

Democratisations in Africa: Attempts, Hindrances and Prospects

Stephen Brown and Paul Kaiser

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Abstract

This article focuses on four sub-Saharan countries that offer different insights into postcolonial democratic experiences on the continent. Botswana has enjoyed decades of uninterrupted multiparty politics (but single-party rule) under a political system that mixes Western-style liberal democracy with traditional top-down structures. Benin has democratised rapidly and relatively successfully after a long period of dictatorial rule, providing a transition model for several other African countries. Kenya's former ruling party reluctantly permitted a multiparty system in 1991, but resisted further democratisation and remained in power for another decade by manipulating (at times violently) the transition process. In Burundi, democracy was severely undermined in 1993, when army extremists assassinated the first freely elected president, sparking waves of retributational 'ethnic' violence that have recently subsided, but not yet ended, despite positive developments in the political transition process. After presenting these cases, the authors explore competing explanations for success and failure in democratic transitions and survival by focusing on voluntaristic and structural factors particularly relevant to the continent. The comparative case study approach, supplemented by these thematic investigations, allow the authors to consider the continent's grave impediments to democratisation and how they might be overcome, as well as critically evaluate alternatives to the dominant Western model of liberal democracy.

Correspondence address

Stephen Brown, Associate Professor, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 75 Laurier Ave. East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada, tel. (613) 562-5800 x1896, fax: (613) 562-5371, email: brown@uottawa.ca.

Notes on Contributors

Stephen Brown is associate professor of political science at the University of Ottawa, where he also teaches in the interdisciplinary program in international development and globalisation. He is interested in democratisation, foreign aid, conflict and conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. His work on democratisation in Africa, based in large part on fieldwork in Kenya and Malawi, has been published in a number of edited volumes and journals, including *Third World Quarterly*, *European Journal of Development Research*, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* and *Canadian Journal of African Studies*. He is currently researching transition violence in Angola, Kenya, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, as well as Canadian development assistance.

Paul Kaiser was Associate Director of African Studies and Adjunct Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania before relocating to Malawi in 2006, where, he is currently Team Leader of USAID's Democracy and Governance/Millennium Challenge Corporation program. He has authored a number of journal articles and book chapters on African politics, including topics relating to economic and political reform, the politics of identity, conflict prevention, and environmental policy making. In addition to publishing a book on the Asian community in Kenya, he co-edited volumes on the democratic transition process in East Africa and on 'phases of conflict' on the continent.

Democratisations in Africa: Attempts, Hindrances and Prospects

Experiences vary so widely in Africa that one can only speak of democratisations in the plural. Though most African countries were granted independence under a multiparty system, before long, military rule and one-party states typified African regimes. Some underwent crippling civil wars, from which a few are only beginning to emerge. After 1989, however, Africa witnessed a sudden resurgence of democracy. The vast majority of African countries held multiparty elections, albeit of widely divergent quality. In some, dictators peacefully ceded power to elected opposition leaders. In others, the ruling party controlled the process to ensure that it would not lose power. In a few cases, military coups reversed previous gains. Even if the results were often disappointing or short-lived, the continent was swept in the 1990s by a wave of democratisation unseen for a generation.¹

This article analyses postcolonial democratic experiences in sub-Saharan Africa, concentrating on four carefully selected cases: Botswana, Benin, Kenya and Burundi. These cases were drawn from each of the four regions of sub-Saharan Africa and reflect the three main colonial legacies. *Botswana* has enjoyed decades of uninterrupted multiparty politics (but rule by a dominant, single party) and sustained economic growth. The land-locked country developed a political system that mixes Western-style liberal democracy with traditional top-down structures. *Benin* has democratised rapidly and relatively successfully since 1989, after a long period of dictatorial rule. Benin followed a transition process that became a model for the continent's other francophone countries: the convening of all stakeholders in a National Conference. *Kenya* half-heartedly permitted a multiparty system in 1991, pressured by the donor community and domestic actors, but resisted further democratisation. Despite widespread unpopularity, the ruling party remained in power for more than another decade by manipulating (at times violently) the transition process. Finally, *Burundi* offers an example of a democratic transition process beset by a decade of ethnic and regional violence. After a set of well-run elections in 1993 that resulted in rule by the ethnic Hutu majority for the first time since independence, some members of the ethnic Tutsi-dominated army assassinated the new president. This sparked waves of retributational 'ethnic' violence that have recently subsided, but that have not completely ended despite the peaceful, indirect election of a Hutu president who has attempted to reach out across the ethnic and regional divides.

In order to explore competing explanations for success and failure of these democratisations, we will examine the varying impact of voluntaristic and structural factors. The comparative case study approach, supplemented by these thematic investigations, will provide us with the opportunity to consider the extent to which the continent's grave impediments to democratisation might be overcome, as well as to consider alternatives to the dominant Western model of liberal democracy.

Experiences with Democracy and Democratisation

Some authors, such as Daniel T. Osabu-Kle, maintain that pre-colonial African societies were largely democratic.² Though certain elements of democracy certainly existed, such as varying degrees of accountability of the ruler to the ruled, to characterise authoritarian military empires (like the Zulu under Shaka) and decentralised, stateless societies (like the Twa in Central Africa)

as explicitly democratic requires a large conceptual stretch. It is nonetheless true that colonialism disrupted existing institutions, reducing vertical accountability. Indirect rule in British colonies, for instance, made chiefs subservient to the British, adding a new layer of autocratic rule.

For a century or more, the main purpose of the colonial state in Africa was to extract wealth, which was obtained through domination and imperialism. It was, as Berman reminds us, 'an authoritarian bureaucratic apparatus of control and not intended to be a school of democracy'.³ The colonial powers did not envisage independence for generations, nor did they intend to give local people a say in how they were governed, since Africans were not considered capable of rational and intelligent deliberation.

Yet, after World War II, Europeans realised they could not maintain control over their colonies much longer. Most African countries, especially the former French and British territories, were hastily granted representative government in the years leading to independence. With the exception of the former Portuguese colonies, '[f]ormal democratic institutions were part of the decolonization pact everywhere'.⁴

Though independence struggles' 'democratic outlook' conferred them international legitimacy,⁵ nationalism was not, for the most part, a liberal movement.⁶ Independence leaders aimed more to seize the state than to reform it or to follow Western political models. These new leaders initially received substantial popular support from the masses in recognition of their anti-colonial struggles and they used it to articulate a political vision far more authoritarian than initially presented. In only a few, such as Gambia and Botswana, did multiparty democracy survive more than a handful of years. Soon after independence, almost all of the new governments 'decayed' into authoritarianism, often instituting single-party states, or they were overthrown in military coups. Some countries descended into extreme kleptocracy (such as Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire), while a few were decimated by brutal dictatorships (including Idi Amin's Uganda and Jean-Bédél Bokassa's Central African Republic/Empire). This trend toward authoritarianism and political centralisation continued until the late 1980s, when changes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, combined with economic decay, political mismanagement, and a more proactive international community, strengthened the ability of the local opposition to confront incumbent leaders. Only after 1989 did Africa undergo a dramatic democratic renewal. Since then, 44 out of sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries have held multiparty elections.⁷

Below, we present a synthesis of selected African countries' postcolonial democratic 'experiments', to borrow an expression from Bratton and van de Walle.⁸ No two countries have identical political trajectories and there is no 'typical' African experience. However, common patterns do emerge and some experiences can be considered paradigmatic in their own way, allowing for valid, if tentative, generalisations.

A Stable Democracy with Authoritarian Roots: Botswana

The southern African country of Botswana is often cited as one of the continent's 'premier' democracies.⁹ The sparsely populated, land-locked country has experienced several decades of stable, competitive multiparty politics based on a republican parliamentary model of governance. Unlike most other countries on the continent, Botswana is endowed with valuable mineral deposits that have been well managed by a succession of democratically elected political leaders.

These leaders have maintained and derived legitimacy from a political system that delicately balances modern statecraft born in the West with traditional authoritarian structures that predate the advent of colonialism.

When the former British protectorate of Bechuanaland became independent in 1966, the newly named Botswana was one of the poorest countries in the world. With a topography unsuitable for productive farming (arable land estimated at 1%), the country faced an uncertain future until large deposits of diamonds and copper-nickel matte were located in 1967.¹⁰ These discoveries radically restructured the political economy of Botswana, creating a revenue stream that facilitated economic growth and the provision of social services. Valuable natural resources have not always resulted in stability and growth on the continent, as Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) demonstrate. Successive military and democratically elected governments in Nigeria have squandered billions of dollars through mismanagement and corruption, while President Mobutu of Zaire accomplished the same feat during three decades of predatory rule. A closer look at the structure of government in Botswana reveals important insights into why this newfound wealth resulted in relative prosperity and stability in lieu of endemic corruption and political disintegration.

The primary architect of independence, Seretse Khama, was Botswana's first president and largely responsible for setting the precedent for managing the mineral wealth in a transparent and nationally advantageous manner.¹¹ When he died in 1980, his sitting vice president assumed the office and was re-elected several times before retiring in 1998 and providing the opportunity for his vice president Festus Gontebanye Mogae to assume the presidency electorally. Though sometimes characterised as a *de facto* one party system, the 2004 elections, in which Mogae was re-elected, demonstrate the extent of actual competition. The ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) received 52% of the popular vote, while two other major parties received 26% (Botswana National Front, or BNF) and 17% (Botswana Congress Party, or BCP) of the total votes cast.¹²

In addition to the National Assembly, the bicameral parliament is comprised of the House of Chiefs, a 15-member advisory body consisting of chiefs from the eight primary ethnic groups in the country, four elected sub-chiefs and three additional representatives chosen by the chiefs and sub-chiefs. This institutional and somewhat symbolic recognition of the importance of traditional authority is supplemented at the local level by the oft-cited *kgotla*, or village council, system.¹³ According to Holm and Darnolf, since independence, government ministries have used this traditional network of local councils headed by a local authority to 'communicate with local communities on development projects'. While civil servants often set the agendas for *kgotla* gatherings, the *kgotla* 'provides an opportunity for citizens to voice their concerns about proposed programs or to criticize functioning one'.¹⁴ Given the largesse of the public sector, the importance of this power should not be underestimated. Overall, the 'willingness to reflect traditional political and juridical structure—through the Kgotla and the chiefs [serving in the House of Chiefs]... established the critical organic links between the institutions of the modern state and a still traditional society'.¹⁵

Despite the apparent success of this traditional/modern balancing act, Sklar offers a necessary cautionary note, citing 'evidence of political domination by... elite and prosperous civil servants who have co-opted the traditional authorities of Tswana society and rule in conjunction with the leaders of the dominant political party'.¹⁶ In addition, this 'dominant political party' has remained in power since independence, rendering parties such as the BNF and BCP as a permanent opposition. Given the absence of alternations of political leadership,

Africa's 'premier' democracy has yet to demonstrate its ability to withstand the challenges of genuine political change. The contradictory notions of democracy and the bottom-up assertion of popular will, countered by distinctly non-democratic tendencies of top-down traditional authority and single-party control of the government, have coexisted harmoniously since independence, but the potential remains for future leaders with explicit non-democratic agendas to upset this balance.

Democratisation and the 'National Conference' Model: Benin

Although a small country in West Africa, the relevance of Benin's experience extends to the whole continent. The country faces problems shared by much of Africa, such as economic dependency and sharp ethnoregional cleavages, and 'according to the usual indicators of democratic success, Benin was not a good democratic prospect'.¹⁷ Nonetheless, its transition to democracy, in particular its 'national conference' mechanism, served as a model for a number of other countries. Moreover, it is one of the few African countries to have an alternation of power.

For its first dozen years of independence, political life in Benin (then known as Dahomey) was extremely volatile. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, successive governments, often identified with a particular ethnoregional group, were unable to achieve stability and were overthrown by the military, which, ethnically divided itself, soon returned power to civilian rulers. This cycle, which had produced 10 violent changes of government in 12 years, ended in 1972, when military officer Mathieu Kérékou seized power.¹⁸ Within a few years, he declared a single-party system. France, Benin's former colonial ruler, remained Benin's principal commercial partner and aid donor. The country's small size and feeble resource endowment made it 'one of Africa's least economically viable states'.¹⁹ Only France's continued financing of the trade deficit kept the country solvent.

In the 1980s, incompetent economic management and ballooning domestic graft, including the draining of funds from parastatals, combined with a continent-wide economic crisis, effectively bankrupted the economy. The government turned to the Bretton Woods institutions for support, which required the implementation of unpopular economic austerity measures. In 1988, when France refused to meet the budgetary shortfall, the three main banks, all state-owned, collapsed and the government was unable to pay teachers, civil servants and soldiers their salaries, nor students their grants. This caused domestic opposition to mushroom, rendering the country 'virtually ungovernable'.²⁰ The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) refused to provide emergency assistance because of Benin's failure to adhere to prior agreements.²¹ Kérékou convened a national conference to discuss the country's future course, bringing together representatives of all sectors of Beninese society, including 'teachers, students, the military, government officials, religious authorities, nongovernmental organizations, more than 50 political parties, ex-presidents, labor unions, business interests, farmers, and dozens of local development organizations'.²²

Kérékou believed that he could retain control of the 488 delegates. Instead, when it met in February 1990, the convention declared itself sovereign, redefined the powers of the presidency, reducing Kérékou to a figurehead role, and appointed Nicéphore Soglo, a former World Bank staff member, to act as executive prime minister. In exchange for a full pardon for

any crimes he may have committed, Kérékou peacefully ceded power. By March 1991, the Beninese electorate had ratified a new constitution and democratically elected Soglo president.

This transition process, inspired by the convening of the Estates-General in France two centuries earlier, provided a model for other Francophone countries in Africa, such as Congo (Brazzaville), Niger, Chad and Madagascar. The outcome of the Beninese conference also served as a warning to a number of authoritarian leaders in other countries, namely Gabon, Togo and Zaire (as it was still known), who managed to prevent their own national conventions from ousting them from power.²³

The first democratic regime in two decades proved profoundly disappointing to many Beninese. President Soglo's structural adjustment policies were deeply unpopular, associated with high inflation and unemployment, and his autocratic-style of leadership characterised by corruption, nepotism and intolerance of dissent. Kérékou made a stunning comeback, defeating Soglo in the 1996 presidential elections.

Power in Benin was peacefully transferred from one democratically elected leader to another in 1996, thus meeting the 'two-turnover' test for democratic consolidation, which presents succession as a better indicator of democracy than a founding election.²⁴ Yet to declare Beninese democracy consolidated would be premature. Most striking about the 1991 and 1996 elections was the regional polarisation of the electorate. Both times, the North overwhelmingly supported Kérékou and the South voted for Soglo. The 2001 presidential elections again pitted Kérékou and Soglo against each other (and several lesser-known contenders). Alleging severe irregularities in the first round of voting, Soglo and the third-ranked candidate withdrew, allowing Kérékou to beat the fourth-place candidate in a run-off without any difficulty. The 2006 presidential elections marked the beginning of a new era, as both Kérékou and Soglo were ineligible to run because of their age. Though characterised by some procedural complaints, the polls produced an uncontested winner: Boni Yayi, a newcomer to politics, was elected in the second round with almost 75% of the vote.²⁵

Benin can boast a smooth transition to democracy and a subsequent alternation of presidents, but its democratic credentials are somewhat tarnished by electoral irregularities and serious corruption. Ethnoregional divisions often threaten the institutionalisation of compromise and the recycling of erstwhile discredited leaders long left voters with few alternatives. Now that power has peacefully passed to a new generation, Benin may once again prove to be a model for the rest of the continent.

Reluctant Democratisation: Kenya

For almost thirty years, from 1963 until 1991, Kenya was a prototypical one-party state. Though Kenya achieved independence from the United Kingdom under a multiparty parliamentary constitution, the party of independence leader Jomo Kenyatta, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), soon absorbed the opposition. Kenyatta relied on a 'kitchen cabinet' of trusted advisors, drawn mainly from his own Kikuyu ethnic group, and repeatedly amended the constitution to centralise power. Kenyatta's successor, Daniel arap Moi, assumed power after a bitter internal struggle and replaced influential Kikuyu with members of the Kalenjin (the ethnic group to which he belongs) and some allied ethnic groups. He also further concentrated power in the hands of the presidency.²⁶

Throughout the 1980s, a dramatic rise in autocratic rule and high-level corruption, combined with steady economic decline, fed internal discontent.²⁷ Open pressure for political liberalisation was exerted mainly by the Law Society (the bar association) and the mainstream churches, who enjoyed a certain amount of protection from reprisals due to their professional standing and international contacts. Dissenting former politicians, who had left or been expelled from KANU, could only re-enter the political arena through a return to multipartyism. Inspired by the fall of single-party regimes in Eastern Europe after 1989, these domestic actors became bolder and increasingly drew international attention from human rights organisation and donor countries. Most prominent among these pressure groups was FORD, the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy.²⁸

Until 1991, Western aid donors had been steadfast supporters of the Moi regime. In both 1989 and 1990, for instance, Kenya received over \$1 billion in development assistance, most of it from the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, the World Bank and the IMF.²⁹ After the demise of the Soviet bloc and the concomitant decreasing strategic value of Africa, donors became more concerned with the internal affairs of their African allies. The ‘maverick’ U.S. ambassador to Kenya, Smith Hempstone, played an important role in supporting multiparty advocates. Large popular demonstrations in 1990-91 drew violent government repression and led to the arrest of prominent activists, which in turn increased international attention to the issue of democratisation.

Donor pressure rapidly grew during this period and, in late 1991, donors suspended all new aid to Kenya (except humanitarian assistance) until a number of reforms were adopted, including liberalizing the political arena. Within days, Moi announced that Kenya would return to multipartyism, something he had long maintained was out of the question, arguing that it was undesired by Kenyans and inappropriate for the multiethnic country. Soon after, parliament amended the constitution to allow opposition parties to function legally, though the executive branch remained quite powerful.

Since the return to a multiparty system, Kenya has held three elections (in 1992, 1997 and 2002). The first two times, President Moi was re-elected and KANU retained control of parliament in a process that fell short of international standards of ‘free and fair’, in large part due to a host of illegitimate strategies, including a skewed distribution of constituencies, irregularities in voter registries, partisan media and electoral commission, fraudulent vote counts and ethnic cleansing in key areas. Though ethnic- and personality-based divisions within the opposition facilitated KANU’s victory, it is unlikely that those in power would have allowed themselves to be removed through the ballot box. In the 1992 and 1997 elections, donors had sufficient evidence of an uneven playing field and poll irregularities to contest the legitimacy of the outcomes. However, they chose not to, mainly out of concern for stability. In between elections, they virtually ignored issues of democratisation.³⁰

The December 2002 elections, however, were much more free and fair than the preceding ones, actually removing KANU from power for the first time since independence. Moi, prohibited from running again by term limits, personally selected Jomo Kenyatta’s son Uhuru as the KANU candidate, though he lacked political experience and general support. Many high-level KANU loyalists, resenting being passed over, subsequently joined an opposition alliance, decisively crippling KANU. A coalition of most major opposition parties and the KANU defectors thus gained a majority of seats in parliament and Mwai Kibaki, the coalition’s joint candidate, was elected president. Because his new coalition government contained a number of

senior officials that had been KANU stalwarts, it was reluctant to deal with their past crimes. In large part because it has relied on these tainted politicians to maintain a parliamentary majority, it has not pursued any major cases of corruption and human rights abuses.³¹ The Kibaki government also reneged on its key campaign promise of significantly reducing the powers of the presidency and thus extending and deepening the gains in democratisation made since the early 1990s. To numerous critics, many of the NARC government's practices, including continued corruption on a giant scale and the violent repression of peaceful demonstrations, are far too reminiscent of Kenya under Moi.³²

Ethnic/Regional Violence and Democratisation: Burundi

In June 1993, Burundians chose their first popularly elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye. For the Hutu majority (estimated at approximately 85% of the population), there was a feeling of excitement that ethnic majority rule was the political order of the day. The minority Tutsi (comprising approximately 14%), for the most part, accepted the results with trepidation, fearing a 'tyranny of the majority'.³³ Many recognised the potential for retribution after 28 consecutive years of Tutsi military rule. Despite these tensions, the majority of Burundians (including many Tutsi) accepted the democratic outcome in the hope that country would finally resolve ethnic tensions that led to localised bursts of violence in 1965, 1972, 1988 and 1991. However, the new democratic order rapidly disintegrated following Ndadaye's assassination by Tutsi military officers less than five months after assuming the presidency. Ndadaye planned to restructure the army to reflect better the country's ethnic diversity, which clearly alarmed many in the Tutsi-dominated institution. The civil war that began immediately following Ndadaye's assassination resulted in the death of over 800,000 people, while exacting a psychological toll on the general population.

The history of this land-locked central African country provides insight into the roots of the current crisis of democracy fuelled by ethnic and regional animosities. After several centuries of localised rule, a centralised kingdom emerged, in which the king, or *mwami*, asserted his authority over Hutu, Tutsi and Twa (pygmy) subjects. The royal family, while more closely related to the ethnic Tutsi, remained separate and distinct from the three ethnic groups until the onset of colonial rule at the end of the 19th century. Ethnic differentiation was not pronounced during this period, with the *mwami* rewarding all who served the monarch well, regardless of ethnic and clan-based lineages.³⁴

From 1890 to 1919, Burundi was a German colony until the end of the First World War, when the League of Nations placed Burundi (along with neighbouring Rwanda) under Belgian trusteeship. On the eve of Burundian independence in 1962, son of the ruling monarch and Prime Minister-elect Louis Rwagasore was assassinated. Less than a year after an unsuccessful Hutu-led coup attempt in 1965, the Tutsi army captain Michel Micombero assumed the presidency by overthrowing the king. In 1972, another aborted Hutu-supported *coup d'état* resulted in massive military reprisals, leaving at least 200,000 dead, and the exile of many others. Two successive military coups resulted in continued Tutsi dominance of the government under the presidencies of Colonel Jean-Baptiste Bagaza (1976-1987) and Major Pierre Buyoya (1987-1993), lasting until the democratic election of Ndadaye. This succession of Tutsi military coups demonstrates that the Tutsi minority was not unified during this period. Regional and clan-based differences repeatedly surfaced, especially in pursuit of the scarce resources of a fledgling economy

controlled by the state. After Ndadaye's assassination, brief rule by two Hutu presidents gave way to the return of Tutsi military rule. Buyoya reclaimed the presidency in 1996 with the support of the army, promising to restore calm.

International efforts to resolve the ongoing ethnic strife have been continuous,³⁵ with a succession of mediators working with the support of multilateral organisations such as the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity. Since 1993, the United Nations Secretary-General has sent a series of Special Representatives to Burundi, including former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, who served from 1996 until his death in 1999.³⁶ South Africa's Nelson Mandela brokered an accord that was signed in 2000 by representatives of 17 Tutsi- and Hutu-dominated parties. Under this agreement, Buyoya remained in power for 18 months with a Hutu vice president, then relinquishing the presidency to the Hutu President Domitien Ndayizeye, who served with a Tutsi vice president. Upon conclusion of this 36-month transition, which formally began in November 2001, multiparty parliamentary elections were successfully held, haltingly returning the country to the democratic trajectory that was aborted after the Ndadaye assassination and subsequent ethnic violence.

A key obstacle to peace in the country has been the civil war waged by Hutu armed insurgencies, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy/Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) and the National Liberation Forces/Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People (FNL-Palipehutu). Both groups, which subsequently splintered into sub-groups, initially refused to sign the 2000 accord, opting instead for a military solution to the ongoing problems in the country. In December 2002, however, the government and the CNDD-FDD signed a ceasefire agreement that addressed many of the key military and political concerns of both parties. CNDD-FDD ultimately decided to join the government. In July 2005, the CNDD-FDD won parliamentary elections with 58% of the vote. This was followed in August 2005 with the indirect presidential election of former rebel leader of CNDD-FDD, Pierre Nkurunziza. After serving almost two years as the Minister for Good Governance in the transitional government, Nkurunziza received 151 of 162 votes cast in the August 2005 election in the legislative chamber. Despite repeated ceasefires and intermittent negotiations between the FNL-Palipehutu and the government, the rebel group has continued to periodically resort to violence in pursuit of its political goals. Until the FNL-Palipehutu formally and faithfully renounces violence and joins the political process, the sustainability of the recent democratic advances will continue to be in doubt.

Even if this transition returns the country to an electoral process similar to 1993, there is little guarantee that it will result in a peaceful, democratic order. Ethnicity, regionalism and the proliferation of multiple understandings of the cause of, and solution for, current woes in the country render another direct multiparty election for the presidency potentially destabilizing. To prevent a return to widespread violence in the central African country, there is a need to develop a system of government that protects the security and rights of the minority, while providing the ethnic majority with the political benefits that they have been deprived of for so long.

Competing Explanations

There is little if any consensus on the specific factors—and their relative importance—that have facilitated the democratisations that began in many African countries in 1989. In order to identify

and organise systematically the major competing explanations for success and failure in democratic transitions and consolidation, we have identified two general sets of explanations.

Structural Explanations

Explanations informed by the impact of culture, history and economics are diverse and often result in different conclusions. Early advocates of the modernisation paradigm focused on the inability of 'traditional' societies to adapt to the social, economic and political demands of modernity. For these societies to develop, they had to leave behind traditional, communal forms of social organisation, instead embracing Western, 'rational' assumptions of individualism and market-based productivity.³⁷ Some modernisation advocates argued that economic development was a necessary precondition to the establishment of a more democratic, participatory political order.³⁸ The early Marxist critique of this perspective was captured by assumptions of class-based inequality and dependency.³⁹

Other scholars have looked to history as the primary explanatory variable. Mamdani's comparative work on South Africa and Uganda eloquently makes this case, while the world systems theory approach pioneered by Wallerstein explicitly embraces the importance of historical legacy (and in the case of Africa, the impact of colonialism) in understanding current crises of political and economic order.⁴⁰ The political economy approach (like the dependency tradition) also accommodates the significance of the intersection between politics and the economy, based on the assumption that economic crisis foments social and political discontent, thus leading to regime change. Some advocates of this approach have argued that economic crises reduce incumbent regimes' patronage resources, foment discontent and increase demands for democratisation.⁴¹ In his book on structural adjustment in Africa, van de Walle examines how leaders have nonetheless been able to manipulate this reform process to remain in power.⁴²

These types of explanations dominate, but do not represent, the complete repertoire of possibilities that have been proffered in recent years: scholars have also focused on the significance of regime type and the actions of self-interested elite. Certain regime types and political leadership profiles are assumed to be more amenable to the democratic transition process or, alternately, less inclined to support a process that has the potential to change the political landscape.

Voluntaristic Explanations

Instead of focusing on the structural impediments to, or incentives for democracy, some have chosen to emphasise the ability of select actors to affect change. These agents include: rulers employing strategies designed to maintain the status quo or transform the political system; grass-roots civil society organisations mobilised to confront (and ultimately dislodge) intransigent incumbent regimes;⁴³ members of the donor community determined to initiate or discourage regime change in an effort to respond to specific, often self-serving interests;⁴⁴ and military personnel who often believe that they can do a better job of maintaining political order and promoting economic growth in divided societies than civilian leaders deriving their authority democratically.⁴⁵

The four cases examined in this chapter demonstrate that none of the explanations offered above, whether structural or voluntaristic, sufficiently captures the complexities inherent in transforming and nurturing full transitions to democratic rule. For example, in all four countries, the first generation of leaders inherited democratic polities, yet only Botswana retained some semblance of a democracy. Likewise, cultural differences are insufficient to explain differing outcomes since the various cultures of one specific country have not been demonstrated to be inherently more or less democratic than in another one. Other contributing factors, such as economic crises, are also too generalised to constitute robust explanatory and predictive arguments across a broad set of cases. Finally, as Ndegwa and Orvis point out, the presence of civil society organisations has not served to guarantee democracy, with some organisations implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) working on behalf of the *status quo* (and the incumbent regime).⁴⁶ In sum, democratisations in Africa know no simple causal mechanism. Rather, they result from a complex interplay of conditions and actors.

Impediments to and Prospects for Democratisation

Until the early 1990s, democratisation scholars and experts in African politics expected authoritarianism, one-party states and military rule to continue to dominate the African political landscape, as they had for decades. They were convinced that the continent lacked the structural prerequisites for democracy associated with democracy elsewhere: Africa was not characterised by advanced capitalism, had low literacy rates and had no civic culture to buttress democracy. Moreover, the agents that had been found to introduce democracy in other regions—the middle or working classes—were weak and often co-opted under authoritarian rule. The consensus was that ‘[d]emocratization was not supposed to happen in Africa’.⁴⁷

It is true that impediments to democratisation in Africa are stronger than in any other region. The state and civil society, two critical actors in a democracy, both tend to be weak. In addition, African countries generally suffer from longstanding economic crises and extreme poverty, little experience with liberal democratic governance, and widespread societal alienation. Another fundamental obstacle to democratisation throughout the continent is neopatrimonial rule, described as ‘the *core* feature of politics in Africa’.⁴⁸ Neopatrimonialism is inimical to democratisation because the distribution of state resources is based on the ruling elite’s personal ties, rather than on principles such as the public good, national citizenship or equal opportunities. The ruler’s personal prerogatives also eclipse the role of formal institutions and the rule of law. Nonetheless, economic liberalisation since the 1980s has, as mentioned above, undermined patronage-based politics.⁴⁹

Most authoritarian leaders, under pressure from domestic and international actors, agreed to hold multiparty elections. They liberalised politically, but often not enough for them to be defeated. Out of 40 new multiparty elections held in sub-Saharan Africa between 1989 and 1997, only 15 were found to be significantly free and fair, and in only 12 cases did a change of leadership occur.⁵⁰ Transitions to democracy thus remain incomplete in countries such as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Togo and Zimbabwe. In a few cases, the democratisation process was at least temporarily reversed by military coups—for instance, in Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo (Brazzaville), Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, Nigeria, and São Tomé and Príncipe.

Even if a full transition to democracy does take place, the endurance of democracy is an even more difficult challenge. For a number of historical and practical reasons, political identification in Africa tends to be organised along ethno-regional lines and political parties often compete to be able to bring benefits to their client networks. The ethnicisation of politics, often reinforced by politicians themselves, promotes competition for access to resources, rather than the institutionalised compromise that theoretically characterises a democracy.

A number of authors fault African rulers' corruption and feeble commitment to democratic principles once in power.⁵¹ After the defeat of former dictators, newly installed leaders often use their powers to ensure that they remain in office beyond constitutionally mandated terms limits, leading to 'backsliding' towards authoritarianism. In countries such as Malawi, Mali and Zambia, reasonably fair elections were followed by subsequent electoral contests that were significantly less transparent. Only 7 out of 16 *second* elections held between 1995 and 1997 were found to be free and fair.⁵² To date, the alternation of parties in power—an important gauge of democracy—has occurred in only four countries: Benin, Cape Verde, Mauritius and Madagascar, the last of which was paralysed for several months in 2002 until the outgoing president conceded power.

New democracies face challenges that their authoritarian predecessors did not, including extending citizenship to all geographic areas and social sectors.⁵³ This challenge is especially pronounced in South Africa, where apartheid institutionalised racial inequalities. Among the greatest problems will be meeting the raised expectations of the electorate, including the Herculean tasks of providing good governance (which usually requires limiting executive powers, de-emphasizing ethno-regional ties and eschewing the 'winner-take-all' mentality), reversing the decline in the standard of living that most of the continent has suffered, and meeting voters' basic human needs.

The impediments to democratisation are therefore significant, but certainly not insurmountable. Numerous transitions to democracy have occurred in Africa since 1989. Many were short-lived or only presented democratic façades, but in a number of cases, democracy has shown surprising endurance and resilience. Though many countries' trajectories are viewed as disappointing, failures can often lead to more imaginative and responsive systems of governance.⁵⁴ Moreover, the state of democracy in Africa is vastly superior to what observers expected before 1989. Among the most important gains are major advances in freedom of expression and the entrenchment of the idea of legitimate opposition. There is some indication, furthermore, that regular electoral competition is self-reinforcing: even substandard elections promote further democratisation in the future.⁵⁵ The widespread desire for democratisation cannot be easily reversed to re-legitimise authoritarianism. Despite the paucity of democratic success stories in Africa and the failure of democratisation to improve socioeconomic conditions, liberal democracy remains a widely shared popular aspiration across the continent.⁵⁶

Which Way(s) Forward?

The question of the appropriateness of the liberal-democratic model for African countries is often raised. Rather than trying to engineer African societies to fit into the Western political model, it could be more appropriate to find models that are better suited to Africa. Ake, for instance, proposed a paradigm shift that would involve greater participation in decision-making, greater emphasis on social policy (especially in rural areas), collective rights, and the

incorporation of marginalised groups.⁵⁷ Mamdani and Berman both contend that the relations between rural Africans and local rulers (so-called traditional or customary authorities) should be democratised, also pointing towards greater local participation.⁵⁸ What this means in practice remains to be developed. The national conference model initiated in Benin represented an attempt to ensure that the transition to democratic rule was an inclusive process that incorporated marginal and dominant groups crossing the rural/urban divide. However, as the examples of Congo (Brazzaville) and Niger demonstrate, there is no guarantee that this approach to political transitions will result in a stable, democratic order.

Culturally based arguments fare no better in presenting concrete alternatives. For instance, Ayana recommends investing African democracy with ‘collective ceremonies and secular rituals’ that would allegedly enhance grassroots participation and the connection between communities and the state.⁵⁹ Osabu-Kle advocates abolishing political parties and modifying existing representational institutions to include professional or interest groups, with decisions made consensually, as per ‘African tradition’.⁶⁰ Banning parties, however, could be a way of disguising authoritarianism. Uganda’s no-party ‘movement’ model, in place from 1986 to 2005, appeared to be a single-party system in all but name. A few authors suggest a return to pre-colonial forms of rule, despite the century or more hiatus in their practice and the uncertain applicability to the scale of the nation-state.⁶¹ Moreover, is it reasonable to conclude that in multi-ethnic countries, the culture and tradition of one particular group should serve as the model for democratic governance, when other groups offer competing models? In sum, the practicality of these suggestions is very much in doubt.

In addition to the example of Botswana discussed earlier, a few African countries have grafted onto Western political institutions certain innovative elements. Mali holds a yearly forum for common people to voice their complaints, known as the *Espace d’interpellation démocratique*. South Africa and Namibia have established ‘councils of traditional rulers’ and Ghana has set up a ‘council of elder statesmen’, while Malawi’s constitution initially provided for a Senate composed of chiefs and other sectional representatives (a provision that was repeatedly postponed and then abolished before it was ever implemented⁶²). Such alternative mechanisms are supposedly based on tradition but are in fact usually new, non-elective institutions that enjoy only consultative status. Though governments might heed some of their advice, it is likely that they will prove to be ineffective talk-shops or, worse yet, be manipulated to provide greater legitimacy for a regime that otherwise lacks popular support. Moreover, to the extent that they fortify existing power structures (chiefs were often instruments of colonial and postcolonial despotic rule), such institutions might reinforce the exclusion of women and other participants from the political realm—a distinctly anti-democratic endeavour. Critics of Botswana’s governance model have been quick to point out the exclusionary characteristics of the House of Chiefs and *kgotlas* that coexist with the more powerful parliamentary institutions of government, and highlight that there has been no alternation of political parties in power since independence.

Sometimes an argument is made that many or most African countries are not ‘ready’ for democracy or that they have other priorities. Ottaway, for example, contends that a number of African countries need to achieve greater stability and resolve issues of ‘stateness’ before democratisation is possible.⁶³ The Moi regime repeatedly made this argument before the advent of multipartyism in Kenya and retrospective analyses of the violent political transition in Burundi have questioned the appropriateness of standard conceptions of democracy, given the

ethnic and regional polarisation that periodically erupted into violent outbursts since independence. Nonetheless, in many cases, democratisation might actually assist in state (re)construction.

Democracy and democratisation have an unclear causal relationship with economic growth. More certain is that democracy will require some economic and social development to survive. In other words, popular support for democracy will depend to a certain extent on its ability to 'deliver the goods'. A range of factors outside a democratic regime's control, such as debt burdens, inadequate rainfall and low commodity prices, all undermine its capacity to do so. Alternately, accidents of geography and demographics also have the potential to facilitate the democratisation process, as the Botswanan example demonstrates.

The case of Kenya clearly shows that external aid donors have an important role to play in supporting African democracies, providing assistance for both the state and civil society. Donors, however, no matter how committed to democratisation in theory, are confronted with policy goals they consider more immediate, such as neoliberal economic reforms or strategic considerations, which can involve bolstering authoritarian regimes. More broadly speaking, the global environment and international actors cannot be counted on to buttress democratisations in Africa.

Regional actors could prove valuable. As democratic rule increasingly becomes a norm in Africa, as evidenced by the mechanisms of the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a growing formal and informal role will be vested in the regional hegemony, principally Nigeria (in West Africa) and South Africa (in Southern Africa). If they are willing to assume the role, their influence and occasionally active intervention could be crucial for encouraging and sustaining democratisation. Nonetheless, too much hope should not be placed in them. Their efforts could fail—South Africa, for instance, was unable to negotiate an agreement in Burundi and it was widely criticized for intervening militarily in Lesotho in 1998 and for failing to condemn political repression and electoral fraud in Zimbabwe. Both regional powers face important domestic challenges themselves: South Africa's is struggling to overcome the legacy of apartheid, while Nigeria's own democratic survival is far from certain.

What types of African countries should prove to be the most fertile ground for sustained democratisation in the future? Making predictions is a difficult task, nowhere more so than in Africa's shifting political terrain. The performance of new democratic leaders in the areas of governance, economic growth and poverty alleviation will all be crucial in the long term. A simple barometer of the internalisation of democratic rules is the respect of the presidential term limits adopted in many countries in the early 1990s as part of the democratisation process.⁶⁴ The paths to democratisation are diverse and sinuous. Nonetheless, four factors constitute encouraging signposts along the way: strong popular support for democracy (overcoming longstanding suspicion of the colonial and postcolonial state), an elite consensus on democracy's desirability (encouraging election losers to accept the results), the institutionalisation of democratic governance and a positive socioeconomic outlook (no matter how low the starting point).

Notes

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¹ This series of events is part of the worldwide process that Samuel Huntington refers to as the 'third wave' of democratisation. See S Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

² D T Osabu-Kle, *Compatible Cultural Democracy: The Key to Development in Africa*, Peterborough, Ontario & Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2000.

³ B J Berman, 'Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism', *African Affairs*, 97 (388), 1998, p 329.

⁴ C Young, 'The Third Wave of Democratization in Africa: Ambiguities and Contradictions', in R Joseph (ed.), *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1999, p 16.

⁵ Young, 'Third Wave', p 17.

⁶ N Chazan, 'Between Liberalism and Statism: African Political Cultures and Democracy', in L Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*, Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1993, p 75.

⁷ Nicolas van de Walle mentions the exceptions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Rwanda, Somalia, Swaziland and Uganda. See N van de Walle, 'Africa's Range of Regimes', *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2), 2002, p 67. However, since his article was published, Rwanda and Uganda have held multiparty elections. As a result of political liberalisation, between 1989 and 2003, the proportion of Africans living in 'not free' countries (using to the Freedom House classification) fell from 54% to 29%, according to M Chege, 'Democratic Governance at the Start of the Twenty-first Century: Lessons of Experience', in L A Villalón & P VonDoepp, *The Fate of Africa's Democratic Experiments: Elites and Institutions*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005, p 273.

⁸ M Bratton & N van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transition in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁹ J D Holm & S Darnolf, 'Democratizing the Administrative State in Botswana', in Y Bradshaw & S Ndegwa (eds.), *The Uncertain Promise of Southern Africa*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000, p 134.

¹⁰ F Morton, A Murray & J Ramsey, *Historical Dictionary of Botswana: New Edition*, Metuchen, NJ & London: Scarecrow, 1989.

¹¹ For a more sanguine perspective, see K Good, 'Resource Dependency and Its Consequences: The Costs of Botswana's Shining Gems', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 23 (1), 2005, pp 27-50.

¹² See 'Elections in Botswana', <http://www.electionworld.org/election/botswana.htm>.

¹³ L D Ngcongco, 'Tswana Political Tradition: How Democratic?', in J Holm & P Molutsi (eds.), *Democracy in Botswana*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1990, p 46; G M Somolekae & M H Lekorwe, 'The Chieftaincy System and Politics in Botswana, 1966-95', in W A Edge & M H Lekorwe (eds.), *Democracy: Politics and Society*, Pretoria, South Africa: J.L. van Schaik Publishers, 1998, pp 186-198.

¹⁴ Holm & Darnoff, 'Democratizing', p 134.

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¹⁶ R Sklar, 'Africa Politics: The Next Generation', in R Joseph (ed.), *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1999, p 166.

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- ¹⁷ B A Magnusson, 'Democratic Legitimacy in Benin: Institutions and Identity in a Regional Context' in Villalón & VonDoepp, *The Fate*, p 75.
- ¹⁸ A Onadipe, 'The return of Africa's old guard', *Contemporary Review*, no. 269, 1996, p 88.
- ¹⁹ S Decalo, 'Benin: First of the New Democracies', in J F Clark & D E Gardinier (eds.), *Political Reform in Francophone Africa*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997, p 45.
- ²⁰ J R Heilbrunn, 'Social Origins of National Conferences in Benin and Togo', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 31 (2), 1993, p 285.
- ²¹ R Westebbe, 'Structural Adjustment, Rent Seeking, and Liberalization in Benin', in J A Widner (ed.), *Economic Change and Political Liberalization in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, p 94.
- ²² B A Magnusson, 'Testing Democracy in Benin: Experiments in Institutional Reform', in R Joseph (ed.), *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999, p 221.
- ²³ See P T Robinson, 'The National Conference Phenomenon in Francophone Africa', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36 (3), 1994, pp 575-610.
- ²⁴ See A Segal, 'Can Democratic Transitions Tame Political Successions?', *Africa Today*, 43 (4), 1996, pp 369-84.
- ²⁵ See J C Seely, 'The presidential election in Benin, March 2006', *Electoral Studies*, 26 (1), 2007, pp 196-200.
- ²⁶ J A Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya: From 'Harambee!' to 'Nyayo!'*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992.
- ²⁷ Freedom to express this discontent was severely curtailed by a ubiquitous network of KANU supporters throughout the country. Those who publicly criticized the government – even in rural and remote areas – risked being reported by KANU supporters to local authorities (Kaiser, fieldwork, 1987-88).
- ²⁸ For greater detail, see D W Throup & C Hornsby, *Multi-Party Politics in Kenya: The Kenyatta and Moi States and the Triumph of the System in the 1992 Elections*, Oxford: James Currey, 1998.
- ²⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *International Development Statistics Online*, www.oecd.org/dac, n.d.
- ³⁰ S Brown, 'Authoritarian leaders and multiparty elections in Africa: how foreign donors help to keep Kenya's Daniel arap Moi in power', *Third World Quarterly*, 22 (5), 2001, pp 725-39.
- ³¹ S Brown, 'Theorising Kenya's Protracted Transition to Democracy', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 22 (3), 2004, pp 325-42.
- ³² Parallels with Moi's rule began to be drawn within months of Kibaki's inauguration (Brown, fieldwork, June-July 2003). See also G R Murunga & S W Nasong'o, 'Bent on Self-Destruction: The Kibaki Regime in Kenya', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 24 (1), 2006, pp 1-28.
- ³³ For example, there were numerous reports of Tutsi in the capital city of Bujumbura being verbally harassed by their Hutu counterparts in the months leading to the 1993 elections. Likewise, Hutu in the city feared harassment by the Tutsi-dominated army during this tense period (Kaiser, fieldwork, December 1992).
- ³⁴ R M Kadende-Kaiser & P J Kaiser, 'Modern Folklore, Identity, and Political Change in Burundi', *African Studies Review*, 40 (3), 1997, pp 29-54. Though often portrayed as distinct 'ethnic groups' or 'tribes', the Hutu and Tutsi actually share a common language, culture and traditional religion. They are arguably better described as fluid identity groups, with significant intermarriage and mobility occurring between the two. See R Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*, Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press & Cambridge University Press, 1995.

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- ³⁵ It should be noted that in addition to public diplomatic initiatives, local communities – comprised of both Hutu and Tutsi – often forged (and, in many cases resumed) cross-ethnic relationships in an effort to cope with the challenges of civil war. For example, there was a proliferation of inter-ethnic women’s groups that worked to restore trust while cooperatively farming fallow government plots throughout Bujumbura (Kaiser, fieldwork, 2000).
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- ³⁷ W W Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.
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- ³⁹ C Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974; F H Cardoso & E Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976.
- ⁴⁰ M Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996; I Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York: Academic Press, 1974.
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- ⁴² N van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis: 1979-1999*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- ⁴³ J W Harbeson, D Rothchild & N Chazan (eds.), *Civil Society and the State in Africa*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994; S Ndegwa, *The Two Faces of Civil Society: NGOs and Politics in Africa*, West Hartford, CT: Kumarian, 1996; S Orvis, ‘Civil Society in Africa or African Civil Society?’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 36 (1) , 2001, pp 17-38.
- ⁴⁴ Brown, ‘Authoritarian leaders’.
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- ⁴⁶ Ndegwa, *Two Faces*; Orvis, ‘Civil Society’.
- ⁴⁷ R Joseph, ‘Democratization in Africa after 1989: Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives’, *Comparative Politics*, 29 (3), 1997, p 363.
- ⁴⁸ Bratton & van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments*, p 62, italics in original.
- ⁴⁹ For a more in-depth version of the above, see S Brown ‘Foreign Aid and Democracy Promotion: Lessons from Africa’, *European Journal of Development Research*, 17 (2), 2005, pp 183-84. On enduring neopatrimonialism, see E Gyimah-Boadi, ‘Africa: The Quality of Political Reform’, in E Gyimah-Boadi (ed.), *Democratic Reform in Africa: The Quality of Progress*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004, p 22.
- ⁵⁰ Bratton & van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments*, p 97; M Bratton, ‘Second Elections in Africa’, *Journal of Democracy*, 9 (3), 1998, p 54.
- ⁵¹ For instance, J O Ihonvbere, ‘Where Is the Third Wave? A Critical Evaluation of Africa’s Non-Transition to Democracy’, *Africa Today*, 43 (4), 1996, pp 343-67.
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- ⁵³ A Przeworski *et al*, *Sustainable Democracy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p 39.

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- ⁶³ M Ottaway, *Africa's New Leaders: Democracy or State Reconstruction?* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999.
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