allow criticism of the government until [an] issue surfaced” that was “too glaring” to ignore.¹⁰ Another made the same point using almost the same terms: “Donors are sitting on their laurels till something really bad happens”.¹¹ This was however contradicted

⁷ Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Nairobi, Kenya, May 1998.

⁸ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, Malawi, November 1997.

⁹ Author’s interview with a Western ambassador, Lilongwe, Malawi, February 1998.

¹⁰ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, Malawi, November 1997.

¹¹ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, Malawi, October 1997.

by a diplomatic official of the same Western government as the first aid official, who claimed that “Donors are doing as much as they can to encourage democratic survival.” But their efforts were hampered by the lack of “governmental capacity to absorb more.” He compared the government to “little kid in a candy store”, stating that “it couldn’t define exactly what it wanted” and “was a lot of learning on the job”. He provocatively added, “Maybe we should even pare back to make [democratization] more manageable, but donors won’t.”¹²

In Kenya, donor country officials invoked various forms of flawed reasoning to legitimize the deeply flawed 1997 elections. A common cliché is that “the elections were better than last time” and “it was a step in the right direction”. For instance, a Western embassy official in Kenya made both of these points when he argued that “The ’97 elections were better than the ’92 ones, so we are moving in the right direction”.¹³ This type of argument represents a clear shift of the goal posts, since the international standard is free-and-fair elections, not somewhat more democratic ones than the previous ones. They also give the impression of the inevitable forward march of democratization. In 2003, a Western diplomat expressed great optimism for the future, since “Each election gets better. Institutions are stronger: the Electoral Commission, NGOs, etc.”—even though he recognized that the opposition’s victory was due to numerous last-minute defections of high-level KANU officials. This, he admitted, prevented the re-emergence of “ethnic clashes” similar to those that had accompanied the last two elections: “Had the vote been any closer, there would have been more violence, shenanigans”.¹⁴ The closeness of the vote in 2007 and the collapse of the Electoral Commission triggered the massive violence that once again shook Kenya, directly contradicting his scenario of ever-improving elections and ever-stronger democratic institutions (Brown 2009; Throup 2008).

One Western diplomat recognized in 1998 that Kenya was in many ways “moving back to ’91-’93 instead of moving ahead”, yet simultaneously maintained that “With the ’97 elections, democracy in Kenya was consolidated. It is now the only game in town. Moi was freely re-elected without massive rigging. His presidency is legitimate, even if KANU’s majority in parliament is not”.¹⁵ That he made the latter remark on the record was surprising, not because it was not true—the donors’ internal joint election observation report documented that finding—but because donors had actually deleted any reference to that from the publicly released version, choosing to suppress the evidence (Brown 2001: 734). As Carothers (1997: 29) notes, this kind of “diplomatic massaging” of technical reports is common. Another embassy official argued that the lack of objections in the local media justified donor inaction.¹⁶

A Western consultant who wrote election observation reports for a Western donor country stated that Kenya’s 1992 elections “were obviously not free and fair”, but in 1997 KANU had learned that:

they did not need to be so draconian. The playing field was very unlevel, but there was not as much vote-stealing as most people think. Moi would have won the presidential elections anyway. The opposition could have won 21 [additional] seats if it hadn’t split the vote. Even with half of those, the opposition would have majority in parliament.

¹² Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Lilongwe, Malawi, November 1997.

¹³ Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Nairobi, Kenya, March 1998.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Nairobi, Kenya, June 2003.

¹⁵ Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Nairobi, Kenya, March 1998.

¹⁶ Author’s interview with a Western embassy official, Nairobi, Kenya, March 1998.

When I asked if KANU have allowed that, she answered, “No, they would have fiddled with the count and added [stuffed ballot] boxes. Even if not free and fair, she still considered the 1992 and 1997 elections “acceptable”.¹⁷ This example perfectly illustrates the shift in goals from good elections to elections deemed “good enough” for donors. Very often, as I argue in the next section, they hypothesize that elections will keep improving in quality and over time democracy will take root.

Set a very long time horizon

Cautioning against impatience with the slow pace of democratization in Africa, Western officials often invoke the well-worn cliché that “it took democracy 500 years to take root in Europe”—even if it is unclear what and whose 500-year period they are referring to.¹⁸ Scholars such as Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl (1991: 80) argue that new democracies will not reproduce most European democracies “gradual historical progression”, but rather “live in ‘compressed time’” and leapfrog over the stages that their predecessors went through. India required no transition period after decolonization and has been democratic since it achieved independence in 1947 (arguably with the exception of the 1975-77 period under a state of emergency). There is no *a priori* reason to believe that African countries will require centuries, or even decades, to democratize—just as capitalism does not take centuries to develop elsewhere just because that was its initial gestation period in Western Europe.

Nonetheless, donor officials constantly repeat that “democratization takes time”. Of course, one cannot expect democracy to emerge fully formed, like Athena out of her father’s head. In most cases, it will advance in fits and starts or fall prey to resurgent authoritarianism. Democratization does take time. However, that should not be an excuse for donor officials to justify blatant abuses by self-professed democrats. Western officials often repeated to me arguments to the effect that “It is too early to tell if the problem is a lack of capacity or of will” or “you have to give the government a chance”, regardless of which country we were discussing, even if the country’s poor record could be clearly established, and no matter how many “chances” the government had already been given. Despite successful “electoral revolutions” elsewhere, to borrow the term from Bunce and Wolchik (1996), an aid official in Kenya told me in 1998 that one had “to think of small steps that take time, not everything-or-nothing, immediately. They must have incremental change because they do not have political support for more radical change”.¹⁹

Sometimes Western officials invoked the lack of an alleged prerequisite, such as a certain level of education or a sizeable middle class, as one Western ambassador told me was necessary “in my experience”.²⁰ This may have satisfied Seymour Martin Lipset (1959), but hardly a scholar of democracy since then believes that there are such prerequisites. Even if certain conditions may make the survival of democracy more likely, democracies can emerge and potentially survive anywhere (Przeworski *et al.* 1996).

¹⁷ Author’s interview with a Western aid consultant, Nairobi, Kenya, April 1998.

¹⁸ The beginning and the end of a transition are often hard to identify (Brown 2004b) and thus the duration of the process as well. The British transition to democracy could be said to span over 600 years, from the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 to the promulgation of the Reform Act in 1832. The timeframe in other European countries, such as France, was much shorter. Germany and Italy, important European democracies, did not even exist until the 19th century. Several Eastern and Central European countries, such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, democratized very quickly and rather successfully after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989-90.

¹⁹ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Nairobi, Kenya, April 1998.

²⁰ Discussions with a Western ambassador to one of the three hybrid countries discussed in this paper, held in his capital city, October 2008.

In Malawi, a donor official informed me that, “We must look ahead 30-40 years to a viable middle class, [in order to] to improve prospects for democracy”.²¹ In 1997, I was told that “democratization is a process that takes time... We cannot expect immediate results”.²² In the meantime, instead of harping on insufficiencies, one should have faith in quasi-inevitable improvements: “Progress will come over the long term. It is not always visible. Institutions will get stronger”.²³ As if authoritarianism could never return, Western officials presented the problem as mainly being a lack of experience: “The government is at the [democratic] system, sometimes [government officials] must unlearn old ways”.²⁴ While recognizing that, given the structural weaknesses of the parliamentary opposition and civil society, “We [donors] are the checks and balances”, many donors felt that “Malawi is a young democracy and therefore shouldn't be punished”.²⁵

In Rwanda, one donor official not only raised the cliché of the 500 years Europe required to democratize in Europe, but also warned against donors imposing democratization prematurely. She suggested that the RPF government was right to restrict democracy and that Rwandans should not be allowed to vote freely, as they would not mature enough to make responsible decisions: “It is not wise to have a full democracy, [the Rwandan] people not used to it. It would allow extremists to get the upper hand. They would have a lot of appeal. The wounds are too fresh”.²⁶ Another Western diplomat also invoked the country's post-conflict status: “We must be realistic about how open the country can be 13 years after a genocide”. Though he suspected that the government “would not allow a count that would show RPF losing”, he still hoped the dominant RPF would “open [political] space”.²⁷

Such structural arguments fly in the face of successful experiences of democratization elsewhere in Africa, despite the initial lack of supposed prerequisites (for instance, Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe and South Africa, the latter including a deeply divided society). Having demonstrated *how* donor officials justify working with hybrid regimes and justify their undemocratic ways, I now turn to the question *why* they do so.

Donor officials' motivation

A significant number of scholars have explored why donor *governments* choose to endorse what Judith Kelley (2009) calls “D-minus elections” and discard concerns for democratic governance. Many point to priorities higher than democratization, most notably economic reform and security, the latter especially in the post-September 11 era. Compliance with donor preferences—even if temporary or no more than promised—usually wins governments donor leniency when it comes to political conditionality, though donor behaviour is far from consistent in this matter (Brown 2001, 2003, 2005: 187-89; Crawford 1997; Hook 1998; Olsen 1998: 366-67; Rose 2000/01: 189), nor is this a new phenomenon (Peceny 1999).

Few, however, have examined why donor *officials*—as individuals—are so quick to justify the undemocratic nature of the country where they are posted. Of course, many are simply toeing their employer's line. However, some bend over further backwards to avoid sullying the host government's reputation, often taking a softer position than their own

²¹ Author's interview with a multilateral organization official, Lilongwe, Malawi, January 1998.

²² Author's interview with a multilateral organization official, Lilongwe, Malawi, November 1997.

²³ Author's interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, Malawi, December 1997.

²⁴ Author's interview with a Western embassy official, Lilongwe, Malawi, November 1997.

²⁵ Author's interview with a multilateral organization official, Lilongwe, Malawi, July 2003.

²⁶ Author's interview with a Western embassy official, Kigali, Rwanda, August 2007.

²⁷ Author's interview with a Western embassy official, Kigali, Rwanda, August 2007.

government. I make no pretensions of having scientifically studied the matter, but I offer here three reasons why Western officials make facile excuses.

First, embassies and aid missions have very short memories, mainly due the relatively short postings of their officials. The typical tour of duty last two to four years. Thus, no international staff member will have been present for more than one presidential election in his or her country of posting, typically held every five years. This makes them unable to witness first hand a pattern of abuse or track how the situation may be worsening. Each time, they will give the government “a chance” and “the benefit of the doubt”. Of course, careful research could go a long way to provide the necessary background, but the exigencies of hitting the ground running at the new posting and meeting urgent deadlines usually preclude spending a lot of time seeking out and reading background information.

Second, it is easier to tolerate abuses than to make systematic efforts to prevent them. Unilateral action is, in most cases, unlikely to have an important impact. However, donor coordination is a difficult and time-consuming task. Donors often disagree amongst themselves on the diagnosis, prognosis and recommended action. A consensus might never be possible. There can also be disagreement between the aid and diplomatic wings of the same donor government. In Malawi, a Western aid official criticized the ambassadors and high commissions for being “unwilling to address the issues head on”.²⁸

Third, career incentives in the foreign service and bilateral and multilateral aid agencies discourage officials from “rocking the boat”. They earn rewards, including promotion, by “getting the job done”, not creating diplomatic incidents or worsening relations with the host government. It is no coincidence that Smith Hempstone, the “rogue” US ambassador who played an important role in Kenya’s return to multipartyism, was a political appointee and not a career civil servant, sometimes ignoring instructions from his boss back in Washington, DC (Brown 2007).

A Western aid official in Malawi described her country’s bureaucrats as being “stuck in the rut of spending allocations”.²⁹ An official from another Western country confirmed that, “Concerns over disbursement rates do influence decisions and make [his government] more tolerant in the D/G [democracy and governance] area”.³⁰ At times, such concerns can make a country’s aid officials act as stronger apologists for hybrid regimes than its embassy staff. I noticed this in Rwanda for one of the most important donors. In Kenya, Western aid officials told their consultant “tone down the statements” in her an election observation report “on how the elections were not free and fair, so that [the aid agency] would not have its funding reduced” and jeopardize its “good programs with NGOs”.³¹ This partly explains why, as mentioned above, the report deems the elections “acceptable”, even if they fell short of free and fair.

Conclusion

Critics will no doubt dismiss this paper as being fatally one-sided. I must therefore be very clear about what I am arguing and what I am not. They are correct that I am not balanced. This paper examines how and why officials from various Western governments, based in one of the three hybrid regimes I discuss (Kenya, Malawi and Rwanda) act as apologists for their host government. I do not mean that they all do it all the time, nor that no defence from excessive or unwarranted criticism is justified. Rather, I examine the faulty arguments and

²⁸ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, Malawi, October 1997.

²⁹ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, Malawi, October 1997.

³⁰ Author’s interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, Malawi, December 1997.

³¹ Author’s interview with a Western aid consultant, Nairobi, Kenya, April 1998.

clichés they invoke when they do actually do so, which is often. I find that the main ones are: 1) an excessive focus on the polling day, to the detriment of the period leading up to the elections; 2) a shifting of the goal posts so that free-and-fair elections are not longer a requirement; and 3) the emphasis on “baby steps” and need for patience and (a lot?) more time for democracy to be possible. I also examine why Western officials use such unsound reasoning, above and beyond the requirements of defending their own government’s position. I identify three explanations: 1) their quasi-permanent newness on the job, which promotes naïveté; 2) the strength of inertia and the lack of political will that prevents more vigorous action; and 3) distinct career disincentives from taking a more critical approach. Neither of these lists is exhaustive.

I make no claims that these findings hold for all donors in all hybrid regimes in all of Sub-Saharan Africa—or beyond. They are merely the ones I have observed in my interactions with donors in Kenya, Malawi and Rwanda in my multiple field visits since 1997. I strongly suspect, however, that many of those who have engaged in similar interactions with donor officials in other hybrid regimes will recognize many of the patterns of apologetics that I have analyzed. I hope that they will be able to build on the arguments I make above, not only to advance our understanding of the phenomenon, but also to help others engage donor officials in a productive dialogue on the possibilities of democratization in Africa, perhaps even teaching them a thing or two.

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