Introduction

Edalina Rodrigues Sanches, José Jaime Macuane and Chipo Dendere

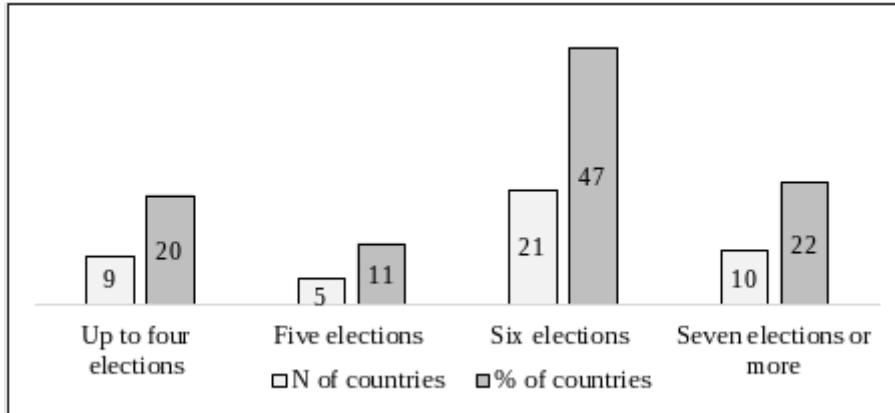This text was automatically generated on 9 March 2020.

Introduction

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1 Some thirty years ago, Benin's *Conférence des Forces Vives de la Nation* paved the way for the end of Mathieu Kérékou rule and inaugurated a new democratic order in country (Banégas, 1995; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). The successful transition in Benin pioneered the wave of democratisation in Africa and the demise of formal one-party rule in most countries. In the backcloth of domestic and international pressures, incumbent authoritarian parties embarked in significant liberalisation reforms, from the early 1990s-on, leading up to landmark constitutional revisions, and the introduction of laws allowing the formation of political parties, and the realisation of multiparty elections, for the first time ever or in decades. By mid-1990s virtually all countries had organised a round of competitive multiparty elections (Bratton, 1998; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

2 Initial appraisals qualified the African democratic wave as political "miracle" or "second independence" (Joseph, 1991, p. 11) and highlighted the democratising role of elections (Lindberg, 2006). Though elections did not translate in democracy in most countries, their increasing acceptance as the legitimate way to choose a government was a significant departure from the past. As Figure 1 helps demonstrate, most countries have been able to hold regular parliamentary elections: as of 2019, 14 countries have held up to five elections, 21 countries are in the sixth round of elections and 10 have held more than seven elections. The latter group includes, among others, Botswana, Mauritius and Gambia, which have held elections since independence in the 1960s.

Figure 1: Parliamentary elections in 45 sub-Saharan African countries (from the founding elections until December 2019)

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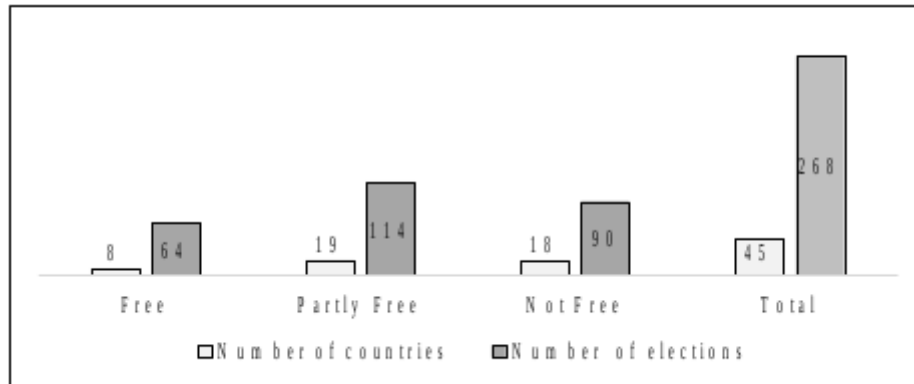

Source: Authors' compilation

Note: We counted a total of 268 parliamentary elections. For most countries the period covered is 1990s-2019, but in some cases – of political instability, blocked transitions, etc. – we only included the most recent elections (e.g. for Angola, Nigeria, Liberia we only counted the elections held in the 2000s).

3   While elections have become more common, it remains unclear whether they have transformed the essence of African politics (Bleck & van de Walle, 2018; Lynch & Crawford, 2011; Rakner & van de Walle, 2009). It has been argued that instead of producing alternation in power and more democratic regimes, the successive rounds of elections led to the emergence of new types of nondemocratic government and to the proliferation of dominant party systems, where the former authoritarian parties still hold a considerable share of votes/seats (Lynch & Crawford, 2011; Rakner & van de Walle, 2009). Moreover, no substantive improvements have happened over time: liberal democracies tend to remain liberal democracies while electoral autocracies or full autocracies remain as such (Bogaards, 2013).

4   This has implications for the way we think about the relationship between elections and democratisation. As Figure 2 shows, 42% of all elections (114 out of 268) take place in partly free countries, i.e. in countries that can be qualified as hybrid regimes or electoral autocracies. The second largest number of elections (90) are held in authoritarian regimes (not free), while only 64 elections are being conducted in liberal democracies (free).

Figure 2: Parliamentary elections in 45 sub-Saharan African countries, by freedom status in 2019

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Source: Authors' compilation, and Freedom House 2019 report

5   Adding to the above, world indexes place the continent as the worst in terms of electoral integrity due to persisting episodes of (pre- or post-) electoral violence, vote buying and fraud (Norris & Grömping, 2019). Though all this reinforces the narrative that elections in Africa are but a "shadow of democracy" (Adejumobi, 2000), it is also true that multiparty elections have in some instances given birth to exemplar democracies as in Cabo Verde, Ghana and Mauritius, for instance. Overall, the outcomes of the democratic experiments have been mixed, with experiences of success and failure (Cheeseman, 2015).

6   This dossier evaluates the state of African democracy and raises important questions such as: What is the impact of elections on democratisation and turnover? How do voters behave in different types of elections? What explains variations in citizens' political participation over time? What is the role of political institutions on democratisation and conflict mitigation? Can the internet and social media act as forces of democratisation?

7   The contributions in this dossier address these questions using different types of data and methodologies – ranging from comparative to in-depth cases studies. This methodological pluralism, is in our view an additional strength of this publication. The article by Sanches and Macuane draws on an original dataset of 179 elections in 27 African countries and finds that alternation in government in the founding elections improves democratic performance, and the odds of turnover in the future. The latter is also increased by the level of political competition and the quality of elections. Conduto and Sanches survey the limited impact of elections on party system institutionalisation in Madagascar. The authors show how leadership centralisation, ethnicity, personalism and clientelism shaped party formation during the authoritarian era and beyond; and also how incumbents' attempts to uneven the played field have been countervailed by the opposition.

8   Santana Pereira, Susana Nina and Delgado focus on Cabo Verde, a successful democratic story. They analyse electoral behaviour in all legislative, presidential and local elections held between 1991 and 2016, and show that local elections present the features of second-order elections much more clearly than the presidential elections. Nascimento, in turn, focuses on São Tomé and Príncipe, a small island state that managed to democratise despite the odds, but that seems to be facing a democratic

backslash since 2014. The author argues that big men rule and pervasive clientelism undermine the strength of democratic institutions. Burchard and Simati examine the sources of electoral violence in Nigerian elections (2015 and 2019) and show the relevance of courts as moderators of election-related violence. More specifically successfully challenging an election outcome in the courts is related to a reduction in the lethality of violence in the next election, but only if the courts are generally perceived as trustworthy. Using Afrobarometer data, Shenga and Pereira analyse how perceptions of violence (general and electoral) influence electoral participation and attitudes towards democracy. Dendere draws on extensive ethnographic study of 50 WhatsApp and Facebook communities in Zimbabwe to understand how they have increased participation and mobilisation. Finally, Rwodzi focuses on the democracy and legitimacy debates in Zimbabwe after the ouster of Robert Mugabe from power by his erstwhile ally, Emmerson Mnangagwa.

9   The various articles of this dossier provide some lessons on thirty years of elections in Africa, namely that: regular elections do not lead necessarily to more democracy, founding elections matter to understand current events, democracies can slide back or remain stuck in hybridity, political institutions are essential to strengthen democracy and mitigate conflict, and citizens can push democracy forward. Overall, African countries, like much of the world, face significant challenges but there have been some positive strides. The democratic experiment will continue to see turns and twists as countries make adjustments following decades of misrule. A remaining challenge for countries is the promotion of democratic turnover between leaders. In countries hailed as making good strides either presidents like Kagame have sought ways to stay in power longer or as is the case in Botswana the ruling parties continue to dominate politics. New forms of technology such as social media have opened political space but not to a great extent – their full impact is still yet to be seen. Suffice to say that it is not yet Uhuru.

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