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Democratic Transitions in Africa

Shaheen Mozaffar

Bridgewater State College, smozaffar@bridgew.edu

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Democracy in Africa! The very idea sounds like a cruel oxymoron. Terrible pictures of seemingly endless civil wars in impoverished countries, of starving children in squalid refugee camps, and of the human brutality of ethnic genocide have typically filled the all-too-erratic American media reports on Africa in recent years. These pictures represent very real human suffering and tragedy, but they also tell unduly exaggerated and only partial stories that evoke horrifying images of widespread social, economic and political degradation of an otherwise complex and diverse region of the African continent. These images distort our perceptions and reinforce unspoken stereotypes of the 560 million people living in 48 countries. Beyond these horrifying images, however, and largely unnoticed by the American media, a dramatic political transformation has been underway in sub-Saharan Africa since 1989, and in some countries, even before that. The central feature of this transformation is the yet unfinished process of democratic transition.

The Historical Context of Democratic Transitions in Africa

The unfolding process of democratic transition in Africa is part of what Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington has termed the "third wave" of democratization in the modern world. In the first wave between 1828-1926, modern democracy expanded from its intellectual roots in the American and the French Revolutions to Western Europe and parts of Latin America, before being reversed by the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. The second wave between 1942-62 witnessed the advent of democracy in Germany, Italy and Japan, in most of Latin America, and in the Asian and African countries gaining independence from European colonial rule. The years 1962-1973 witnessed a reversal of the second wave as authoritarian governments replaced most of the fledgling democracies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The third wave began on April 25, 1974, with the overthrow of Portugal's 48-year old authoritarian government in a peaceful military coup and the installation a year later of one of the world's most successful democracies. From this ironic beginning, the third wave spread rapidly to Spain and Greece, across the Atlantic to Latin America, and then to Asia. In 1989, as communism and the Berlin Wall fell, it engulfed Eastern Europe, Russia and most of the former Soviet Republics, and simultaneously swept across Africa.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the third wave fostered a supportive international environment for the incipient but uneven movements toward democracy in Africa. Democracy has always been an integral, albeit a problematic, component of African political development for over three decades. Most African countries gained independence in the 1960s with democratic governments elected in the waning days of European colonial rule. While most of them subsequently turned toward authoritarian rule, Botswana and Mauritius remained, and continue to remain, uninterrupted democracies. Gambia's 27 year-old democracy was overthrown by a military coup in 1994, but the country elected a new democratic government a year later. In the 1970s, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Sudan elected short-lived democratic governments. More controversially, apartheid South Africa and Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) held regular competitive elections, but with franchise restricted to the minority European population. Even in some single-party regimes, notably in Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, and Zambia, tightly-controlled candidate nominations and electoral competition among aspiring local candidates served as important mechanisms for pork-barrel servicing of local communities with valuable national resources, for recruiting new leaders with strong local ties, and for legitimizing authoritarian governments.

The 1980s witnessed intermittent but discernible movements toward democracy on the continent. In Zimbabwe (1980) and Namibia (1989), negotiated settlements to protracted civil wars facilitated the establishment of democratic governments through multiparty elections. In 1983, Senegal elected its first government through multiparty elections after 20 years of single-party rule. At the time, it had one of Africa's most stable authoritarian regimes and also one of the continent's most successful economies. Its turn toward democracy was symptomatic of the growing pressure on African authoritarian rulers for political and economic liberalization. The source of this pressure was the severe economic crises caused by the combination of a global recession in the early 1980s and misguided domestic policies of market controls, trade restrictions, deficit spending, and inflated currencies. African authoritarian rulers responded to these pressures with a combination of political concessions aimed at assuaging the most politically important segments of the society and political repression aimed at controlling the pace and extent of liberalization. Thus, the Nigerian military rulers aborted their self-proclaimed plans for democratic transition by imprisoning the business tycoon who had defeated their hand-picked candidate in the freest and the fairest elections ever held in the country. In Ghana, on the other hand, the military government, forced to implement harsh structural adjustment policies as a condition for receiving Western financial aid, promised and eventually held non-partisan local elections in 1988 that presaged a successful transition to full democracy four years later. Elsewhere, for example in Kenya, Tanzania, Zaire, and Zambia, authoritarian incumbents used co-optation, exile and imprisonment to silence the weak and fragmented pro-democracy forces until concerted international and domestic pressures sparked by the third wave compelled them democratize.

Indicators of Democratic Transitions in Africa

As in Latin America and Eastern Europe, democratic transitions in Africa did not always produce the desired democratic outcomes, due to a combination of politically astute authoritarian rulers and politically inept pro-democracy forces. Even so, the impact of the third wave on the continent was, by all measures, dramatic. First, it unleashed a wave of mass, often violent, protests (86 in 1991 alone) that directly precipitated political liberalization in 28 countries and indirectly launched preemptive political liberalization in 10 others. In most cases, political liberalization reformed au-

thoritarian regimes with the introduction of explicit constitutional guarantees of fundamental civil liberties and political rights. Second, these initial political openings sparked an unprecedented efflorescence of civic associations, private media outlets (mostly print and radio), unfettered political debate, and vigorous criticisms of governments. Third, and more significantly, political liberalization led to competitive legislative elections in all 38 countries, with opposition parties winning seats in national legislatures for the first time since independence in 35. In addition, 29 countries held "founding elections" in which the chief executive was directly elected by the people in a competitive election. Finally, these founding elections produced peaceful leadership turnover for the first time since independence, as 13 former authoritarian incumbents who ran for election were defeated, while 15 were re-elected. In a novel political development for Africa, former authoritarian rulers who were defeated in the founding elections were returned to office in the second round of democratic elections in Benin and Madagascar.

Measures of levels of political participation and electoral competition in founding elections also confirm the dramatic nature of Africa's third wave democratic transitions. Measuring the level of political participation by voter turnout as percentage of registered voters indicates an overall average turnout of 64 percent across the 29 countries holding founding elections. This figure is not high by global standards, but is impressive nevertheless, especially if we recall that most of these countries were governed for over two decades by authoritarian regimes which either proscribed or tightly controlled political participation. Measuring electoral competition by the winner's share of votes as a percentage of total votes cast indicates an average winner's share of 63 percent for the 29 countries holding founding elections. This equally impressive figure indicates that, after an extended period of authoritarian rule with limited political opportunities,
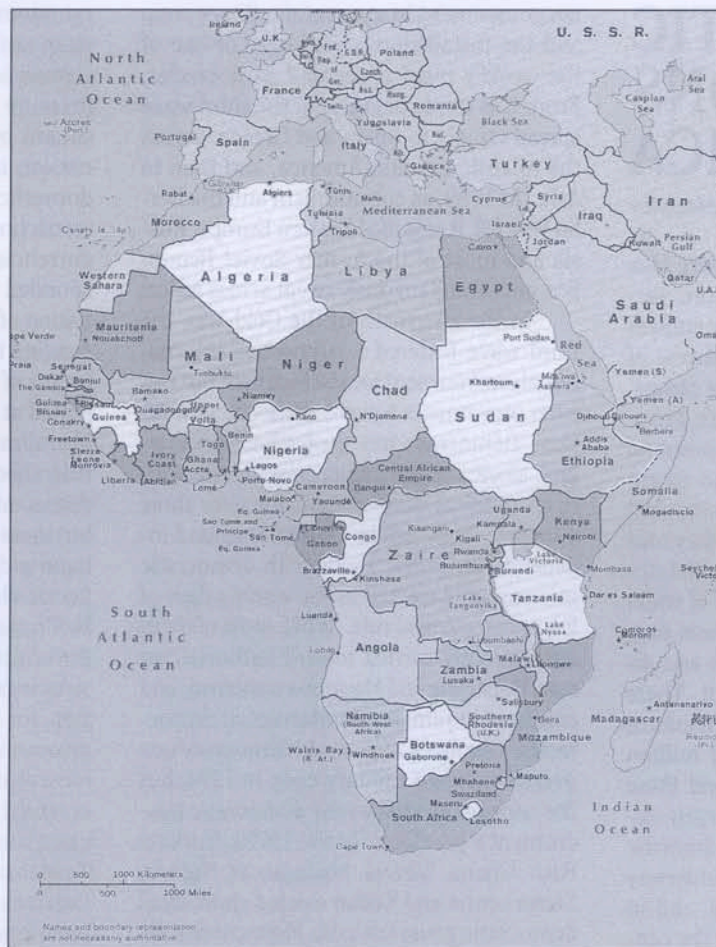
large numbers of candidates will enter the untested waters of electoral competition. This conclusion is validated by the fact that an average of 5 candidates ran for the top office in the 29 founding elections.

The Politics of Democratic Transitions in Africa

These quantitative indicators of the wide scope of Africa's third wave democratic transitions challenge conventional wisdom about the economic and cultural pre-conditions for the origin of modern democracies. They point instead to a political logic. An understanding of this logic requires clarifying the meaning of democratic transition. A democratic transition consists of two closely related processes: (1) a process of *liberalization* in which constitutional guarantees of civil liberties and political rights and limits on the exercise of power by the government *and* the people replace personal and arbitrary rule as the basic institutional framework of governance; and (2) a process of *democratization* in which rules regulating electoral competition and specifying

governmental powers and responsibilities are crafted. African political actors, influenced by strong international norms, have generally agreed on the basic provisions of constitutional guarantees of civil liberties and political rights. However, they have differed sharply on the rules of electoral competition and restraints on governmental power, because these rules determine opportunities for political representation, for shaping public policies, and for affecting the resulting distribution of burdens and benefits in society. It is, therefore, useful to think of liberalization and democratization as separate processes, even though they are interrelated in practice.

Liberalization is necessary for democratization, but may not automatically lead to it. It can produce political chaos, as, for example, in Rwanda and Zaire. It can engender a prolonged period of uncertainty, especially when authoritarian rulers (usually the military) feel threatened by the pace and extent of political liberalization and block further reform, as, for example, in Nigeria and Togo. It can produce fragile democracies susceptible to military coups, as, for example, in Niger. It can lead to flawed democratization in which authoritarian incumbents with sufficient political leverage against fragmented pro-democracy forces successfully manipulate democratic elections in their favor, as, for example, in Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Kenya.

Most importantly, thinking about liberalization and democratization as separate processes helps us to recognize the complexity of democratic transitions and the uncertainty of transition outcomes. Democratic transitions are complex processes because they require the simultaneous destruction of an existing authoritarian regime and the construction of a new democratic order. Democratic transitions are successful to the extent that these two contradictory imperatives are adequately managed, even if not entirely resolved. Democratic transitions outcomes are always uncertain

because the construction of a new democratic order requires crafting new rules of governance whose potential costs and benefits reside obscurely in the future. Since authoritarian incumbents and pro-democracy elites who craft democracies can only anticipate without fully knowing these future costs and benefits, they will prefer rules that will favor their particular interests in the new democratic order. With their current power relations defining their conflicting interests, they struggle to design the rules of the new democratic order. This struggle animates the politics of democratic transitions. All new democracies, whether in the first, second or third wave, thus emerge as improvised, negotiated and often unintended second-best solutions to this quintessential political struggle.

The nature of this struggle and the types of democracies emerging from it in Africa today is best illustrated by examining the politics surrounding the choice of electoral systems. The choice of an electoral system—the sets of rules that regulate competitive elections and determine their outcomes—is one of the most important political decisions made in emerging democracies, because competitive elections are the principal—but not the only—institutional means for securing political representation and access to valued state resources in all modern democracies. Particularly critical in new democracies is the choice of an electoral formula for translating votes into seats. Plurality (or majority) formulas, traditionally used in Britain and the United States (and France), require political parties to win a relative (or absolute) majority of votes in order to win legislative seats, and usually discriminate against smaller parties. Proportional representation (PR) formulas, widely used in Western Europe, allocate legislative seats in proportion to the votes won by political parties, and usually favor smaller parties.

The two formulas embody different visions of democratic politics that define different types of democracy. Plurality formulas embody a majoritarian vision of democratic politics that clearly defines the locus of political authority and accountability, whereby incumbent and opposition parties present voters with clear policy choices, voters elect the party closest to their policy preferences, and the winning party governs until the next election. PR formulas embody a consensus vision of democratic politics

Table 1. The Political Dynamics of Electoral Systems Choice in Africa's Third Wave Democratic Transitions		
Balance of Political Power	Plurality (Majority) Electoral Systems	Proportional Representation Electoral Systems
Favorable to Authoritarian Incumbents (or to Small Numbers of Large Groups)	Cameroon Central Africa Rep. Comoros Congo Cote d'Ivoire Gabon Gambia (1996) Ghana Kenya Lesotho Tanzania Togo Zimbabwe (1985) Zambia	
Favorable to Pro-Democracy Forces		Benin Burkina Faso Burundi Cape Verde Guinea Guinea-Bissau Madagascar Niger Sao Tome & Principe
Equally Divided Between Incumbents and Opponents Engaged in Civil War		Angola Liberia Mozambique Namibia Sierra Leone South Africa Zimbabwe (1980)

Table 1

that contains a more inclusive definition of democratic governance, whereby a variety of parties present socially diverse voters a wide range of policy choices, parties and voters are proportionally represented, and a coalition government is formed by bargaining among winning parties, virtually all or most of which are represented at one time or another in shifting governing coalitions.

In Africa's third wave democratic transitions, the choice of electoral systems with corresponding visions of democratic politics reflects the outcome of three distinct political dynamics, each distinguished by the relative balance of political power between authoritarian incumbents and the pro-democracy forces (see Table 1). First, plurality (or majority) electoral systems were generally chosen in those countries in which the balance of political power favored the authoritarian incumbents. They were also chosen in a small number of countries in which the authoritarian rulers departed before the onset of democratization, and the politics animating the choice of electoral systems was dominated by a small number of large pro-democracy groups either with

a national support base (e.g. Mali) or a regionally-concentrated support base (e.g. Malawi). In all these countries, the relative power balance enabled the favored groups to virtually dictate the choice of new electoral systems, with their known support base and local dominance offering protection against opposition in competitive elections.

Second, PR electoral systems were chosen in countries in which the balance of political power favored the pro-democracy forces, because of the following political logic. In all these countries, pro-democracy forces were multiparty coalitions with the potential of splitting during and after the elections. On the one hand, therefore, opposition leaders wished to reinforce future electoral opportunities for themselves as a block vis-à-vis the authoritarian incumbents. On the other, they wished to protect future opportunities for their individual parties that provisionally comprised the present coalition against the authoritarian incumbents. The choice of PR systems was a strategically rational response to these twin political logics.

Finally, PR electoral systems were chosen in deeply-divided countries which experienced recent civil wars or near-civil war conditions (e.g. South Africa). In all these countries, protracted violent conflicts eventually produced what political scientist and negotiation expert I. William Zartman has characterized as a situation of "mutually hurting stalemate." This is a situation beyond which further conflict is recognized by all combatants to be mutually destructive. In the ensuing negotiated settlements to these conflicts, the choice of PR electoral systems offered the most strategically rational option to protect the future political interests of all parties in the new democratic order.

The South African solution, of course, attracted the most press coverage in the United States, but that coverage failed to report that the fatally flawed apartheid system and its debilitating legacies prevented both Nelson Mandela and De Klerk initially from accepting and articulating a consensus vision of democratic politics. Neither leader, as a result, preferred a PR electoral system as his first choice. The PR system that guided South Africa's historic democratic transition was adopted after two years of vigorous national debate and intense political negotiations. In the other six coun-

tries listed in Table 1 under this pattern of electoral systems choice, there never was any discussion of plurality (or majority) systems, even though Liberia and Sierra Leone had employed plurality systems in their failed experiments with democracy in the 1970s, and Zimbabwe eventually returned to a plurality system in 1985. In negotiating democratic transitions as settlements to protracted conflicts, the choice of PR systems represents a critical confidence-building strategy aimed at encouraging violent political enemies to become peaceful political adversaries. That such systems are chosen in countries which have no previous experience with them suggest, more broadly, that democracies are neither historically determined nor culturally prescribed, but are crafted by strategically rational actors tempered by political calculations in changing contexts.

The Prospects for Sustaining Democracy in Africa

What are the prospects for sustaining Africa's third wave democracies? Definitive answers would be premature, since not enough time has elapsed to accumulate systematic data on the performance of these democracies. Several possibilities suggest themselves, however. First, the prospects for sustaining new democracies in Africa are likely to increase with the ability of new democratic institutions to manage political conflicts peacefully. Political conflicts are the inevitable concomitants of routine decisions about the allocation of scarce societal resources, and the distinguishing hallmark of all democracies is the provision of institutional opportunities for their organized expression and peaceful management (*contra* authoritarian regimes, which deal with political conflicts by attempting to eliminate them altogether). Particularly important are provisions for power-sharing among major political groups. Such provisions were instrumental in the success of South Africa's democratic transition, among others; their absence or ambiguous language contributed to the failure of democratic transition in Angola and the brutal tragedy in Rwanda. In the absence of formal provisions, informal power-sharing strategies can also be pursued. For example, in Guinea, Malawi, and Senegal, among others, political parties winning the transitional elections have invited the leaders of major losing parties to join national coalition governments as a means of legitimizing the new democratic order.

Second, and related to the first, the new democratic institutions must provide for adequate opportunities for both present and future political representation. A crucial weakness of African authoritarian regimes was their arbitrary exclusion and inclusion of targeted groups from political power, which increased unpredictability, aggravated fears of permanent exclusion (or worse), and destroyed any prospects of securing long-term allegiance to the regimes. To the extent that democratic sustainability requires a long-term horizon, political actors require incentives to play by the rules, especially when they lose. One key source of this incentive is the recognition that today's loser will have the opportunity to become tomorrow's winners. The institutional design of electoral systems is especially important in this respect. Thus, PR formulas have fostered political inclusiveness in such deeply-divided societies as Benin, Namibia, and Sierra Leone. However, plurality systems have also produced similar outcomes when voters (usually from the same ethnic group) are regionally concentrated and vote as a block, as, for example, in Malawi.

Third, improved prospects for democratic sustainability require institutional flexibility. Once crafted, institutions (sets of rules) tend to stick, promoting peace and stability. But they are unlikely to do so effectively if they foster socially undesirable outcomes. Institutional reform is then best achieved when rules are new and political actors are just beginning to learn their costs and benefits. As the experience of several East European third wave democracies show, reform of newly-introduced electoral systems is particularly instrumental in stabilizing otherwise fragile democracies. The survival of Africa's fragile third wave democracies will also depend on their ability to address this dilemma. Countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali have already successfully reformed their new electoral systems via an inclusive process of political negotiations involving government, opposition, and key civil society actors. Similar debates are underway in Kenya, where the present plurality system heavily favors the incumbent, and in Namibia and South Africa, where the present PR systems, despite their initial success, give too much power to political party leaders over the rank-and-file members in selecting political candidates.

Fourth, widely accepted rules, even when they have undesirable consequences, promote political stability, and political stability is an essential condition for economic development. Even as they have challenged the conventional wisdom that economic growth is necessary for democratic transition, the experiences of third wave democracies in Latin America and Southern and Eastern Europe suggest that economic growth is necessary for the survival of new democracies after they are born and that political stability grounded in widely-accepted rules of the game is a strong foundation for economic growth. Perhaps more crucially, even when such growth has occurred through harsh and unpopular structural adjustment policies that have lowered living standards, the recognized fairness of democratic rules have substituted as much-need "political capital" for the survival of democratic governments in otherwise fledgling third wave democracies. Whether Africa's fledgling third wave democracies have developed such political capital, or are likely to do so in the future, is unclear. But, as the well-known West African proverb says: "No condition is permanent!" ▨
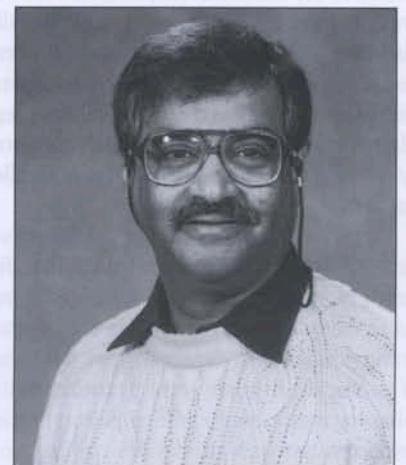
Shaheen Mozaffar is Associate Professor of Political Science and Research Fellow of the Boston University African Studies Center.