

# Foreign Aid and Democracy Promotion: Lessons from Africa

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*The disappointing results of international democratisation efforts are often attributed to domestic conditions that make it difficult for democracy to be established or survive. This paper recognises that the process is largely an endogenous one and that significant structural impediments exist. It argues that international actors, though for the most part absent from current theories of democratisation, can nonetheless play a very important role in promoting (or preventing) democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Paradoxically, the role of donors in promoting a rapid transition to a multiparty system actually can impede further democratisation. For better results, a better understanding of and commitment to the process are required. Competing economic, commercial and strategic interests, however, prevent donors from making a more positive contribution.*

*Les résultats décevants des efforts internationaux de démocratisation sont souvent attribués aux conditions domestiques qui rendent l'établissement ou la survie de la démocratie difficile. Cet article reconnaît que le processus est largement endogène et qu'il existe des entraves structurelles significatives. Des acteurs internationaux, bien que pour la plupart absents des théories actuelles de démocratisation, peuvent malgré tout jouer un rôle très important en promouvant (ou en empêchant) la démocratisation en Afrique subsaharienne. Paradoxalement, le rôle des bailleurs de fonds dans la promotion d'une transition rapide au multipartisme peut, dans les faits, venir gêner la démocratisation. Afin d'obtenir de meilleurs résultats, une meilleure compréhension des mécanismes et un plus grand engagement dans le processus sont nécessaires. Toutefois, les intérêts économiques, commerciaux et stratégiques concurrents empêchent les bailleurs de fonds de faire une contribution plus positive.*

During the Cold War, foreign aid often propped up dictators and authoritarian regimes, thus discouraging or even preventing democratic rule. Since 1990, however, aid has often promoted and rewarded democratisation. Though tying

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foreign aid to political reform is not always successful, it can be very effective in facilitating a move from a one-party state to a multiparty system, albeit not necessarily a full transition to democracy.<sup>1</sup> More often than not, it fails outright or results in an incomplete transition. Why do these efforts, for the most part, produce disappointing results?

Despite the fact that democratisation comes in waves, which points to the existence of an international dimension, the academic literature concentrates largely on domestic aspects of the process [Remmer, 1995]. Analyses of democratisation widely under-examine and under-theorise international actors.<sup>2</sup> Discussions of exogenous factors analyze mainly the international context or environment (structure), rather than actors (agency), and insufficient attention is paid to the interaction between international and domestic actors. These discussions tend to focus on Western attempts to foster democracy abroad. Historically, they have looked at democratisation in Latin America and the role of the US. Often, the poor results of democracy promotion have been attributed to the centrality of Latin American domestic conditions, relegating international aspects to a secondary role at best [Lowenthal, 1991]. Recent work on democratisation in post-Communist Europe is beginning to examine the contributions of international actors [Mendelson, 2001; Pridham et al., 1997; Quigley, 1997; Wedel, 1998]. Very little, however, has been published on the role and effects of the donors' promotion of democracy in the African context.<sup>3</sup>

Though political change often has powerful domestic sources, the international component is particularly fundamental in Sub-Saharan Africa in large part due to the magnitude of foreign aid flows to African governments. Still, many authors minimise international influence and consider recent cases in Africa to be almost a purely endogenous affair.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, when combined with domestic factors, the international dimension's explanatory strength is particularly pertinent to Africa.

This paper begins by reviewing the history of democracy promotion. I then argue that its success has been muted in Sub-Saharan Africa for two main reasons. First, structural impediments hamper democratisation in poor countries and limit the effectiveness of donor conditionality. Second, donors lack the necessary understanding and commitment to see through political reforms, especially when other foreign policy interests intervene. I then present the main implications for improving future efforts to promote democratisation, followed by a brief conclusion on why change is unlikely.

## DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

From the early 1960s to the late 1980s, an era of intense superpower competition, strategic alliance was the most common condition for development assistance. Security imperatives dominated the choice of aid recipients. While the USSR

supported strategic allies, especially Marxist-Leninist regimes, the US and other Western donors provided economic assistance to developing countries that helped contain communism and Soviet 'expansionism'. For the US and, to a lesser extent, other bilateral donors recipient allegiance usually eclipsed concern about the nature of internal political arrangements. A formal semblance of democracy was deemed sufficient; often, not even that was of import.<sup>5</sup>

Still, donors sometimes used aid as leverage to pressure a developing country to carry out certain political and social reforms. The US, especially after the Cuban revolution in 1959, worried that conspicuous inequality in poor countries increased the chances of socialist revolutions paving the way for alignment with Moscow. Promoting democratic institutions abroad became an explicit goal of US development aid in 1961, with the enactment of the Foreign Assistance Act.

American aid programs aimed to promote economic growth and greater equity through democratic rule, though actual democratic requirements were not usually emphasised. As a number of cases in Latin America illustrate, this did not preclude extending support to brutal non-democratic regimes. American foreign aid during the Cold War was more anti-communist and anti-revolutionary than it was pro-democratic. US president Jimmy Carter officially adopted a human rights-based policy in the late 1970s, but it was 'partial' and ineffective, quickly subordinated to other priorities, which it often contradicted [*Carothers, 1999: 29*].

For other donors, notably the Western Europeans, Cold War considerations were less central. France and Britain, for example, maintained important commercial and financial ties with their former colonies, largely independently of ideology (though this generally kept recipient countries pro-Western). Indeed, France almost always supported – sometimes militarily – the autocratic rulers of its client states, regardless of domestic governance issues. The Nordic countries and the Netherlands' aid programs were motivated more by social and humanitarian priorities.<sup>6</sup> A few countries, starting with some Scandinavian ones in the 1970s, did officially link aid to human rights concerns. However, such support was often more rhetorical than financial, as the recipients and levels of aid indicated that human rights remained a low priority [*Gillies, 1996; Mushi, 1995*]. For the bulk of bilateral aid, recipients were chosen and rewarded mainly using Cold War considerations. In practice, foreign aid was often inimical to democratisation by supporting military and civilian autocracies.

The 1990s saw the rapid growth of democracy promotion as bilateral and multilateral donors reformulated their priorities for assistance. With the disappearance of communism and Soviet expansionism as credible threats to the US and its allies, security considerations lost much of their relevance, especially in Africa. No longer in grave need of strategic alliances in the developing world, donors became more closely involved in the domestic

matters of weaker states. New guidelines and policy statements from the Americans, British, Canadians, Dutch, French, Germans and others all stipulated that funding allocation would take into account political liberalisation, and the European Community, as it was then known, changed its rules to enable it to take into account a country's political system when determining aid levels.<sup>7</sup> Development agencies earmarked sizeable funds specifically to promote democracy. For example, USAID budgeted a record \$637 million for democracy assistance in fiscal year 1999, of which \$123 million was for Sub-Saharan Africa [*Carothers, 1999: 49, 51*]. Since democratisation became so central to donor discourse, it is all the more important to evaluate its effectiveness.

#### MIDDLING RESULTS

The relationship between political conditionality and democratisation is unclear. According to Bratton and van de Walle [*1997: 219*], of the 25 cases of politically conditioned aid in Africa, eight resulted in a democratic transition – a moderate success rate.<sup>8</sup> However, statistically, the extent of political liberalisation was *inversely* related (albeit weakly) to the degree of conditionality, suggesting a spurious relationship. This appears very surprising, but the results were probably distorted by two facts. First, some of the 'failures' were the most extreme cases of bad governance (such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Somalia), which are clearly the most difficult to reform. Second, a 'large number' of authoritarian regimes implemented reforms in anticipation of donor actions [*Bratton and van de Walle, 1997: 182*]. Thus, the threat of political conditionality (whether explicit or not) can be sufficient to exact political liberalisation without altering aid delivery.

Still, political conditionality's immediate effectiveness has disappointed its advocates. Political conditionality often encourages a transition to a democracy that is merely electoral, sometimes fomenting rivalries, at times unleashing interethnic violence in the struggle to retain or achieve power (as in Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi), and otherwise impeding democratisation. Moreover, several cases of 'success' soon proved disappointing, with backsliding, civil war and military coups occurring in places such as Malawi, Central African Republic and Madagascar.

We now turn to the two main reasons for these middling results, bridging the areas of domestic and international politics.

#### STRUCTURAL IMPEDIMENTS

There are important structural impediments to democratisation in Africa and to the use of conditionality as a means of policy change.

*Impediments to Democratisation*

Democracy remained elusive for most of Sub-Saharan Africa throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Only two countries have maintained democratic rule uninterrupted since the 1960s: Botswana and Mauritius. In 1989, by one count, 38 out of 45 Sub-Saharan African countries were under military, autocratic or single-party rule [Ake, 1996: 135]. At that time, students of democracy and African politics agreed that '[d]emocratization was not supposed to happen in Africa' [Joseph, 1997: 363]. The wave of democratisation in the early 1990s caught scholars by surprise, since they believed that Africa had neither the structural underpinnings for democracy to develop (including capitalism, literacy and civic culture), nor the agents to introduce it (the middle classes were weak and usually co-opted into the authoritarian system, while the working classes were rarely beyond an 'embryonic' stage). Indeed, African countries face especially grave impediments to democratisation. More than in any other region, they are characterised by poverty and long-term economic crises, recent independence, a weak and often predatory state, and few institutionalised democratic practices. Other critical obstacles include the lack of rudimentary guarantees of the rule of law as well as the authoritarian legacies of administrative weakness and societal alienation [Bienen and Herbst, 1996; Lewis, 1996].

Many of these problems derive from the legacy of colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Post-independence African politics are often characterised by the prevalence of clientelism. The government is beholden to its supporters – typically industrialists, large-scale landowners and bureaucrats – and acts to appease their demands, often in ways antithetical to the national interest, thereby causing instability in the long term. These practices increase the personal prerogatives of the ruler at the expense of more formal institutions and rules. Clientelism clearly hampers democratisation, since it privileges personal ties – often related to kinship, ethnicity, region, language or religion – over national citizenship and equal opportunities. Since the 1980s, however, opportunities for political patronage, in Africa as a whole, have been reduced somewhat by economic liberalisation. This has undermined support for authoritarian regimes, contributing indirectly to local demands for democratisation.

Further complicating democratisation is the frequent overlapping of party systems with ethno-regional identities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, ethnic cleavages were often created or deepened by authoritarian regimes with a strong ethnic bias. Classes and interest groups – the foundation of political parties in the West – are relatively weak, so political divisions and representation tend to be along ethnic, linguistic or religious lines [Makinda, 1996: 555]. Rather than being characterised by competing ideas or ideologies, elections become a struggle for the spoils of power.

Economic and other structural impediments threaten not only the eventual consolidation but also the more immediate survival of democracy.<sup>10</sup> For instance,

constant or worsening economic crises have produced popular and elite discontent and state dependence on external aid, both of which gave political conditionality more power in the process of replacing dictatorships with multiparty democracies. However, continued crises undermine support for democracy and reduce the prospects for its consolidation. In other words, dire economic conditions promote the conditions and changes required for a transition, but paradoxically impede the ones that favour the endurance of democracy.

#### *Impediments to Conditionality*

Political conditionality is not as easy and powerful a tool as it might seem at first. If donors have had tremendous problems ensuring that quantifiable and measurable macroeconomic conditions are met, it is hardly surprising that following up on political conditionality has proven even more challenging [*Uvin, 1993: 73*]. An effective strategy for action is rarely clear and trade-offs are necessary. If the recipient government complies and aid is renewed, it is unclear how much backsliding will trigger renewed aid sanctions. It is cumbersome to cancel and resume development projects, much more so than aid in the form of loans, credits or balance-of-payments support. Development projects and programs require medium- and long-term planning to have a lasting impact. The kind of instability caused by political conditionality could jeopardise their objectives. Furthermore, the structure of aid agencies does not lend itself well to the suspension and resumption of aid. It is an expensive and disruptive process. Political conditionality is thus a blunt instrument, to be wielded with care. It cannot bypass the complicated yet indispensable process of consensus building within a democratising country.

Autocrats often survive pressure for democratisation. Political conditionality, as currently applied, can be evaded. Many African governments quickly learned how to make the minimum necessary reforms to retain their levels of aid: allowing opposition parties to compete, but not win; permitting an independent press to operate, but not freely; allowing civic groups to function, but not effectively; and consenting that elections be held, but not replace the ruling party [*Joseph, 1997: 62; Carothers, 1997*].

Many authoritarian regimes display considerable ingenuity to evade political conditionality and resist democratisation. In Zaire, for instance, President Mobutu Sese Seko responded to domestic and donor pressure by allowing multipartyism in 1990. He nonetheless remained in power until 1997, when rebel forces, backed by Rwanda and Uganda, overthrew him. His survival has been attributed to his 'retain[ing] control of key institutions' and his 'formidable political skills, practicing successful divide-and-rule tactics against the domestic opposition as well as his erstwhile backers', namely Belgium, France and the US [*Turner, 1997: 255–6*].

Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi also deployed a series of shrewd measures in the 1990s, ranging from the co-optation of opponents and electoral fraud to ethnic cleansing, in order to resist losing power. Bilateral donors could have refused to recognise the validity of the 1992 and 1997 elections that returned Moi and Kenya African National Union (KANU) to power, but declined to do so. Moi learned in 1992–93 how procedural compliance with multiparty elections combined with limited economic reform was sufficient to satisfy donors. Five years later, he needed only repeat the scenario to minimise the application of political conditionality. It was in large part KANU's implosion, following Moi's retirement, that permitted a broad opposition alliance to sweep the December 2002 elections [*Brown, 2004b*].

Recipient governments can enact macroeconomic policies that please donors and soften the political conditions to which donors subject governments, as has occurred in Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda and Zambia, among others. Crawford Young [*1999: 35*] is correct to assert that 'semi-democracy is probably sufficient to deflect international system pressures for more complete political opening, particularly if macroeconomic management earns external approbation'.

Often, getting an authoritarian ruler to hold multiparty elections is the easier phase. In earlier research, I found that political conditionality is inherently most effective in prompting a political liberalisation, less effective in ensuring a full transition and least effective in promoting consolidation. It becomes progressively more difficult for donors to focus their leverage effectively as the political reform agenda becomes broader [*Brown, 2000*].

Despite their strong leverage over African governments, Western donors cannot operate alone. Short of military occupation, donors cannot impose democracy without local involvement. International measures appear more likely to fail if there is little government support or local activism in favour of democratisation, be it pre-existing or encouraged by the conditionality. Independent local institutions – such as churches, universities and professional associations – provide anti-regime individuals with crucial bases of support. They also afford a certain degree of opportunity for free speech, protected by their international contacts and, in the case of churches, moral authority.

The structural impediments in Africa could thus appear almost insurmountable, no matter what donors do. Nonetheless, the evidence is insufficient to abandon democracy promotion. The difficulties facing political conditionality do not *ipso facto* indicate that the task is impossible.

#### DONOR SHORTCOMINGS

Poor results to date can also be attributed to a lack of donor commitment (in both degree and duration), a lack of understanding of the democratisation process and how to assist it, and competing priorities.

*Lack of Commitment*

Poor results are, in part, due to low donor commitment to democratisation, especially beyond the holding of multiparty elections. Where commitment is higher, donors apply more pressure and sustain it. Yet, their measures are often weak, prompting concerns about their credibility [Crawford, 1997: 69]. Donors do not reinforce democracy promotion by local actors and/or do not maintain pressure after the founding elections. They are modestly involved in post-electoral political reform and are reluctant to apply political conditionality. Bilateral donors are especially likely to support a rapid move to an electoral regime, even if severely flawed. Multilateral donors display more concern with economic and administrative reforms that are believed to facilitate growth than with democracy per se; in some instances, like with the Bretton Woods institutions, their statutes prohibit them from favouring one political system over another.

Expecting little of African democracies (for assorted reasons), donors express satisfaction with elections that are clearly not 'free and fair' [Geisler, 1993]. Often, bilateral donors knowingly endorse severely flawed elections and even prevent measures that will lay the foundation for future democratisation. In Kenya in the 1990s, for instance, donors never demonstrated commitment to a truly fair poll and on several occasions actively impeded domestic efforts aimed at designing a new, more democratic political system [Brown, 2001]. Donors, however, are not monolithic entities; intra-governmental disagreements sometimes result in work at cross-purposes, with one branch of government undermining another one's efforts. For example, drug enforcement officials might wink at human rights abuses by their counterparts in developing countries, while foreign service officials decry them. The ministries of defence or trade and industry might squarely oppose policies advocated by state development agencies or foreign ministries [Nelson and Eglinton, 1993: 82].<sup>11</sup>

Donor commitment to democracy has waned since the enthusiasm of the early 1990s and the use of political conditionality has declined. By the middle of the decade, donors 'return[ed] to largely rhetorical endorsements of democratization' out of concern for 'order, regional security, and market-based reforms' [Joseph, 1998: 11]. As a result, there now exists 'convergence and compromise between the interests of Western powers and African states...in the tacit acceptance of virtual democracies as an acceptable form of governance' [Joseph, 1999: 70].

*Lack of Understanding*

A major problem of bilateral donors' democracy assistance is its technical bias. Donors treat symptoms (training judges and journalists for example) while ignoring root causes (such as regime unwillingness to accept independent judiciaries or media). Donor assistance normally contains laudable objectives,

but often fails during implementation, promoting activities without paying due attention to intervening factors.<sup>12</sup> Notably, donors misunderstand power relationships in neopatrimonial societies and underestimate the strength of entrenched interests. In other words, donors forget about politics. When they do identify clearly political problems, such as rampant high-level corruption, they usually are not able or are loath to intervene directly.

Official statements increasingly emphasise the need for institution-building.<sup>13</sup> However, the actual institutionalisation of democratic practices is extremely difficult, extending far beyond the periodic holding of multiparty elections. It requires the operationalisation of such concepts as the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law, accountability and civilian control of the military.

Building political institutions – for example, parliamentary capacity-building and electoral reform – is crucial, but it would be foolhardy to ignore factors that might affect the underpinnings of democracy (such as health, education and economic growth), many of which are adversely affected by donor-designed structural adjustment programs. Sustained growth, for example, provides resources for alleviating hardships associated with reforms and for reducing social cleavages. Yet, many donors – especially the Bretton Woods institutions and the US – advocate economic measures, such as user fees, that make education and health care even less accessible to poor Africans, thereby exacerbating social conditions and inequalities, and indirectly creating obstacles to democratisation.

#### *Other Priorities*

In spite of donors' pro-democracy statements and commitments since the early 1990s, they have made no marked departure from previous policies. By the late 1980s, commercial interests had become important in influencing the size of American, Swedish, Japanese and other donor aid to specific countries; this trend deepened in the 1990s [*Schraeder et al., 1998: 321–22*].

The case of Algeria in January 1992 illustrates well donors' double standards in implementing political conditionality since the end of the Cold War: the government cancelled elections when it appeared almost certain that the Islamist opposition would win. Donors did not protest because the would-be winners appeared 'highly likely to subvert democratic processes and institutions' [*Nelson and Eglinton, 1992: 45*]. The result, of course, was hardly less 'subversive' to democracy, but donors turned a blind eye.<sup>14</sup> In more recent years, notably since the al-Qaeda attacks of 11 September 2001, the donors' security interests have grown even more preponderant. A particularly stark example is how the aid embargo and other sanctions on Pakistan's military dictatorship were quickly dropped in exchange for support for the US-led attack on Afghanistan's ruling Taliban.

Though the special geopolitical considerations at stake in Algeria and Pakistan do not apply to most of Sub-Saharan Africa, security interests nonetheless trump pressure for democratisation in many instances, especially when recipients embrace economic liberalisation. In Ethiopia, for example, a nascent multiparty democracy has given way to a 'de facto single-party state' [Harbeson, 1999: 52–3]. Western donors and international financial institutions generally ignore this because of the country's pro-free market rhetoric (if not always actual policies) and its role as a so-called stabilising force in the volatile Horn of Africa, including opposing 'expansionist Islam' and counterbalancing the Sudanese regime [J. Young, 2004: 20].

Even prior to 11 September 2001, donors' post-Cold War foreign policy interests were often deemed more important than the local democratic process. A study found that there was no relationship between the level of US foreign aid and either democratic development or humanitarian need in the 1990s; instead, it was closely correlated with security and economic factors [Hook, 1998]. Likewise, the European Union and its member states were found to lack a serious commitment to democracy and human rights in Africa in the 1990s; their own interests continued to determine where aid was directed – with a few exceptions, such as the Netherlands, which paid greater attention to recipient needs [Olsen, 1998: 366–7]. Thus, donor motivations did not seem any less self-interested in the 1990s than they were during the Cold War and recent years have further confirmed this.

Moreover, donors can simultaneously promote several policies (such as economic reform, good governance, poverty alleviation, health and education), not all of which can be top priorities or are necessarily compatible. Measuring compliance with all forms of aid conditionality becomes problematic. How does a donor respond if, for example, a government frees political prisoners but further restricts the media, or if a democratically elected leader is also corrupt? Prioritisation has to occur, be it *de facto* or *de jure*. Even when donors are interested in promoting democratisation, other foreign policy interests outweigh concerns over the imperfections of individual transitions.<sup>15</sup> Political stability and economic reform, theoretically said to promote economic growth, are favoured over the extension of democratic practices beyond periodic voting. A recent study found that the US has historically subordinated democracy promotion to its security interests, since democracy – contrary to current rhetoric – is not always perceived as serving US interests [Peceny, 1999].<sup>16</sup> To the extent that conditionality is currently imposed, it is usually reserved for issues of economic reform, at the expense of democratisation. Donors' current approach, cautiously rewarding governments for modest achievements in economic governance, undermines domestic actors' effectiveness in applying pressure for further political reform and can actually serve as a disincentive for increased political liberalisation.

Political stability is the donors' other large preoccupation. Unlike mass demonstrations for political reform in Eastern Europe in 1989–90, African popular mobilisations ignite a fear of the mob and the sense that anything could happen. Donors and domestic elites are concerned with potential violence, loss of life, populist or socialist policies, property damage, impaired production, interruptions of trade, increased refugee flows or missed debt repayments. The more radical potential of fundamental reform threatens donors' interests and incites them to seek accommodations that will restore order, at the expense of progressive change [*Brown, 2001*].

There are some encouraging examples of donors supporting civil society actors and applying behind-the-scenes pressure on incumbent rulers to prevent them from lifting or extending presidential term limits, notably in Kenya (2001–02), Malawi (2002–03) and Zambia (2001). Though in the latter two cases, the ruling party's candidate won in a widely condemned poll, both new presidents have surprisingly demonstrated considerable independence from their predecessor and benefactor. Still, donors did little to follow up on their critical electoral monitoring reports.

The impact of post-9/11 foreign policy priorities usually translates into increased support for authoritarian regimes that cooperate with the US and its allies in the so-called 'war on terror'. Moreover, there is a growing concern that foreign aid is increasingly being used a security tool, conflating military, political and humanitarian goals. For instance, Australia's official development assistance includes counter-terrorism programmes [*Randel et al., 2004: 5*].

In sum, the active involvement of donors – or lack thereof – has helped limit democratisation in Africa since 1990 primarily to its basic procedural component, eschewing more participatory forms of democracy. Donors might want democracy, but they prefer neoliberal economic reform. Most often, they settle for stability, whatever its form.

## IMPLICATIONS

In a number of cases, donors have assisted in bringing about a transition to democracy, working in conjunction with domestic actors. Donors' conditioning of aid or the threat of doing so certainly encouraged many African authoritarian regimes to liberalise politically, notably by holding multiparty elections. Although many elections did not meet international standards of free and fair, in a number of cases they resulted in the democratic transfer of power. If donors better recognised propitious domestic conditions and effectively concentrated their efforts on those countries, their rate of success would improve in the future. As I have argued elsewhere, political conditionality would benefit from greater unity and coordination among donors, clearer objectives, more strategic targeting and more effective timing [*Brown, 2000: 462–7*].

*In for a Penny, in for a Pound*

The conclusion that democratisation must be domestically driven should be of little surprise – the need for national ownership is widely recognised. But a deeper reading indicates that when international actors act as substitutes for domestic ones, their continued involvement might be necessary for further democratisation to take place. For instance, if donors play a large part in the decision to hold multiparty elections but then withdraw pressure for sustained democratisation, the process might quickly become stalled or suffer from ‘backsliding’ into authoritarian rule.

In this case, of which Malawi is an excellent example, the domestic actors were not nearly strong enough to overthrow the *ancien régime* – though they might have been at a later point. Donors suspended aid until multiparty elections were held and, unsurprisingly, after the elections, domestic actors (mainly political parties and civic organisations) did not have the strength to defend democratisation. In fact, in Malawi, with the main opposition parties working mainly for their own interests, there is virtually no one to defend the public’s interests or ensure that the government follows democratic rules. As a result, the executive remains disproportionately strong compared to the other branches of government, constitutional provisions do not operate as ‘checks and balances’ on executive power, and civic actors are too weak to hold it accountable [Brown, 2004a]. Thus, with little domestic pressure to sustain the democratisation process, a rapid and peaceful donor-driven transition might sometimes – quite paradoxically – hinder future efforts.

In another scenario, when donors do not play so large a part in the move to multipartyism, domestic actors obviously play the more important role. In the case of Kenya in the 1990s, the reform movement was mainly domestically driven, with donors lending their support after a critical mass had already been achieved and actually discouraging more fundamental political reform. Thus, the transition was only partial for over a decade, leaving the same people and party in control and their powers virtually unaltered after two substandard elections. If the domestic political reform movement brings about change essentially on its own, it is more likely to have the strength and the willpower to defend democratisation. Kenya will prove an important test case for this assertion.

In other words, a more limited form of intervention (or none at all) is more likely to be fruitful in the long run than initial donor involvement followed by relative withdrawal after the founding elections. Furthermore, a speedy and relatively violence-free transition does not automatically bode well for consolidation, for it could mean that certain key issues were not resolved. This finding contradicts most recent scholarship on transitions, which places much value on short transitions [Huntington 1991; Bratton and van de Walle, 1997: 255–7; van de Walle, 1999: 33–4].<sup>17</sup>

It might not be possible for donors to influence consolidation deeply, since consolidation is primarily an internal process – even more so than a transition – that

depends on a broad consensus on democratic practices among citizens and elites. Moreover, if a semi-authoritarian or even democratic government resists consolidation, its achievement is by definition impossible, since consolidation requires elite consensus. However, this does not mean that donors cannot promote democratic consolidation. Support for domestic democratisers has so far been equivocal and sometimes contradictory. Nowhere in Africa have donors aggressively pursued a program of political conditionality to further consolidation. With continued involvement, donors can serve as guarantors of democracy, encouraging losers to hand over power to the winners in the trust that they might be returned to power in the next scheduled elections. Donors can also reinforce the efforts of domestic actors by providing them with support and serving as watchdogs, alongside domestic and international NGOs and the media. Though democracy-building projects are difficult to implement and evaluate and the results are perforce modest, they could be expanded and improved.

#### *Democratisation and Economic Reform*

Donors' promotion of political liberalisation is linked to economic liberalisation, specifically structural adjustment, despite the incompatibilities between the two programs. Under current policies, economic considerations and a concern for stability tend to outweigh objectives of political reform. A series of difficult choices would therefore have to be made, involving trade-offs between objectives. It remains highly unlikely that donors will collectively make sustained democratisation a higher priority than economic and commercial questions.

Electoral competition itself can in fact often have a negative impact on economic reform. It is not uncommon in liberal democracies for public spending to increase in the run-up to elections. However, in liberalising countries where incumbents are especially determined to hold onto power, dramatic over-expenditure fuels inflation and otherwise compromises economic reform, frequently serving to finance the incumbent party's campaign and bribe voters. Often, large amounts of money are obtained through corrupt means, including raiding social security funds or selling privatised enterprises to political clients at a bargain price in exchange for support. In such cases, if the opposition is nonetheless victorious, the new government will need donors' understanding and long-term support to recover from the economic cost of the transition process.

The economic status quo is unacceptable for Africa, but neoliberalism does not appear to provide more fertile ground for democracy to grow. Though economic reform might be necessary in Africa, structural adjustment need not be the only option. Its short- and long-term effectiveness in promoting economic growth is unproven [*Przeworski and Vreeland, 2000*]. Strong international commitment can help democracy survive, but only domestic actors can ensure it

takes root. To promote democracy, donors will have to play a more active role not only in strengthening the political process, but also in seeking and supporting alternative economic models. If democracy is about people making their own decisions, democratic debate should determine national economic policy, not donors.

### *Deepening Democracy*

Donors have adopted a script for political and economic development in Africa. It is a fairly rigid one, allowing for little domestic decision-making in these policy areas. Though donor documents are peppered with references to the need to 'empower ordinary people' (or similar expressions) and the benefits of participation in the political and economic decision-making process, few – if any – operationalise the concept beyond periodic voting and freedom of expression.<sup>18</sup> Popular participation is rarely a significant component of actual development programs. Politicians are generally not responsive to their constituencies, yet no other mechanism of popular participation or even consultation is envisaged.

Democracy is not just an end: it is also a means to improve domestic social, political and economic relations. Democratic expectations in developing countries are inextricably linked with demands for better living conditions, including health care, education and job opportunities. Economic assistance for growth, poverty alleviation, education, health care and other measures bolsters the underlying foundations of democracy, making democratic survival – and presumably consolidation – much more probable [Przeworski *et al.*, 1995]. Since democratisation has structural components, donors, if serious about democratisation, should pay greater attention to the myriad factors that contribute to and underpin not only transitions but, even more complicated, long-term consolidation as well. This involves broader economic and structural considerations, such as encouraging accommodation among various ethnic groups, economic recovery and improved living standards. In the end, when designing aid programs to enhance chances of long-term democratisation, donors need to consider both structural requirements and the mechanisms for creating and modifying institutions.

Donors tend to use political conditionality in an ad hoc manner, often with modest outcomes, and are relatively quick to resume support even if reform is only partial. Conditionality is often simply not implemented, or only weakly or for a short period, due to a number of countervailing forces and other priorities. However, African democratic movements, so long repressed by authoritarian elites and often – indirectly – their Western patrons, are worthy of support. Thus politically conditioning aid can be a laudable practice. Nonetheless, for the foreseeable future, other policy goals are likely to prevent it from being done effectively.

## CONCLUSION

Without conditionality, aid to an authoritarian regime helps it survive by providing resources for co-opting or repressing opposition. It notably strengthens the hand of hardliners, who tend to benefit most from neopatrimonial uses of development assistance. Political conditionality, however, has the potential of shifting power to softliners and the opposition through the opening of political space and by raising the cost of continued authoritarian practices. Moreover, bilateral donors can assist domestic opposition groups and civic and religious actors by providing material, financial, organisational and psychic encouragement, as well as some degree of protection from state repression. Donors can also meet some of the high cost of holding elections and help build democratic institutions and local capacity.

The disappointing results of international democratisation efforts thus far are often attributed to domestic conditions that make it difficult for democracy to be established or survive. This article argues that international actors, though largely absent from current theories of democratisation, can play a very important role in promoting (or preventing) democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa, even if the process is to a large extent an endogenous one and significant structural impediments exist. Paradoxically, the role of donors in promoting a rapid transition to a multiparty system actually can impede further democratisation. Nonetheless, it remains possible for international actors to play a more positive role, requiring a better understanding of and commitment to the process. Competing economic, commercial and strategic interests, however, prevent donors from doing so.

This conclusion is not an optimistic one for democracy promotion (and democratisation) in Africa. Donors' professed new 'pro-democracy' focus has not been supported by actual aid flows. I do not foresee a change in Western interests that would make democracy a higher priority, through either an increased normative concern or lesser emphasis on competing interests. Commercial ties, economic reform and concerns for stability are likely to remain high on the list of major donors' priorities. Moreover, with the 'war on terror', security interests have re-emerged as central considerations for Western policy, including towards Africa.

More effective democracy promotion efforts could result from pressure on large donors (including the US, the UK, France and Japan) by smaller, less self-interested donors (such as the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and perhaps Canada). The latter, however, would first need to clarify their priorities and assume a greater advocacy role within international organisations and coordination mechanisms. The trend, however, is in the opposite direction: donors increasingly rely on the Bretton Woods institutions to determine worthiness of support.

Finally, the African Peer Review Mechanism of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (APRM/NEPAD) contains provisions for African government to assess each other's level of democracy and good governance, in an attempt to forestall donor critiques and to obtain increased levels of aid. However, as Ian Taylor [2004: 3] points out, it is unrealistic to expect neopatrimonial rulers in Africa to abandon the system that keeps them in power and truly embrace the concept of good governance. The failure of the countries propelling NEPAD forward, notably South Africa, to condemn the egregious electoral and other abuses in Zimbabwe jeopardises APRM's fundamental credibility. Without much greater participation of African civil society, NEPAD will remain a club of African states and the strong men that rule them. The onus thus falls overwhelmingly on Africans themselves to undertake the difficult task of confronting entrenched elites and reforming their political institutions and practices, regardless of (and sometimes despite) international involvement.

#### NOTES

1. Without getting into any long definitional debates, I would like to specify how I use a few key terms in this paper. By *transition*, I mean the process of moving from an authoritarian to a democratic system. If free and fair elections are held and the winner assumes office, a *full transition* to democracy has occurred. If the process falls short of that, the transition is *partial* or *stalled*, allowing for a multiparty system to be in place without it qualifying as democratic. *Political conditionality* refers to the strings attached to foreign aid, making it dependent on political liberalisation. *Consolidation* is a far more nebulous term and can include long-term survival of democracy, its process of deepening and widening, or its transformation into the 'only game in town'.
2. One of the earliest and most important studies of transitions to democracy states that, with the exception of military occupation, 'external actors tended to play an indirect and usually marginal role' [O'Donnell *et al.*, 1986: 5]. Others, such as Pridham [1995], Whitehead [1986] and Whitehead [2001], attribute greater weight to exogenous factors.
3. Three exceptions are Barkan [1997], Hearn and Robinson [2000] and Sørensen [2000].
4. For instance, Widner [1994] and C. Young [1994].
5. Jeane Kirkpatrick [1979] rationalised this focus based on the democratic potential of authoritarian regimes, as opposed to the alleged unreformability of totalitarian states.
6. Scandinavians were also supportive of progressive socialist regimes, such as Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia and the 'Frontline States' in Southern Africa.
7. Not all donors place equal emphasis on the various components of political reform. The US stresses democracy, while most Western European countries and the European Union focus on less specific 'good governance'. Nordic countries tend to pay more attention to human rights than other donors, while France values its economic, military and cultural ties with former colonies. Japan is least interested in domestic political systems, privileging trade relationships instead. Among multi lateral agencies, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), though prohibited from promoting democracy as such, increasingly emphasise good governance; other agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) do not apply policy conditionality.
8. Transitions occurred in Benin, Central African Republic, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles and South Africa (extracted from Bratton and van de Walle [1996]).
9. Colonial rule's main purpose was to extract wealth through domination and imperialism. Colonial powers did not intend to give Africans, considered incapable of rational and intelligent deliberation, a say in their own government. Yet, after World War II, Europeans realised they could not maintain indefinite control over their colonies. Most African countries, especially

former French and British territories, were hastily granted representative government in the decade leading to independence. Independence movements aimed to seize the state more than to reform it or follow Western political models. For the most part, nationalism was not a liberal movement [Chazan, 1993: 75]. Soon after independence, almost all new governments 'decayed' into authoritarianism or were overthrown in military coups under the justification of national unity and/or a development imperative (though few eventually produced either), invariably centralising power and repressing dissent. Laws enacted by the colonial power to control the 'natives' were often used to quell opposition in postcolonial states.

10. One of the biggest impediments to sustained democratisation is the 'winner-take-all mentality', whereby an elected party acts as if it has a mandate to do as it pleases for its entire term in office. The strong powers of the executive deprive the parliamentary opposition of a political role, the right to question and criticise, and security from harassment, which constitutes a fundamental breach in the philosophy that underpins democracy [Makinda, 1996: 567]. Opposition politicians are sometimes charged with treason or sedition for criticising the government, despite the fact that that is the 'loyal' opposition's function in a democratic system. Viewing power as a prize-for-the-taking often leads to other damaging abuses of power, including the siphoning off of state resources. Control over countless patronage appointments at all levels, land allocation and the privatisation of state assets provide political leaders and their close allies with great opportunities for enrichment at public expense. Moreover, since no party can guarantee its hold on power, governments attempt to grab as much as possible while in office. Indeed, a large number of opposition politicians appear to seek personal aggrandisement and to partake in reaping the spoils of power. Their parties often function as their personal vehicles, lack continuity and professionalism. If elected, they do little to promote the deepening of democracy, including by reducing the powers of the executive.
11. In the case of Kenya, for example, the Bush (Senior) administration and the Pentagon wanted to reward the Kenyan government with military and economic assistance for its support of American military and security interests (including the Gulf War, Sudan, Libya and Somalia). Congress was more concerned with the regime's manifest human rights violations, whereas USAID wanted to downplay the unfairness of elections so that its budget would not be cut.
12. The US Congress is especially desirous of rapid, quantifiable results to justify aid to its domestic constituency. Though arguably appropriate for health care services or infrastructure programs, this makes little sense in the field of democracy and governance.
13. For American examples, see Gore [1994: 447], Christopher [1996: 506] and Rice [1998: 20].
14. Crawford [1997: 93–100] also analyzes the conspicuous 'non-cases' of Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, where no aid sanctions were imposed, despite persistent human rights violations. Carothers [1999: 5] cites examples where US national interests (such as oil, trade, or regional security and stability) superseded democracy promotion in the 1990s, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Indonesia under Suharto, Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia.
15. In the case of the US, Rose [2000/01: 189] argued that 'enhancing U.S. security' and 'promoting prosperity at home', the two main competing objectives, 'carried greater weight' than democracy promotion abroad.
16. Moreover, the results of free and fair elections in developing countries were not always respected by Western liberal democracies. For example, the US supported the overthrow of democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala (1954) and Salvador Allende in Chile (1973).
17. An exception is Casper [2000: 59], who concludes that 'difficult transitions, while risky, offer the highest payoff for democratization'.
18. See, for example, World Bank [1989: xii, 4, 15, 54–5, 63, 191].

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