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Democracy and Reconfigured Power in Africa

RICHARD JOSEPH

In July 2009, President Barack Obama declared in Accra, Ghana, that Africa no longer needs strongmen—it needs strong institutions. Almost a year later, at a meeting of the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton contended that many African leaders seem more concerned with staying eternally in power than with ably serving their people. In some cases, she said, democracy “as one election, one time” still prevails.

How much do these views correspond with what is taking place in African countries? What patterns emerge in the configuration of political power? And finally, how do we assess Africa’s democratic prospects in light of global developments?

As once impregnable autocracies fall in North Africa, the people of sub-Saharan Africa can reflect on two decades of political turmoil and change. Today most countries in the region are nominally democratic; that is, they hold regular elections, opposition parties compete for elective offices, and a wide range of opinions can be expressed. The 2010 survey by Freedom House, however, suggests that sub-Saharan Africa reflects a global trend in which political rights and civil liberties have deteriorated in recent years.

Developments in Africa, according to Freedom House’s Arch Puddington, show “a continued pattern of volatility amid overall freedom decline,” with democratic backsliding exceeding advances. Samuel Huntington’s theory of waves of democracy, and of reverse waves, has been helpful in explaining this course of events. The third wave of democracy did sweep across much of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, but has now subsided, except for ripples and eddies.

This is an appropriate moment, therefore, to step back from the volatility and try to understand the deeper dynamics of political change and continuity in the region. In this exercise, the perspective of Richard L. Sklar, a longtime student of African affairs and retired professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles, is helpful. Sklar has argued for the importance of studying power and the means by which it is acquired and exercised. He contends that all governmental systems are mixed, and everything that is good in governance may not necessarily be “democratic.”

Sklar calls attention, for example, to the significance of oligarchic entities, such as the US Supreme Court or the British House of Lords, in capitalist democracies. Significant powers are often devolved to unelected institutions such as the US Federal Reserve. Well before the post-Soviet transitions, Sklar claimed that Africa was a “workshop of democracy.” And he identified a unique African contribution to modern governance in “dual majesty”—that is, the persistence alongside Western-type political orders of traditional systems of authority such as chieftaincy institutions. Sklar’s studies alert us to the importance of understanding the contextual dynamics of power, authority, and institutions in Africa.

A few other observations are pertinent as well. First, we should think of democratic and autocratic systems of power as being *simultaneously* in play in many African nations. Second, appropriate attention should be devoted to geopolitics and the impact of external forces. Cambridge University’s Christopher Clapham refers to the “extraversion” of African countries throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods: that is, the extent to which they have been, and continue to be, influenced by external powers. A third consideration in many African countries’ politi-

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cal development is the significance of armed struggle in installing long-surviving regimes and shaping their character.

RESILIENT AUTOCRATS

In an essay on the new authoritarianism in Russia, Ivan Krastev asks “why authoritarianism is surviving in the age of democratization.” He argues that students of democracy have been “blind to the resilience of authoritarianism.” However, a number of scholars have dealt with this issue in essays since 1991. To capture the tentative nature of these political processes, I argued in my 1998 edited book, *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa*, that many new regimes reflected a reconfiguration of power rather than a transition to constitutional democracy.

When we speak of autocracy and authoritarianism, we naturally think of the exercise of power. However, the same should be true of democracy, which derives from the Greek word, *demokratia*, meaning the power of the demos. A struggle to wrest power from autocratic systems and shift it to the people is evidently happening in North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East. Likewise, anyone who witnessed the *villes mortes* campaign in Cameroon in the early 1990s, when protesters shut down major cities, or many of the other uprisings and demonstrations of that period, would attest to this central feature.

After popular upheavals, however, nations have to be governed. In restoring order, a reconfigured autocracy can be established, as happened in Russia under Vladimir Putin. In the journey from system overthrow to new political order, African countries are strewn along a continuum from the liberal democracy of Cape Verde to the hard autocracy of Eritrea, with many hybrid systems in between.

The most prevalent political system in Africa today, notwithstanding important democratic advances, is the electoral authoritarian regime, which ranges from noncompetitive, as in the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), to competitive, as in Uganda. At the top of the list of consolidated autocratic rule would be José Eduardo dos Santos, who succeeded Antonio Agostinho Neto as Angola’s president in September 1979. Dos Santos and the ruling MPLA (People’s Movement

for the Liberation of Angola) were confident enough of their hegemony to permit parliamentary elections in 2008, in which the party won 82 percent of the vote.

It can be expected that this dominant party system, as with other post-liberation governments like Namibia’s SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organization), will persist through several electoral cycles. The power and authority of the Angolan regime rest on decades of colonial and postcolonial armed struggle, enormous oil wealth, a petroleum industry that now competes globally, and the capacity to adjust to criticisms without ceding its extensive control of the state and economy.

Another case of Marxism-Leninism reconfigured for the new global era, following the armed seizure of power, is the Ethiopian regime of Meles Zenawi and the EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front). Freedom House’s 2010 survey downgraded Ethiopia from “partly free” to “not free.” What impact will this demotion have? Not much, most likely. Ethiopia

has been one of the world’s leading per capita recipients of overseas development aid, and will continue to receive such largesse.

The EPRDF regime rests on a minority ethnic base and operates a system carefully designed to enable it to dominate provincial governments. When the opposition improved its performance in 2005 elections, and the results were falsified, subsequent protests were brutally suppressed. The regime then tightened its pre-election controls and significantly improved its “electoral” support in 2010.

The Ethiopian regime knows that what really counts is not its democratic character but its capacity to project force, domestically and externally, and the country’s socioeconomic indicators. In alliance with the United States, Ethiopia has sent troops to fight Islamist insurgents in Somalia. When Sudan seemed on the verge of another outbreak of fighting over the disputed Abyei district and in south Kordofan, Ethiopia again obliged external powers by sending troops to help contain the threat. It is not easy to persuade a post-liberation regime in a very diverse country of 90 million to serve as regional gendarme, permit humanitarian access to its impoverished communities, and also risk defeat in competitive elections.

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Africa’s entrenched strongmen.
But removing them is not enough.*

An even more direct challenge to democratic state building in Africa is the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) led by Rwandan President Paul Kagame. Since the regime exercises draconian control over all forms of association and expression, elections can be regularly held with landslide victories regularly reported. The 1994 genocide has been used to justify resisting anything deemed a threat to peace and stability.

Some governments and international agencies have implicated the RPF in mass killings during the Rwandan and Congolese wars of the 1990s, continuing cross-border interventions in Congo, and a raft of human rights abuses, but the regime counters these criticisms by citing the praise of its foreign admirers. And even more than Ethiopia, the Kagame regime can cite impressive socio-economic achievements. These new and refurbished authoritarians fend off democratization by espousing a developmental ideology, by relying on militarized state power, and by insisting on being judged according to their liberation narratives.

WHO DECIDES?

In a few instances, African heads of state have opted to lead their countries in opening up their political systems rather than pursue last-ditch stratagems to retain power. The most notable of the various examples is that of Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, who got ahead of both his party and the populace when he declared in February 1992 that the time had come to end the legal single-party system. Subsequently, Tanzania evolved, with the glaring exception of Zanzibar, into single-party dominance with significant democratic content.

A more nuanced but equally significant case is that of Abdou Diouf, when he completed 19 years as president of Senegal in 2000. Presiding over a country with deep democratic roots, a vigorous civil society, and strong countervailing power in the form of Islamic brotherhoods, Diouf continued the process of gradual liberalization pursued by his predecessor, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Following disputed elections in 2000, rather than challenge the results as some party barons wanted, Diouf chose to cede power to his longtime challenger, Abdoulaye Wade, and the PDS (Senegalese Democratic Party). Yet Wade, instead of carrying Senegal forward as anticipated to become one of the stalwarts of democracy building in Africa, has taken it backwards to a regime characterized by an expanded presidency, mismanagement, and nepotism.

A perceptive statement by Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg at the end of their influential 1984 *Comparative Politics* article, "Personal Rule: Theory and Practice in Africa," helps put these cases in context:

[D]emocracy can be promoted by inventive political practitioners as well as by favorable socioeconomic processes, and the former do not necessarily have to wait upon the latter. Statesmen are to political development what entrepreneurs are to economic development. Indeed, they may be more important insofar as political development is less dependent on material resources and consists essentially in appropriate inclinations and conduct.

Nyerere and Diouf demonstrated "appropriate inclinations and conduct" when they elected to move their countries toward a democratic opening. But the relative autonomy enjoyed by African leaders can also result in countries' moving backwards. After Diouf led his nation toward greater democracy, his successor took it in another direction for personal rather than societal or structural reasons.

Zambia over two decades experienced four direction switches that could be attributed, in large part, to the predilections of the country's head of state. Kenneth Kaunda's 27-year rule might be described as a moderate autocracy. Although Kaunda stoutly resisted demands for multiparty democracy, once this concession was made, he allowed the process to proceed in a relatively salutary manner, and stepped aside following his defeat by Frederick Chiluba and the MMD (Movement for Multiparty Democracy) in 1991.

However, to the consternation of the coalition of political, trade union, civic, and religious groups responsible for Chiluba's victory, as well as a broad alliance of external donors, he then established a tawdry kleptocracy. The coalition that put him in power fortuitously reconstituted itself to block his attempt to remove a two-term constitutional limit to his presidency.

Chiluba's former vice president, Levy Mwanawasa, sharply shifted Zambia back onto a democratic course. During a presidency tragically cut short by his death in August 2008, Mwanawasa showed principled leadership in having Chiluba brought to trial on corruption charges while he also stood up to the misrule of Robert Mugabe in neighboring Zimbabwe. Sadly, and again reflecting how dependent Africa's emergent democracies can be on the inclinations of their

leaders, Mwanawasa's successor, President Rupiah Banda, reversed gears and even praised the unredeemable Chiluba.

The veteran politician Michael Sata defeated Banda and ended 20 years of MMD rule in Zambia's September 2011 elections, but we do not know yet what kind of president he will be. Will he prove a born-again kleptocrat like Chiluba, a committed democrat like Mwanawasa, or something else?

The curriculum vitae of leaders can offer little guidance as to whether once in power they will follow the ideals they championed in opposition or just reinstate personalist and patrimonial systems. The name Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is already etched on the plinth of state builders and democracy builders in Africa based on her achievements as Liberia's president; she has pulled her country decisively away from the depravity of the Samuel Doe/Charles Taylor era.

Will Alassane Ouattara establish a similar record in Ivory Coast? He conducted a principled struggle to secure an electoral mandate as president following a 2010 election, bringing an end to the tumultuous and destructive political gyrations his nation had experienced since the 1993 death of President Felix Houphouët-Boigny.

What is so far true of the Liberian and Ivorian leaders, with their earlier careers respectively as a commercial banker and an International Monetary Fund official, has not been the case for their Malawian counterpart. Malawian President Bingu wa Mutharika, a former World Bank economist, experienced the obloquy of having the British government suspend aid to his country on July 14, 2011, while the United States suspended a \$350 million aid compact from the Millennium Challenge Corporation on July 26. The reasons given were economic mismanagement and the brutal suppression of popular protests against his government.

Mutharika dissolved his cabinet and assumed all ministerial duties on August 20, 2011. He seems to be reading from the playbook of Niger's former president, Mamadou Tandja, who suspended his government and opted to rule by decree in June 2009. In February 2010, Tandja was ousted by the military; new elections were conducted with international assistance in January 2011.

The adage "power corrupts" reminds us of an unchanging human flaw. In Botswana, one

of the jewels of African democratic governance, President Seretse Khama Ian Khama—despite his pedigree as the son of the country's revered first leader, Seretse Khama—has been opting for autocratic and arrogant rule. Rather than in waves that follow one another, democracy and autocracy now appear to move in tandem in Africa, often depending on the character of whoever occupies the highest political office.

POWER SHIFTS

A few regimes in Africa have weathered many changes in the political climate. For example, since its independence in January 1960, Cameroon has been led by just two men, Ahmadou Ahidjo and his former deputy, Paul Biya. Will the winds of change now blowing southward because of the Arab Spring ruffle such governments?

In some cases, an alliance between France and postcolonial rulers in Africa has afforded the latter a unique capacity to survive and thrive. The Bongo and Eyadema regimes in Gabon and Togo, for instance, not only have survived the deaths of their chieftains, but the autocrats' sons (Ali Bongo and Faure Gnassingbé) have succeeded them.

In Tunisia the Nicolas Sarkozy government, after taking the usual French stance of supporting an entrenched autocrat, shifted course and supported the ouster of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. France has since led the successful allied effort to dislodge Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya. And its helicopter gunships evicted from his bunker Laurent Gbagbo, who refused to vacate his office after losing the Ivorian presidential election to Ouattara. This is not typical Gallic state behavior in postcolonial Africa.

Biya has served continuously in the government of Cameroon since 1964 and as its president since 1982. Cameroon is an oil-producing country that has known decades of peace and stability, so no one will bother his deeply implanted regime unless Cameroonians decide that the time for change has truly come. But three other countries, all potential economic powerhouses, are on the cusp of possibly significant transformations: Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, and Kenya.

In Zimbabwe, though it is surrounded by countries that underwent profound changes in the 1990s, Mugabe and his party, ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front), have

The most prevalent political system in Africa today is the electoral authoritarian regime.

maintained their dominance, albeit tempered by the creation of a government of national unity in February 2009. ZANU-PF has lost every vote in which Zimbabweans enjoyed a reasonable opportunity to express their views, beginning with a constitutional referendum in 2000. So the regime has only been able to retain power through force and its control of access to critical resources, whether sequestered land, foreign exchange, or diamonds.

Zimbabwe's ruler is old and ailing. The regime has no geostrategic levers that can be pulled to ward off external pressures. To be sure, China is deeply engaged, as is the case wherever there are natural resources to be procured and profitable business can be done. As elsewhere in Africa, however, China's opportunism enables it to adjust no matter where the political wind blows. ZANU-PF barons engage in a fierce struggle over the authoritarian succession, while domestic forces struggling against autocracy have done all that could be expected of them in the face of so brutalizing a regime.

The prospects of a democratic transition in Zimbabwe now rest on the emergence of an international coalition, including some regional leaders and organizations, committed to shifting the balance of power to enable Zimbabweans to express their will in nonviolent elections. Once they can do so, and the results are enforced as in Ivory Coast, the long Zimbabwean nightmare will be brought to an end.

In Ivory Coast, such a coalition of forces blocked the authoritarian succession that Gbagbo, abetted by his wife Simone, sought to engineer. A transition to democratic rule in Ivory Coast would not have occurred without the coordinated actions of several entities: the African Union, ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), the United Nations, France, the United States, an armed movement long in control of the north of the country, and political forces led by Ouattara. In this global era, the extraversion of African countries can work for the good of the people, as the case of Ivory Coast demonstrates and while that of Zimbabwe awaits consummation.

Violence in Kenya following a disputed 2007 election was so gruesome that the international community was compelled to intervene.

Although a series of high-level missions failed to break the logjam, one led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had the tenacity, skill, and wide support to succeed. Its outcome included not only provisions for a power-sharing arrangement but also an agreement allowing the International Criminal Court to indict individuals responsible for instigating mass violence. Of signal importance, too, were steps leading to constitutional reforms approved in an August 2010 referendum.

Kenya, given its ethnic polarization and pervasive corruption, still has a long way to go in achieving a stable democratic order. Yet it has come a considerable distance since the bloodletting and forced displacements of 2008. Great political skill, and sustained international and domestic action, will be required to keep this pivotal country on a path of accelerated growth and democratic development.

NEW PYRAMIDS

A new global era has begun with the reconfiguration of pyramids of power. There is a logic to the usual power pyramid, with a supreme leader at the top and resources flowing up and down. When popular upheavals occur, the pyramid is

inverted. As exhilarating an experience as this may be, an inverted pyramid is unstable until a new political order is constituted. In some cases, the new order may simply be a refurbished version of the old one. It takes consummate skill to right the pyramid while also making the new leadership rule-bound and accountable. As Francis Fukuyama demonstrates in his extraordinary new book, *The Origins of Political Order*, at the heart of this difficult and uncertain process is institution building.

In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the pyramid of power has been inverted, somewhat ambiguously in the case of Egypt. In Egypt the secular forces that drove the revolution quickly learned that the girders of the *ancien régime* (especially the army), and those formerly opposed to it (especially the Muslim Brotherhood), will play major roles in shaping the new order. While the composition of forces in post-Ben Ali Tunisia is not yet clear, to be reckoned with is a vast security apparatus, corporate groups that benefited economically from

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the Ben Ali era, the armed forces, and provincially based interests. Libya was much more bereft of national institutions, and of organized political and civil society groups outside the regime structures, than the two other countries. So a comprehensively new pyramid of power must be constructed there.

How does sub-Saharan Africa look from this perspective? Since South Sudan gained its independence on July 9, 2011, the region has increased from 48 to 49 nominally sovereign countries. In the past two decades, the reconfiguration of power pyramids has ranged from minimal to maximal. Some, as in Mauritania, Niger, and Madagascar, have moved among democratic, authoritarian, and uncertain categories as a result of power struggles at the top. Ghana, similarly to the Botswana of Ian Khama, requires probing beneath the veil of past democratic accomplishments.

Popular support for the two major parties in Ghana is so finely balanced that the presidency can now be won or lost in just four years. But the wide discretion enjoyed by the president, persistent patrimonialism in the allocation of state resources, the ethno-regional nature of political coalitions, and the heightened incentive for gaining political office provided by new oil wealth put Ghana at risk of slippage in elections next year. International agencies have as important a role to play in helping such countries stay on track democratically as they do in bringing some back after derailments.

It is not likely that new waves of democracy will wash through sub-Saharan Africa any time soon. The political context is too varied. A particular democratic advance, or a retreat, might differ from others even in neighboring countries, so the use of only statistical approaches to gauge democratic progress can obscure more than enlighten.

In some cases, a significant advance can take the form of a reasonably fair election after several flawed contests, as in Nigeria in April 2011. In others, as in South Africa, it could be a peaceful change in leadership through party structures, as in Jacob Zuma's succession from Thabo Mbeki as head of the ANC (African National Congress) in September 2008—which effectively determined the country's next president.

Guinea, a mineral-rich nation devastated by predatory rulers for a half century—a country that was becoming a base for international drug-trafficking—was able in 2010 to elect a civilian president and win a chance at a wholly new start.

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Or the advance might take the form of the Kenyan 2010 referendum to enact a new constitution—an outcome of negotiated compromises among political factions, a process conducted without the ugly interethnic clashes of 2008. These are steps of profound importance for the countries concerned even if they do not constitute a pattern across a vast continent.

CLAIMING DEMOCRACY

Federalism in certain cases could provide mechanisms for sharing and dispersing power within the “geographical entities” bequeathed by colonialism. Most countries now opt for centralized systems that respond to the need for order while increasing the risk of reconfigured autocracy. Nigeria today has the only true federation in Africa.

Several Nigerian states are taking advantage of the opportunity to construct pyramids of power that reflect Fukuyama’s core tenets: effective state capacity, law-based governance, and public accountability. Furthermore, these dispersed power centers can be Sklarian constructs with “the authoritative allocation of values” shared by traditional and religious authorities, professional and civic organizations, and governmental entities. Unfortunately, however, most Nigerian government units have not yet risen above what the Nigerian journalist Emeka Izeze calls “the mediocre level of petty roguery and money sharing.”

The response to this challenge is what Michigan State University’s Michael Bratton and Carolyn Logan—in their chapter in my edited book, *Smart Aid for African Development* (2008)—have described as “claiming democracy.” Armed with innumerable cell phones, conventional and social media, and access to abundant civil society groups, Nigerians are becoming increasingly empowered.

At the forefront internationally of “claiming democracy” is India, with experiments under way

in several states to make government officials more accountable to local communities. This social movement has culminated in successful protests led by the activist Anna Hazare to compel India’s parliament to create a powerful new anti-corruption agency.

Everything that has motivated the Indian social movement is present in Nigeria. While Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has brought many office holders to account and has recovered substantial sums, it lacks the power and independence that India’s new anticorruption agency will possess.

In Nigeria, terrorist acts and violent upheavals multiply the challenges confronting President Goodluck Jonathan’s government and the project of democracy building. Widespread poverty caused by decades of predatory governance has created pools of ready recruits for Islamic extremism. Around the city of Jos in the Middle Belt area, disputes over land, ethnicity, religion, and politics coalesce to produce riptides of mass slaughter.

As Ben Ali flees, Mubarak is brought to trial in a cage, Gbagbo is driven from his bunker, and Qaddafi’s tyranny is extinguished, the writing is on the wall for Africa’s entrenched strongmen. But removing them is not enough. Just as daunting a task is establishing law-based states and political institutions that actually improve social welfare.

Sustained progress in the region will depend on what Fukuyama calls “the long, costly, laborious, and difficult process of institution building.” And, as Sklar long ago advised, major institutions of governance will continue to have democratic, oligarchic, and autocratic features. Understanding these configurations, and how they can be tilted toward empowering the demos, is a challenge to be met by political actors as well as by those who study these evolving systems. ■