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Benin's stealthy democracide

How Africa's model democracy kills itself bit by bit

DIRK KOHNERT¹, HANS-JOACHIM PREUSS²

Abstract: A 'democratic recession' is to be observed, which is not restricted to Sub-Sahara Africa. It went along with the rise of populist new nationalism and lack of regard of the concerned for the need to defend democracy actively. On the other hand, recent examples of African social movements that successfully campaigned for a democratic renaissance in Africa and elsewhere are promising indicators of progressive social forces that counteract global trends of the resurgence of right-wing nationalism and autocratic rule.

Résumé : On observe une « récession démocratique » qui ne se limite pas à l'Afrique subsaharienne. Cela a coïncidé avec la montée d'un nouveau nationalisme populiste et le manque de vigilance des personnes concernées quant à la nécessité de défendre activement la démocratie. D'autre part, des exemples récents de mouvements sociaux africains qui ont mené avec succès une renaissance démocratique en Afrique et ailleurs sont des indicateurs prometteurs de forces sociales progressistes qui vont à l'encontre des tendances mondiales à la résurgence d'un nationalisme de droite et des régimes autocratiques.

Zusammenfassung : Es ist eine "demokratische Rezession" zu beobachten, die sich nicht nur auf Afrika südlich der Sahara beschränkt. Dies geht einher mit dem Aufkommen eines populistischen neuen Nationalismus und dem mangelnden Augenmerk auf die Notwendigkeit, die Demokratie aktiv zu verteidigen. Andererseits sind afrikanische soziale Bewegungen, die sich erfolgreich für eine demokratische Renaissance in Afrika und anderswo einsetzen, vielversprechende Indikatoren für fortschrittliche soziale Kräfte, die globalen Trends des Wiederauflebens eines rechten Nationalismus und autokratischer Herrschaft entgegenwirken.

Keywords: Democratization, democratic institutions, democratic recession, Africa, Benin, Senegal, Togo, social movements.

JEL-Code: F35, K15, K16, N47, N97, Z13

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s and the “[second wind of change](#)” in Africa (Engel *et al.* 1996), the tiny West African Republic of Benin, labelled the *Quartier Latin* of Francophone Africa, has been regarded as a model democracy for the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, Benin made history by becoming the first African country to overthrow a military dictator by democratic means (Kohnert & Preuss 1992: 70). The concept of a [Sovereign National Conference](#) of representatives of all active forces of the Nation became a model for a peaceful transition to follow in the whole of Francophone Africa and beyond (Brown & Kaiser 2007; Eboussi Boulaga 2009; Gisselquist 2008; Heilbrunn 1995; Kohnert 1997; Ngenge 2019).

This image of Benin has recently changed radically within three months. Inside and outside the country, people are stunned after the ‘exclusive’ parliamentary elections of April 2019: The “*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*” complains: “Benin - a former model state is becoming a sham democracy” (Burri 2019). “*Africa confidential*” (2019) is laconically accusing the current president: “Talon turns back the clock”. “The fatal trap?”, asks the Civic Academy for Africa's Future (CIAAF 2019). These are just a few of the reactions from inside and outside the country that illustrate how much hopes for further democratic development have been disappointed. What had happened?

2. “EXCLUSIVE” PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN 2019: THE END OF AFRICA’S MODEL DEMOCRACY?

On 28 April 2019, five million voters were called upon to elect the deputies for the “*Assemblée Nationale*”, the Beninese parliament. The 83 elected representatives belong to two parties, the “*Bloc Républicain*” and the “*Union Progressiste*”. Both groups – in their respective party constellations until the change of the Charter of the Political Parties - are close to current President Patrice Talon and have supported his government since he took office in 2016.³ Excluded from the elections were five other (mostly opposition) parties, which - according to the verdict of the state election authority, the Autonomous National Electoral Commission ([CENA](#)) - had not qualified sufficiently for participation. In the run-up to the ballot, this sparked a passionate public debate. If one believes Beninese intellectuals, there has been no comparable crisis of democracy since the overcoming of the ‘Marxist-Leninist’ one-party state 30 years ago and the introduction of democratic institutions. Many fear that the President, with the help of the parliamentary groups that support him, will be able to decide on all constitutional amendments in the future to secure more presidential rights and thus greater power in the implementation of the reforms he is striving for. In the past, attempts in this direction had failed because of the resistance in parliament and the constitutional court, which were afraid of the head of state’s overpowering supremacy.

The President himself does not see democracy at risk. On the one hand, he said before the elections that there will be other elections in the next few years (2020 communal elections,

³ We draw heavily from the article of Preuss (2019a).

2021 presidential elections), in which an opposition that may then have become stronger will be able to participate. On the other hand, he argued that the two blocs admitted to the elections were formed by a large number of different parties so that a certain representativeness was still maintained. And finally, he held that life would go on without the excluded parties anyway.⁴

How did it get this far? In the beginning, there was, firstly, a change to the Charter of Political Parties adopted by the [National Assembly](#) in July 2018 (Présidence de la République 2018a). The laudable objective of the reform was to anchor the political parties more broadly on the entire national territory and thus to achieve a higher threshold for ethnically or regionally oriented associations. This was to be achieved primarily by recruiting 15 "founding members" in each community, i.e. 1,155 "*membres fondateurs*" per party nationwide.

In September 2018, the deputies then, secondly, adopted the new electoral law (Présidence de la République 2018b). The aim here was to end the fragmentation of the party landscape (more than 200 parties to date) and to promote the formation of larger political blocs (BBC 2019). From the 397 paragraphs of the law, it stands out that each party must achieve at least 10 % of all votes to win seats in the National Assembly. Moreover, the deposit of the equivalent of about 380,000 € is required as a prerequisite for admission to the election.

Thirdly, in February 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled that the parties must submit a "Certificate of Conformity", issued by the Ministry of the Interior (Commission Electorale Nationale Autonome 2019), in addition to the documents to be submitted to the electoral authority. As a result of the examination of the candidatures by the electoral authority, only two parties were accepted, whose documents were allegedly marked by "minor irregularities" only. The documents of all other competitors apparently showed intolerable deficits, which led to their disqualification.⁵

Attempts to resolve the situation prior to the ballot have taken place on many levels. Neither the President nor the Constitutional Court saw themselves in a position to contribute to greater representativeness of the ballot through their own interventions. The National Assembly was also unable to do anything: In principle, a consensual exegesis of the laws and ordinances by parliament would - following the constitution - have allowed modifications to the admission of the parties. But the opposition and the presidential "*Bloc Majoritaire*" did not want to agree on a flexible interpretation of electoral law or to change existing laws in favour of an "inclusive" election. Both sides remained unyielding; "gambled away", some say; "perfidiously hatched", others complain. Thus, the election day came with no real choice for the voters.

To prevent a threatened boycott of larger sections of the population, the government's newspaper "*La Nation*" published a precautionary article two days before the elections, threatening each person with imprisonment and fines who incites others to abstain from voting, possibly using "false information" (*La Nation* 2019). On election day itself, the Internet was shut down without giving any reason (Amnesty International 2019). After all, the "exclusive" election

⁴ President Patrice Talon in „*Le moment politique*“, a Beninese television programme (Youtube 2019).

⁵ On 21.2.2019, the German Broadcasting Corporation „*Deutsche Welle*“ in its French channel reported about controversies and irregularities (*Deutsche Welle* 2019). For details for each party see Finogbé (2019: 1).

and the opposing position of many well-known personalities in public life seems to have prevented many citizens from voting (*Le Monde* 2019): According to the electoral authority, voter turnout was well below 30 %, which compared unfavourably with over 66 % in the last parliamentary elections. In fact, the turn-out was at its lowest level since the democratic renewal in 1990.⁶

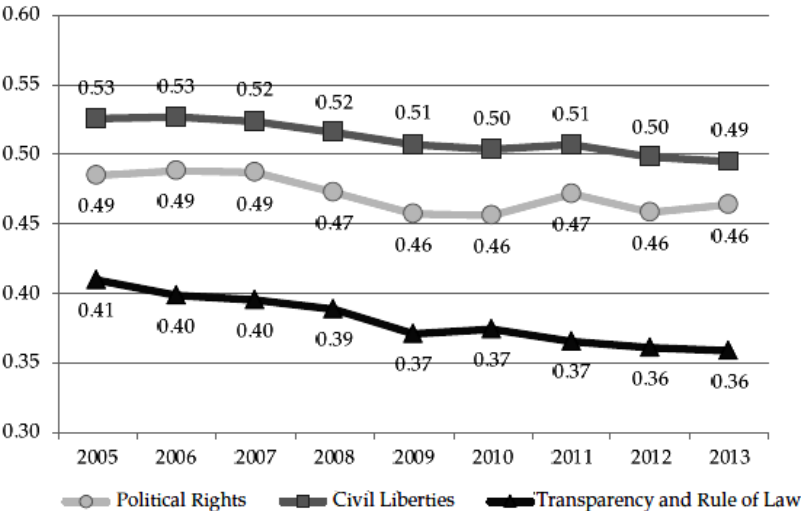
In the weeks after the elections, civil unrest and violence broke out in several parts of the country leading to fatal incidents and the detention of several adversaries to the government. Attempts by local fief holders, religious leaders and elder statesmen from other West African countries to solve the post-electoral crisis have not yet lead to viable results.

Thus, the elections in Benin took place for the first time since the end of the dictatorship and the subsequent "*renouveau démocratique*" under exclusion of the opposition. Is the "Benin model" at its end, an example which, despite the little geopolitical and economic importance of the country with only eleven million inhabitants, inspired many other democratic movements in Africa? The democracy: "*en panne*"? Social peace: endangered?

3. THE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS BEHIND A CONSTITUTIONAL FAÇADE

The domestic political development of the past 30 years in Benin shows signs of a decline in democratic achievements that did not begin with the assumption of office by the current president in 2016. Rather, creeping erosion of democracy can be observed. This corresponds to a lengthy worldwide ‘*democratic recession*’ since about 2006, which has been observed also by Diamond (2015) and others (Wantchekon 2017). Since a decade, established democracies increasingly perform poorly and show a lack of will and self-confidence to promote democracy effectively (Diamond 2015: 144).

Graph 1: Freedom and Governance Trends in Africa, 2005–13



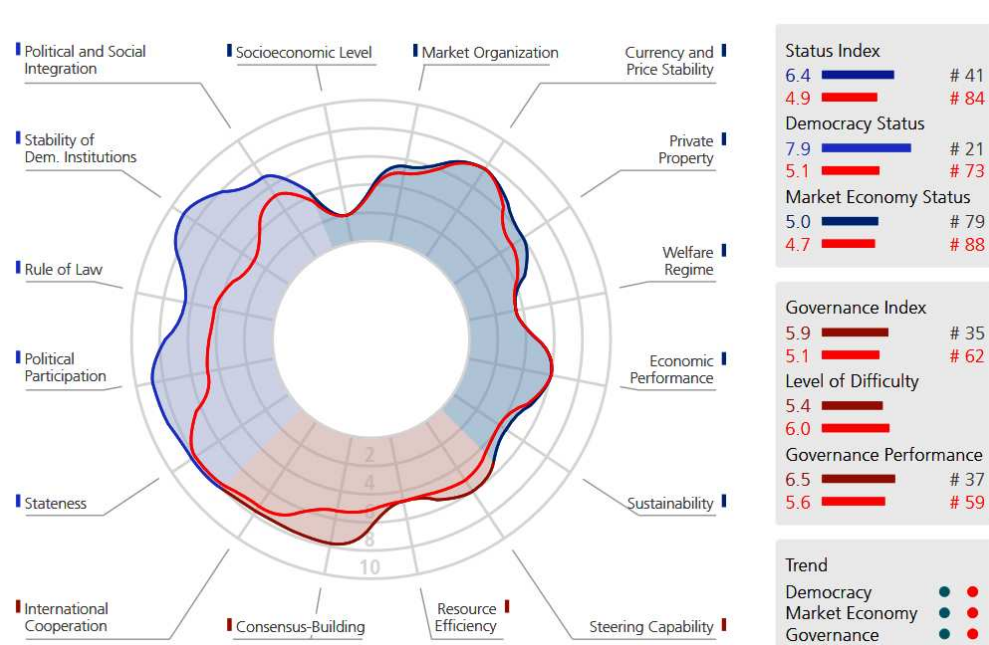
Source: Diamond 2015: 149

⁶ The National Commission for Elections (CENA) had initially stated 23 %; this rate was later increased to 27 % by the Constitutional Court (cf. *Banouto* 2019).

The decline in the quality of democratic institutions and freedom scores apparently was especially pronounced in Africa, whereby the pace of decay in democratic institutions may even have been underestimated because it was not always evident to outside observers. One of the main reasons for this decline was the especially poor performance in good governance (the rule of law and transparency) which was even worse than the deterioration in political rights and civil liberties (Diamond 2015: 148; see graph 1). Poor governance in Sub-Saharan Africa was closely linked with the resurgence of ‘[neo-patrimonialism](#)’, that is with autocratic leaders, supported by the ruling parties, who wanted to amass political and economic power for themselves, their clans and supporters. They relied – often virtually unopposed - on getting away with eroding checks and balances, undermining institutions of accountability, exceeding presidential term limits etc. (Diamond 2015: 149, 151-152). This is in stark contrast to the general high esteem many Africans have for Western-style multi-party democracy, political accountability, rule of law and transparency (Diamond 2015: 153).

Diamond's analysis was complemented and deepened by Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) in their publication "How democracies die". In their thought-provoking study, they showed that democracies, e.g. in Europe and South America, did not die from violent coups, but more commonly from a gradual slide into authoritarianism by steadily reducing civil liberties, restricting the diversity of press and opinion, and changing the rules in favour of the current rulers. Moreover, democracies don't die just by themselves, as a rule, they are killed (Jones 2018). There must be actors responsible for it!

Graph 2: [Benin compared with Togo](#)



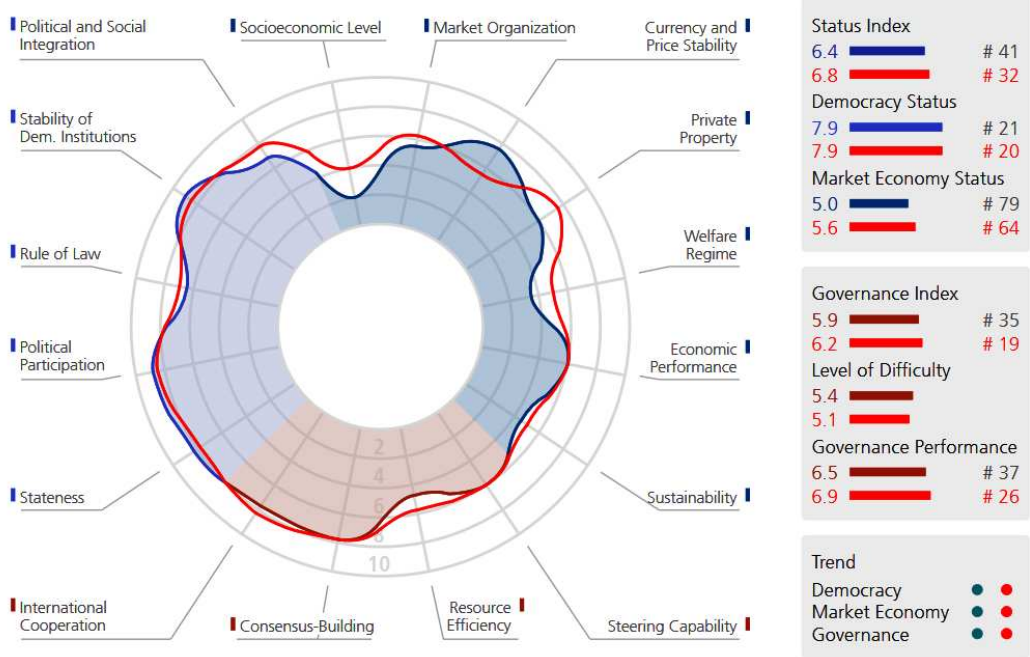
Source: [BTI \(2018\)](#) – Benin = blue, Togo = red

Parallels are obvious, although Benin compared still favourably with neighbouring West African states like Togo until 2018. Benin matched rather with Ghana or Senegal, as demonstrated by the [Bertelsmann Transformation Index](#) (BTI) country reports 2018 (BTI 2018).

Although the BTI Benin country report of 2018 confirmed still that Benin counted among the most stable democratic systems in West Africa, and confirmed that its democratic institutions in the country function well, at least at the national level ([BTI-Benin 2018, chapter 4: 4 Stability of Democratic Institutions](#)), things apparently deteriorated partly unnoticed in between.

In Benin, the right to strike has been curtailed for a year now. The dismissal of civil servants and state employees has also been made easier. With the ban on the print edition of "[La Nouvelle Tribune](#)" in 2018, the country's most widely read critical newspaper, the press has lost a prestigious voice. In the 2019 Annual Report of [Reporters sans Frontières](#), Benin, that ranked 84th a year ago, fell twelve places to rank 96 of a total of 180 countries (Reporters sans frontières 2019). The most recent Africa Media Barometer Benin (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2019) states: "Self-censorship is a common practice among journalists and results from different forms of pressure that they are subject to, including pressure from their supervisors and their employers." According to the current report by [Freedom House](#), Benin is still considered "free", but in 2018 it had to give up three more points of its 82 held so far (Freedom House 2019).

Graph 3: [Benin compared with Ghana](#)



Source: [BTI \(2018\)](#) – Benin = blue, Ghana = red

The decisive factors for this downgrade were that in June 2018 President Talon appointed his personal lawyer as President of the [Constitutional Court](#), that the right to strike was severely restricted, and that the president's worst political rival, Sébastien Ajavon, was sentenced *in absentia* to 20 years in prison. This sentence has not yet been revoked despite a ruling to the contrary by the [African Court of Human Rights](#) in Arusha, Tanzania. [Mo Ibrahim](#), well known for his support to good governance in Africa, condemns the present state of democracy in Benin and the role of its president with harsh words: "What he is doing against his oppo-

nents is deplorable. He is supposed to be a sophisticated man, a great entrepreneur, a liberal, both economically and politically. How did he turn into a dictator?"⁷

However, both democratization as well as economic recovery, have been hampered since the beginning by the underlying fabric of socio-cultural neo-patrimonial structures of clientelism and patronage, i.e. of vested interests of the power elite and rival strategic groups. Our statement of 1992 still holds today: As long as the material and socio-cultural development of the country has not progressed so far that politicians and their electorate can act independently of patronage relations and rent-seeking from foreign aid or other sources, a real democratization of Beninese society, which is based on Western models, is not to be expected (Kohnert & Preuss 1992: 66-67). To discuss the erosion of democratic institutions in Benin we will examine in the following section what happened to parliamentarianism in Benin since 1990, whether the separation of powers was effective, to what extent freedom of association was granted, and how freedom of expression was undermined step by step in the past.

3.1 *Many parties are no indicator of more democracy or strong parliamentarianism*

The constitution of December 1990 established an outstanding legal framework for a presidential multiparty system in Benin (Kohnert 1997). The proliferation of political parties in the following decades reached such dimensions that it was questionable whether all of these parties served the interest of the development of the country or whether they worked mainly for the pursuit of personal interests of their leaders, considered to be their private property.⁸ This the more so, because political "[transhumance](#)", i.e. political nomadism from one party affiliation to another, depending on the attractiveness of 'pastures', irrespective of the political program, has been common. In consequence, political groupings in Benin tended to be fluid and fast-changing (EIU 2018: 12).⁹

Since the democratic renewal, there have been more than 30 years of regular elections at the local and national level for the election of local councils, parliament and the presidency. The number of political parties has multiplied, but few structures have survived at the national level. Rather, public figures, known for their international experience, political profile or economic success form groups under their leadership. Their political program, if any, depends on the occasionally volatile orientation of their leaders.

Once elected to the National Assembly, these groups form larger blocs, mostly as a result of a negotiation process between the respective leaders and the current president. All heads of state of the Benin republic have thus far been able to secure the necessary majority for legisla-

⁷ Interview led by Sylvestre-Treiner (2019: 24). Original quote: "Ce qu'il fait contre ses opposants est déplorable. Il est censé d'être un homme sophistiqué, un grand entrepreneur, un libéral, tant d'un point de vue économique que politique. Comment s'est-il transformé en dictateur?" (English Translation by the authors).

⁸ A detailed analysis of the failures of the 'political system' in Benin from the perspective of the pro-presidential faction was given by [Lazare Séhouéto](#), minister under President Mathieu Kérékou, and one of the four candidates of the *Force Clé* elected in the 2007 parliamentary election, now one of the speakers of Patrice Talon, on occasion of the vote on the new electoral code. In particular, he explained his view on topics such as tax clearance, partisan system, bonds to be a candidate in the presidential election (ORTB 2018).

⁹ Afize Adamon provides an in-depth analysis of what happened between 1990 and 2015 in the National Assembly (cf. Adamon & Amoussou 2016; Adamon 2016).

tive proposals or personnel decisions. The [National Assembly's](#) own initiatives are rare, compared to those of the government. As a rule, members of parliament have no trained staff who can competently deal with political, economic, social or other issues. The parliament also does not have a technical apparatus that could support the representatives in their tasks.

The confidence of Benin's citizens in political parties and their elected representatives is relatively low. A representative survey conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2018 found that only 21 % of those surveyed had some or a great deal of confidence in the work of political parties. After all, just 40 % trust the National Assembly to deal with their priority problems (Preuss 2019b, forthcoming).¹⁰ Parties and parliament thus have neither the personnel nor the brainpower to critically accompany the work of the government. Their support among the population is low.

3.2 *The judiciary does not control political power effectively*

In functioning democracies, the judiciary represents an important corrective to securing the rule of law in government and administration. In Benin, the most important organizations are the Constitutional Court in Cotonou and the Supreme Court in the capital Porto Novo, which have the power to stop the executive branch. The members of these bodies are elected by Parliament and the President for a five-year term each; they may be re-elected once.

To exert their function, they must be independent of government. In small countries like Benin, it is almost impossible for members of the local elites not to know each other, because they have visited the same schools and universities, served in the same institutions, or have family and/or professional relationships. Thus, networks play an important role. Stroh (2018: 600-615) describes to what extent Benin's presidents have used their nomination power between 1993 and 2013 to "streamline" the highest courts of their country using a social network analysis tool that analyses personal relationships between politicians in power and judges in the Constitutional Court. He identified an ever-increasing closeness between the presidential camp and the judges in office. Thus, under the second term of President Talon's predecessor Boni Yayi, there were no more judges who could be attributed to the opposition. And despite the fact that a profound analysis of the new Constitutional Court which took office in 2018 is still pending it can be predicted that this institution led by the former Minister of Justice and personal advocate of President Talon will not easily win credibility and reputation.¹¹

A growing number of "political" sentences by various high courts during the last months contribute to the impression that the judiciary is less and less independent and serves as an instrument of the government to exclude opposing forces and persons from power. One recent example is the verdict against Lionel Zinsou, one of the competitors of President Talon in the

¹⁰ A recent study of Afrobaromètre supports this perception, insofar as only 29 % of Beninese citizens identify themselves with a political party (cf. Bratton & Bhoojedor 2019: 18).

¹¹ Laleye (2018) in a recent publication on the history of the Constitutional Court from 1990 up to now concludes that Benin "has instituted a judge who has become a feudal prosecutor".

2016 presidential elections, who was sentenced for forgery and exceeding campaign expenses to five years ineligibility and six years in prison in August 2019 without any proof of the allegations made. With the changes described above, the judiciary is obviously neither willing nor in a position to oppose any unconstitutional action by the government.

3.3 Freedom of coalition: lack of politically interested civil society organisations and powerful trade unions

Although Benin has had a strong tradition of blossoming civil society organisations (CSOs) and trade unions dating back up to the times of the Marxist-Leninist [Kérékou](#) regime, as well as a Catholic Church that intervened in the process of democratization in decisive moments like the advent of the [Sovereign National Conference](#) in 1990, the freedom of coalition has been endangered in recent years. This is due to a great extent to the increasing formalization and bureaucratization of associative activity in the country which has been promoted by the ruling parties under the reign of Boni Yayi and Patrice Talon. Although the Beninese are proud of their associative competence and activity that climaxed in the peaceful overturn of the Kérékou government by a populist mass-movement they apparently have become less interested to actively defend the democratic achievements of the past decades and concentrate on humanitarian and charitable activities.

Still in 2013, CSOs like the Citizens' Alternative coalition, employing their so-called Red Wednesday demonstrations, successfully defended the legal presidential two-term limit set by the constitution against the intention of Boni Yayi to extend it (BTI 2018. Benin country report, Chapter: Governance - I. Level of Difficulty). Prominent actors of civil society and social media are often lured into profitable positions by the government. Although this practice started already under the reign of Boni Yayi, it has been perfected by the government of Patrice Talon who came to power last, but not least, because of the support of [CSOs](#). Thus, a CSO led by the professor Joseph Djogbénou mutated into a political party and played a major role during the 2016 presidential elections (BTI 2018).

Trade Unions do not have a strong position as the workers, employees and civil servants they represent are a minority compared to the mass of workers and self-employed people in the informal sector. However, strikes of teachers, health personnel and judges could heavily influence the functioning of government facilities in the past. Trade union rights are enshrined in the Beninese Constitution, labour law and civil service law. They guarantee freedom of association and allow all workers to form or join trade unions. Despite this clear legal framework, the reality in Benin is now different. After 2017, two new laws were passed due to repeated strikes in the civil service of the country, which make it considerably more difficult to represent the interests of employees. E.g., the limitation of the duration of strikes to a maximum of ten days per year is a significant restriction on the rights granted by the Constitution. And the law on the conclusion and termination of employment contracts, which aims to make the labour market more flexible and encourage foreign investment, calls into question the job security of workers and intimidates even members of trade unions. Since the democratic reconstruction of the country, there have been no comparable restrictions on trade union rights.

If proof of the weakness of the Beninese trade unions was needed, the more or less conflict-free enforcement of these laws and regulations is an eloquent expression of the inability of workers' representatives to demand their rights.

Demonstrations that previously only had to be registered must now be approved by the local authorities. The first victim of this change was the communist trade union, which naturally wanted to carry out its traditional procession on 1 May. After a tear gas operation by the police, the event was over. Civil society and trade unions as important actors for democracy and civil rights have thus been weakened considerably during the previous years.

3.4 *Freedom of expression: high diversity of opinions ceased to exist*

In Benin, most people still rely on radio and TV for their information ([Afrobarometer 2019](#)) because many citizens cannot read and the print-media is mostly restricted to urban areas. Whereas TV is restricted to urban areas, radio reception covers about 80 % of the national territory. Yet, the new social media are advancing fast because of a relatively high penetration rate of mobile phones (45 % in 2017; cf. [GSMA Intelligence 2017](#)). However, since the implementation of the Intelligence Act (Présidence de la République 2018c), the fear spread that one could be wiretapped by the security services. A fear that concerned not only journalists and whistleblowers but also ordinary citizens and even government officials. An increasing number of citizens, therefore, use more secure applications such as *Signal* and *WhatsApp*. Yet, the concerned public knows very well that in the case of need, public authorities would not refrain from blocking sites hosted within the country through the long-established operator [Benin Telecom](#) (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2019).

Benin has a vibrant media landscape, largely restricted to urban areas, including two public, seven private TV- as well as over 50 radio stations and more than 170 newspapers. However, many of the media refrain from openly criticizing the government because of fear of reprisal. In 2015 already, the National Assembly passed a law that reintroduced the offence of "insulting the majesty", i.e. making a violation of the very broad personal rights of the president and other official representatives of the government a punishable offence (Assemblée Nationale 2015).

However, it has to be admitted that the professional ethics of Benin's journalists still leave a lot to be desired. They frequently mix facts and opinions. They are supervised by the [Media Ethics Observatory \(ODEM\)](#), created in 1999 that has the task to enforce the Code of Ethics, which will be revised in 2019. The [High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication \(HAAC\)](#), a quasi-governmental institution, has the somewhat contradictory role of both guaranteeing freedom of expression of the media, but also as a watchdog to prevent the press from behaving in an "irresponsible" or "destabilizing" way (US Department of State 2019: 7-8). In case of doubt, it is more likely that it reacts in a government-friendly way.

In recent years, the citizen's respect for the HAAC declined because it has lost its impartiality according to public opinion, last, but not least, because of the peculiarities of appointment of

members of the institution which has been biased in favour of the head of state (BTI 2018). Thus, on 24 May 2018, the HAAC suspended the daily newspaper [La Nouvelle Tribune](#) for publishing “abusive, outrageous, detrimental, and intrusive” information on the president’s private life (ibid). The base and background for these harsh measures apparently was the re-introduction of the offence of insult of the President into the Penal Code (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2019). Another case of muffling the media occurred already in 2016 when the HAAC suspended the TV station [Sikka TV](#). This decision was revoked by the Court of Cotonou in May 2107, but the Court forbade Sikka TV to resume direct broadcasting. Nevertheless, it continued broadcasting via satellite and internet (ibid). The creation of websites offering broadcasting and written media has to be formally authorised by the HAAC, however, this authorization is not required for creating and hosting blogs.

3.5 *Civil rights and democracy in Benin: more illusion than reality*

On the surface, democratic institutions and civil rights are respected in Benin. But behind a beautiful façade, the limits of civil liberties and shortcomings in governance become apparent, which attest to the considerable shortcomings of the Benin model. In the next section we will examine whether the existing system has at least made economic progress possible for the population.

4 A DEMOCRATIC DIVIDEND FOR THE POPULATION NOT IN SIGHT

[Mo Ibrahim](#), the promoter of good governance in Africa unveiled in an interview what he thinks democracy signifies for poor people: “When a woman fails to feed her family, do you really think she is concerned about democracy in her country first? I don't think so. Her problem is first of all to eat, to educate her children, to get her husband treated. Democracy only comes after that.”¹²

Is democracy something that has had a positive impact on Benin's population, in particular, the poorer strata? In general terms, inclusive economic development should generate the following outcomes: i) increasing the productivity of labour, ii) enhancing the quality of life of poor people by granting them access to productive resources and social services e.g. health services, drinking water, sanitation, and education; iii) narrowing the gender gap; iv) assuring the sustainability of the economy and the environment. What is the record of Benin’s governments since 1990, and does there exist a significant difference in this respect to other developing countries in Africa?

Benin remains at the bottom of international social and economic indices. Foreign outstanding debts, which were considerably reduced following debt relief through the [HIPC initiative](#), are

¹² Interview led by Sylvestre-Treiner (2019: 22-25). Original quote: "Lorsqu'une femme ne parvient pas à nourrir sa famille, pensez-vous vraiment qu'elle se préoccupe d'abord de la démocratie dans son pays? Je ne crois pas. Son problème, c'est d'abord de manger, de scolariser ses enfants, de faire soigner son mari. La démocratie, cela ne vient qu'après" (English translation by the authors).

growing again, even though the burden of debt service is currently still low (World Bank 2018; African Development Bank 2019: 19) and well below West African average. The effects of a partially dynamic economic development have been partially compensated by population growth; the remainder of the surplus is distributed to members of a growing middle class, especially in the urban centres in Southern Benin. In recent years, distributional inequality in the country has continued to rise: The [Gini index](#) as a measure of inequality rose from 38.6 in 2003 to 47.8 in 2015 and is one of the highest in West Africa (World Bank 2019).

There is not much to distribute: the government expenditure (2018) is approximately 2,1 bn Euros (this amount corresponds to the annual budget of the city of Hanover in Germany) of which more than 50 % is spent on the salaries and pensions of (retired) state employees, subsidies for state firms and decentralised entities, and the interest for outstanding debts (Direction Générale du Budget 2018). The budget deficit went down to 20 %, much lower than in previous years, and thus confirmed Benin's fiscal consolidation path, bringing the country in compliance with the West African Economic and Monetary Union's ([WAEMU](#)) convergence criterion of 3 % of GDP (IMF 2019).

Benin's state social policy is modest. Education and health expenditures (23 % and 7 %, respectively) are inadequate, as in most of its neighbouring peers of the WAEMU. Greater public spending efficiency and a more equitable geographical distribution of resources would pave the way for lower poverty rates and more inclusive growth (World Bank 2019). A minimum wage is fixed: it is 45,000 CFA francs per month (approx. 68 €) and thus hardly exceeds the two-US Dollar limit per day, which is considered the definition of extreme poverty. Also, most people do not benefit from this because they are informally employed or engaged in subsistence farming.

State requirements regarding working hours or health standards are rarely enforced. Progress has been made in school policy. School enrolment has been significantly increased in the last decade, reducing child labour. This is particularly relevant since Benin still had an enormously high proportion of illiterate students in 2015, at 61.6 % of the population. The older population over 60, in particular, has hardly developed any literacy skills, which has brought the country to an inglorious seventh place on the global country index in terms of illiteracy rates. The overall picture remains gloomy, especially as regards the increasing share of extreme poverty and malnutrition. All in all, Benin numbers among Africa's relative winners in economic growth, but growth is not inclusive. The state is only marginally capable to fulfil its social obligation to society as a whole and is mainly relying on the formal sector. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index for Benin (BTI 2018) rates states welfare policy as three (out of ten) and socioeconomic transformation even lower as two.

5 REMEDIES: A NEW CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY OR JUST GOOD GOVERNANCE ?

Since the call for an [African Renaissance](#) by [Thabo Mbeki](#) in 1998 'African' solutions became fashionable again to answer problems of the second wave of democratization in Africa.

One of its key intellectual advocates was the renowned Kenyan historian, philosopher and political writer, late [Ali A. Mazrui](#), director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University (New York), and of the Center for Afro-American and African Studies, Michigan University. In his publications on the African *democracide* (Mazrui & Wiafe-Amoako 2015: 17)¹³ he put forward a concept of a cultural re-adjustment of African institutions to counteract the ‘murder’ of democracy and to promote true democratic development in Africa.

According to Mazrui “democracy in Africa was killed by multiple assassins” (Mazrui & Wiafe-Amoako 2015: 17). First, and foremost by “*the spy who came in from the cold*”, i.e. Western powers who pampered African autocratic regimes in the times of the Cold War as long as they joined the ranks of the global crusade against ‘communism’. However, according to him, the most crucial problem to be solved would be a cultural re-adjustment (Mazrui & Wiafe-Amoako 2015: 24), including an Africanisation of laws and rules about corruption and nepotism. Certain forms of ethnic nepotism should be handled with a greater understanding for African customs. They should not be generally outlawed but regulated while tougher penalties for bribery would be needed (Mazrui & Wiafe-Amoako 2015: 21). Moreover, he deplores that African democracies mostly do not honour sufficiently their cultural heritage. Instead, African democracy should be firmly rooted in its indigenous religion. It should come out openly and include African traditional beliefs for example in curriculums of schools, celebrate public religious holidays dedicated to African religions, etc. to render African democracy more viable and sustainable (Mazrui & Wiafe-Amoako 2015: 21).

In so far as this call for a cultural re-adjustment concerns the recognition of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic distinctions as well as certain collective-, in addition to individual rights, it would be shared by other scholars too (Fye & Senghor 2016). Path-breaking re-adjustments of autocratic regimes in Africa by [Sovereign National Conferences](#), for example, have been widely recognised as unique, popular and inclusive, i.e. typically African representations of the general (public) will (*volonté générale* in French political philosophy) of the people. This would offer more sustainable solutions than to blindly following democratic multi-party elections according to the Western model. An Africanization of democracy has been demanded also by Rocha & Khuon (2018) concerning a better control of good governance and accountability by other legitimate means of democratic control through ‘democratic projects’, like enhanced involvement of Civil Society Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa.

However, beyond these commonly shared arenas of legitimate public decision-making as a facilitator of sustainable democratization, Mazrui’s call for an Africanised cultural re-adjustment becomes highly problematic, if not delusive. You only have to recall the wave of autocratization of African regimes, for example by the notorious despots [Mobutu Sese Seko](#) (Congo), [Eyadéma Gnassingbé](#) (Togo) and Gabon’s [Omar Bongo](#), under the cover of [Africanization](#)- and [Authenticité](#)-campaigns in the 1970s (Adelman 1975; Senghor 2009). In Benin autocratization with recourse to use and customs became infamous as well when dictator [Mathieu Kérékou](#) re-labelled the former French colony [Dahomey](#) to a supposedly ‘Marxist-

¹³ The quoted text is the updated version of a former article by Mazrui (2002: 15-23).

Leninist' Republic of [Bénin](#). Later on, in the aftermath of the second democratization of Africa, the politics of Africanization were again misused by autocrats to legitimate their ambitions as showed in the following, taking three examples from West Africa, Benin, Togo, and Senegal.

On the other hand, there are recent examples of African social movements of overwhelmingly young activists who successfully campaigned for a democratic renaissance in Africa, like [Y'en a marre](#) (Senegal) and [Balai citoyen](#) in Burkina Faso. Therefore, an additional focus will be on the question whether these social movements or other African initiatives, like the [New Partnership for Africa's Development](#) (NEPAD) and the [African Peer Review Mechanism](#) (APRM) implemented within the framework of NEPAD in 2003, could provide the right answers to counter global trends for the resurgence of right-wing nationalism and autocratic rule. This is of considerable importance, because the [new nationalism](#) in Africa and elsewhere contributes directly to the stealthy democraicide. It shows remarkable differences both in its roots and its impact, compared with the surge of patriotic feelings of the national independence movements of the early 1960s. Contrary to the 'first' nationalism, the 'second' is less prone to include, tending rather exclude populations. Alienation, xenophobia and its political instrumentalization are its curses. The new nationalism has been shaped decisively by the consequences of globalisation and by the increasing cleavage between the poor and the rich. Nowadays, structures of nationalism and nation-states differ more than in the past. Frequently, the new nationalism is rooted in populist grass-roots movements which do not necessarily share the same interest as the ruling class or the state. This makes for its extraordinary political and social ambiguity and brisance (Kohnert 2009).

6. CASE STUDIES OF BENIN, TOGO AND SENEGAL

6.1 Benin

In Benin, democratic renewal had been promoted by a 'return of the religious' (Kohnert 2007). Sure, it would be misleading to put the blame for lacking development and democratization in Africa on the cultural heritage, as supposedly incorporated in 'traditional African institutions', which are frequently considered in a simplistic and deterministic manner as a customary barrier to democratization or economic growth (Kohnert 2011: 4). A significant number of democratization processes were inspired by popular religious movements for democratization and human rights, as by the liberation theology in Latin America since the 1970s. An enlightened [vodun](#) (including its Afro-American equivalent), combined with related different denominations of Christian orientation, can have positive effects on democratic transition and empowerment of the poor. Benin was the first African country to recognise by law its African traditional religion [vodun](#) as an integral part of Benin's cultural heritage under president Nicéphore Soglo in 1991 (Kohnert 2007; Crofford 2015). It is held to be a prime example of a democratic renewal promoted by religious institutions with the prominent part of the Archbishop of Cotonou in the [Sovereign National Conference](#) of 1990, supported by representatives of all institutions of the country, including chief priests of the vodun communities (May-

rargue 1997; Kohnert 2007). However, whether the recourse to vodun has aided the democratization process to become sustainable is open to question. In the end, both presidents, Soglo and Kérékou, who instrumentalised vodun as means of political mobilization for their particular interests, did not promote democratization but rather the contrary (Kadya Tall 1995; Mayrargue 1997; Kohnert 2011). Later on, however, Benin politics were reduced to the "survival (or 'consolidation') of minimal democracy", as Gisselquist (2018: 790) called it euphemistically.

The logic of political power requires that the use of traditional African politic-magic belief systems to enhance one's political standing implies necessarily too to pay respect to these institutions to the detriment of democratic legitimacy (Kadya Tall 1995: 207). Thus, occult belief systems, notably the vodun and the belief in magic and witchcraft, played an ambiguous role in Benin's development process (Kohnert 1996: 1351). On the eve of the electoral campaign for the presidential elections in 1991, for example, the contender of dictator M. Kérékou, and subsequent winner of the elections, [Nicéphore Soglo](#), was apparently poisoned and nearly died. The crime was attributed to political adversaries of Soglo, who were accused of employing witchcraft with the help of *vodun* 'witch doctors' (Kohnert 2011: 10). Thus, *vodun*-politics assumed dimensions of a notorious special feature in Benin.

In October 2012, [Patrice Talon](#) a wealthy cotton magnate who had gained a fortune with fertilizer trade and West African cotton, and former ally of President [Thomas Boni Yayi](#), fell out with the leader. Talon – who's wealth ranked among the 15th largest fortunes of Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa in the 2015 - had been for a long time one of the main supporters of the President. In 2006, he sponsored, for example, the first election campaign of Yayi. According to rumours, Talon had allegedly been rewarded for his loyalty by large-scale corruption and nepotism to his advantage. Thus, for example, in 2008, he won the tender for the privatization of the cotton division of [Sonapra](#), the National Society for Agricultural Promotion which provided about 45 % of the tax revenues and 80 % of export earnings of the state. Two months before the next elections of 2012 Talon gained another tender to manage the customs duties of the port of Cotonou, whose annual revenues of about € 1.5 billion per year, were the equivalent of the state budget (Malagardis 2016). But then Talon became for reasons which are hardly comprehensible for outsiders Yayi's enemy and was suspected to be the mastermind behind a poison attack on the president. In December, Talon and his alleged accomplices were arrested in Paris, following an international arrest warrant issued by the general prosecutor in Cotonou. However, in May 2013 a Beninese judge dismissed the case. He was subsequently arrested but could manage to escape and fled to the United States. France, on the other hand, refused twice to extradite Talon (Banégas 2014). The affair grew more complex when Talon was accused of complicity in an attempted coup by Colonel [Pamphile Zomahoun](#) and Johannes Dagnon to overthrow President Yayi on March 4, 2013. But meanwhile, the affair seemed to have been buried, because Yayi had granted pardon to Talon, following mediation by the former Senegalese President [Abdou Diouf](#) (Duhem 2016). Nevertheless, the poisoning-case was re-opened by a French court of justice in June 2014. The judicial investigation was still pending in Paris in 2016 (Malagardis 2016). In Cotonou, however, the case was closed in 2015 and Talon could return from his exile in France to Benin. Candidate for the 2016 presi-

dential election, he won the second round of the presidentials (65.37 % against 34.63 %) against his competitor, [Lionel Zinsou](#).

6.2 Togo

The second example to test Mazrui's thesis on cultural-adjustment as a prerequisite of a viable African democracy is [Togo](#). Togo's history demonstrates arguably the most extreme form of an African autocracy and would-be democracy under the cover of cultural adjustment. The ruling [Gnassingbé](#)-clan, in power since over four decades, is the longest-ruling dynasty of the world besides the North Korean dynasty. It cultivated since the 'authenticity' campaigns of the 1970s – assisted by its Korean advisors - a grotesque personality cult with reference to African customs (Decalo 1996: 232). Over decades, the security services as well as commanding heights of the government and public offices were exceedingly ethnicised and staffed with followers of the dictator, i.e. [Kabye](#), the same ethnic affiliation as the incumbent (Toulabor 2005). Late dictator Eyadéma once summed it up himself, in saying that according to established African tradition "*there can't be two male crocodiles in the same swamp*".¹⁴ After his sudden death in 2005, [Faure Gnassingbé](#), one of his sons was installed as heir to the throne by the military. Coerced by the opposition and the international community he agreed to hold multi-party elections. The latter, however, were sham elections right from the beginning. Still, up-to-date Togo is a 'façade democracy' according to international standards (Kohnert 2019).

6.3 Senegal

As for [Senegal](#) that has long been sold as a showcase of democracy in Africa, including peaceful political alternance, things changed fundamentally with the [Senegalese presidentials of 2019](#) that brought new configurations. One of the major issues was political side-switching that had been elevated, with recourse to established cultural traditions, to the rank of religion in defiance of morality. Political transhumance, i.e. political nomadism from one party affiliation to another, depending on the attractiveness of 'pastures', had become so widespread in Senegal's political history that the country had been renowned already internationally for this questionable practice (Kohnert & Marfaing 2019). Although it is still chastised as betrayal and morally repugnant if it concerns the political adversary, in reality, political transhumance has become more and more commonplace. It does not bother anyone, last, but not least, because party programs are still considered as paper-waste by many voters, and political ideology, whether socialist, liberal or conservative, is said to be increasingly irrelevant. What counts most, besides the individual political history, experience and charisma of the respective candidate, are religious, regional and ethnic affiliation and assets promised to the particular clientele (Kohnert & Marfaing 2019).

On the other hand, Mazrui's call for a cultural adaption of African models of democracy might be justified concerning the balance of power between formal political institutions, including

¹⁴ "Les présidents autoritaires ont pu se réclamer d'un proverbe vraisemblablement apocryphe, selon lequel 'il ne peut y avoir deux crocodiles mâles dans un même marigot', pour affirmer leur suprématie personnelle" (Bayart 2009: 29).

the parliament and government, and informal populist political social networking by youth movements and civil society groups. The latter currently strive, notably in West Africa, with recourse to a long history of African customs, e.g. of [griots](#), travelling storytellers and advisors who also dared to confront the emperor at his court with displeasing truth (Gueye 2013). In Senegal, the activists of [Y'en a marre](#) , which had been inspired by the successful [Balai citoyen](#) movement and youth culture in [Burkina Faso](#)¹⁵, made it clear, right from the beginning, that their aim was not to topple the government or to compete with existing political parties. Instead, they envisaged changing society without recourse to violent actions and without taking power (Faye 2018: 77). The movement was originally founded, inter alia, by rappers Malal Almamy Tall aka '*Fou malade*', Omar Toure aka '*Thiat*' and Mbessane Seck aka '*Kilifeu*' as well as journalists like Sheikh Fadel Barro and Aliou Sane (Mouvement Y'en a marre 2019). The youth movement ran from door to door to register young Senegalese to vote. They claimed that more than 300,000 voters were registered with their assistance and finally succeeded to oust President [Abdoulaye Wade](#) (ibid). Their vision, inspired by the liberation-theory of the African philosopher and revolutionary [Frantz Fanon](#), was a new type of Senegalese citizen (Faye 2018: 77, 80).

7 CONCLUSION

Benin and West Africa should not be considered in isolation, but their development must be seen in a regional and global context. The 'democratic renewal' in the small West African republic 30 years ago happened when the 'iron curtain' in Europe fell apart and state socialism lost its credibility as an economic and political model. The 'democratic recession' is not restricted to Sub-Saharan Africa alone and can be observed worldwide since the beginning of the 21st century. It went along with the rise of a populist new nationalism and lack of regard of the concerned for the need to defend democracy actively. It is therefore no wonder that autocratic tendencies can develop in the shadow of a worldwide mainstream.

The lingering process of the decline of democratic institutions was driven by increasingly poor governance and disregard for the rule of law and transparency, which has been especially pronounced in African countries since the early 2000s. Good governance and inclusive economic development are prerequisites for the construction and consolidation of democracies. For some time, undermined institutions may give the impression that there is no need to worry about democratic development. Formal elections are a necessary but not sufficient means to guarantee the participation of the population in political decisions.

Recent examples of African social movements of predominantly young activists who successfully campaigned for a democratic renaissance in Africa and elsewhere may be promising indicators of progressive social forces that counteract global trends for the resurgence of right-wing nationalism and autocratic rule.

¹⁵ The [Balai citoyen](#) movement in [Burkina Faso](#) had been instigated by reggae singer Karim Sama aka '*Sams'K Le Jah*' and rap musician Serge Bambara aka '*Smockey*' who protested against corruption, nepotism, human rights violations and bad government in their country (Commeilas 2015: 10).

European and other Western countries, struggling themselves with populist, nationalistic and anti-democratic movements cannot point to their alleged superiority in dialogue with developing countries, nor do they have miracle recipes for overcoming these challenges. Instead of concentrating on the outward appearance of a democratic form of government or multi-party elections, greater attention should be paid to good governance, social participation and integration. All together this should contribute to a continued and sustained process of building veritable democratic institutions which do not serve only as a constitutional façade, and contribute to the formation of societal countervailing power.

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