

Do Elections Imply Democracy or Autocracy? Election Processes, Liberation Movements and Democratic Change in Africa



Photo: Arne Tostensen

Since the early 1990s, legislative and presidential multiparty elections have taken place in 42 out of Sub Saharan Africa's 48 states. For a majority, fourth and fifth elections have now been convened, suggesting that regularised elections have become the norm. This is because of the international emphasis, demand and funds for elections, the internal demand for democracy, and the need to legitimise rule, and because elections provide a means of distributing power evenly within parties and movements, and to diffuse internal conflict.

I. ELECTIONS AS A DEMOCRATISING OR AUTHOCRATISING MECHANISM

Staffan I. Lindberg (2006) has shown that even when elections left a lot to be desired in terms of freedom and fairness, the process of repeated, competitive elections tended to generate a momentum for greater democratisation. Arguably, however, both scholars and international donors may have put too much faith in the model of democratisation through elections. More and more, we now see that elections may also lead regimes in a more authoritarian direction.

In a democracy, the opposition may win elections. When this happens, the incumbent steps down. Seen from this perspective, Africa's multiparty elections have not produced anything

but minimalist democracies. Analyses of 120 legislative elections in Sub Saharan Africa between 1989 and 2007 conclude that weakness of opposition parties is a striking characteristic of the multi-party system on the continent.

Across Africa's multiparty systems, competitive political contestation has failed to take root. Even in countries with the most institutionalised democratic elections, the opposition rarely gains more than 25 per cent of the seats. (Rakner and van de Walle, 2009) The government often sets their goal at winning an absolute majority of two thirds so that they can change constitutions at their own whim.

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Regimes that hold elections and never lose, should not be classified as true democracies.

II: THE ORIGINS OF AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS

The form of movement or organisation that governing parties emerge from, largely explains their ability to deliver accountable government. In particular, party origin impacts on the ability of parties to institutionalise and develop programmatic platforms and party discipline (Carey and Reynolds 2007).

First generation liberation movements

A number of governing parties in Africa began their life as liberation movements fighting colonialism, settler rule and occupation. ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, Frelimo in Mozambique, MPLA in Angola, Swapo in Namibia and ANC of South Africa are key examples. Parties emerging from the liberation movements swept to power with overwhelming victories born by popular gratitude for delivering liberation. In the period immediately after the liberation, these parties held high ideals inherited from the struggle, but after a time concerns with retention of power took centre stage.

The former liberation movements turned parties have managed to maintain political power since independence, at times at the expense of democracy and human rights. Their structure is an inheritance from the armed struggle. During the liberation struggle, decision-making was left in the hands of a few. Dissent and criticism were not allowed as they exposed divisions within the movement. This often resulted in violent and brutal purges. Opposition was a difficult concept also after independence. Non-criticism was a strong feature during the first crucial years of power. Pro-longed civil wars in Mozambique and Angola have obviously contributed to this and further entrenched the military cultures of the regimes. The opposition, with roots in armed movements, also maintained a form of military structure after the introduction of multi-party systems. Renamo in Mozambique is an example. The anti-colonial struggle was violent, but once in power the movements have used violence against their own people.

The liberation movements have two legacies – the anti-colonial (anti-racist struggle) and the pro-democracy movement. In the years after Independence the democratic aspect of the struggle tended to lose out. The legacies of the liberation struggle are in themselves a challenge.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's first two post-independence elections in 1980 and 1985 were generally passed as a credible expression of the will of the people, although Mugabe's government brutally quashed dissenting voices in the 1980s, killing thousands in the Matabeleland region. All elections in Zimbabwe have been marred by violence with allegations of rigging, gerrymandering, vote buying and coercion.

February 2009 saw the establishment of a unity government between the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which actually won the elections despite violence and fraud. The

government is officially a coalition for national unity, but there is no doubt that ZANU-PF holds the control. It is difficult to create coalition governments on the basis of unfree and unfair elections.

Mozambique/Angola

Since the first democratic elections in 1994, the dream of regime change, participation, representation and accountability has not been realized to its full. Disillusion and pessimism are emerging. The 2008 local elections and the 2009 general elections in Mozambique, illustrate many of the challenges of the transitions from war, authoritarianism and one-party rule to a new Constitution and multi-party-elections.

A similar trajectory exists in Angola where the ruling party MPLA received 82 per cent of the votes in the parliamentary elections in September 2008. There are three parallel trends in Angolan politics: weak opposition parties, exceptional MPLA political dominance, and supreme presidential control over the MPLA.

Apart from ending the civil war, elections in Mozambique and Angola have served as promotions tools to grant access to state resources, and ensure other legitimate and illegitimate benefits.

Pro-democracy movements

In the early 1990s, pro-democracy movements succeeded in ousting former one-party regimes. In terms of establishing liberal democratic regimes, with a vibrant opposition and outspoken civil society, the pro-democracy movements that gained power in the 1990s were assumed to represent a new democratic trajectory in Africa.

Analysing the political developments since the time of the democratic transition, institutionalised multiparty political systems have not emerged to the extent that viable, stable opposition parties are able to win elections and check government policies. The fragility of the political configuration, is reflected in the large number of new parties formed prior to each election and the high number of independent parliamentary candidates.

Contrary to previous transitions around the struggle for independence, pro-democracy movements faced the challenge of institutionalising as political parties in a competitive 'market place', which was totally different from the monopoly situation of the one-party state. The combined effects of political and economic liberalisation, and limited focus on the importance of creating strong democratic political parties, resulted in a de-institutionalisation of the political system. This resulted in enhanced powers of the executive. The enduring legacies from the authoritarian single-party systems have shaped electoral practices.

Zambia/Malawi

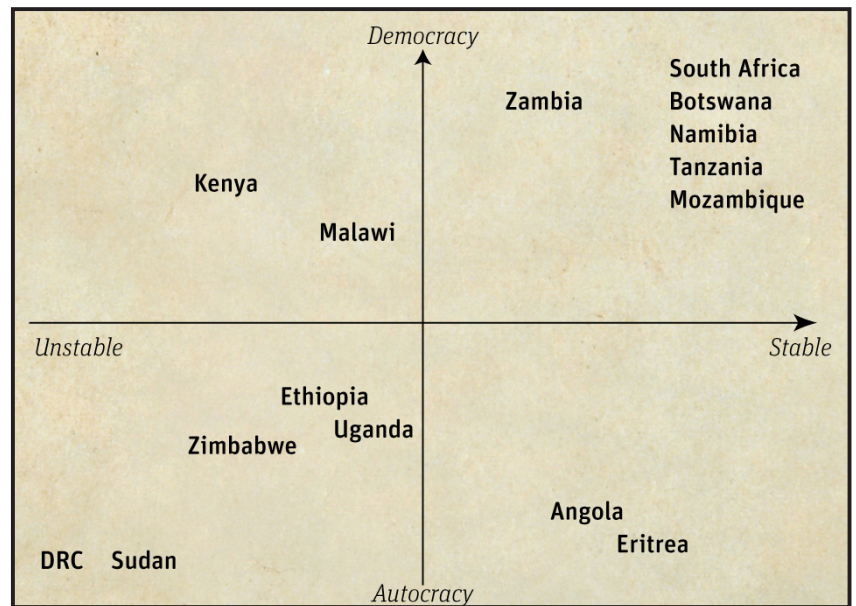
Zambia has held five elections since the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1991. The elections have been highly competitive, and the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) has won power with less than 45 per cent of the national votes. The post-2001 period has seen the emergence of a strong opposition. Despite the decline in MMD support, nationally the opposition failed to win both the 2006 and 2008 elections. While the level of political contestation in Zambia has increased since 2001, the quality of elections remains poor and alternation in power has not occurred. MMD illustrates the problems of pro-democracy movements that emerge with programmatic consistency relating to deepening democracy and participation but fail to institutionalise and thus display weak discipline in the legislature.

In 1993, the autocratic one-party regime headed by Dr. Banda was defeated. Malawi emerged as one of Africa's relatively few countries where a return to democracy coincided with a shift of governing party. The new governing party, United Democratic Front (UDF), emerged from a pro-democracy movement as a response to an increasingly unpopular one-party system. Since then, there have been four multi party elections (1994, 1999, 2004, 2009). Until the 2004 elections, a regional based three party system dominated, but following the 2004 elections this three party system fragmented, indicating a precarious lack of party system institutionalisation. In the 2004 and 2009 elections, there was a record number of independent candidates and 'independents' was the third largest 'group' in the Parliament 2004-2009. After the 2009 elections, the group of independents is second to the governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Second generation liberation movements

Second generation liberation movements are movements that waged an armed struggle against authoritarian rule. They were an expression of people's disillusionment with failure of development, compounded with corruption, abuse of civic, political and human rights. Uganda National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M), and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) are key illustrative examples. Other examples are the Eritrean Peoples' Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), and Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL). The political systems growing out of second generation liberation movement represent different models from a one-party state (Eritrea), or restricted democracy (Rwanda) (Uganda), and severely restricted democracy (Ethiopia). With mentalities of hierarchy, the discipline of military-derived parties provides clear and structured models of decision-making.

As with first generation liberation movements the tension between liberation and democracy resonates in movement governments, which found it difficult to reconcile the two discourses.



Uganda/Ethiopia

The first multi-party elections in Uganda in 2006 were controversial, and challenged on grounds that proper institutional arrangements and political tolerance were not in place to guarantee free and fair elections. Violence was rampant, electoral rules were violated, state resources were misused and opposition leaders were harassed. Thus, the anticipated gains of multiparty elections such as durable peace and stability, peaceful change of government, alternative policy articulation, respect for human rights and democratic accountability may not be realised as the country heads to the second multiparty elections in 2011.

In May 1991, the victorious Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) accorded primacy to ethnic self-determination through restructuring the form of state (from unitary to federal) and reorienting economic policy and practice (from the centrally-planned model to the 'free' market variant). In the formal and legal sense, the post-1991 dispensation represents a system with periodic national/regional and local elections and Constitutional democratic rights and civil liberties. However, Ethiopia's multiparty democracy operates as a restricted dominant party state controlled by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who has ruled since 1991. Government is increasingly intolerant of dissenting opposition political parties, NGOs and of open criticism. Leaders of the major opposition groups, were jailed following their rejection of the 2005 election results. The coming elections in May 2010 are looked upon with apprehension.

III. DEMOCRATIZATION AS ALTERNATION?

A dominant perspective in the democratisation literature, conceptualises democracy as a system in which parties lose elections (Przeworski 1991, p., 10). Democracy requires alternation, and alternation breeds democracy. Underscoring the democratic challenge in Africa, the most institutionalised electoral processes are found in the dominant party regimes. This perspective suggests that regimes that hold elections and never lose, should not be classified as true

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democracies. Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Mozambique would according to this definition be weak democracies. Regardless of the nature and quality of electoral institutions, opposition parties remain numerically weak and fragmented – with some notable exceptions – one being Zimbabwe.

Authoritarian governments may hold elections without a mechanism for transition to democracy. Evidence suggests that authoritarian regimes that hold elections remain in power longer than those who fail to hold them. Why do authoritarian governments hold elections, and why do they win elections?

- Authoritarian regimes receive a 'democracy bonus' for holding elections through international democracy assistance.
- Competitive clientelism drives the behaviour of voters and candidates in ways that promote pro-regime parliamentarians.
- Incumbents manage elections by employing institutional mechanisms rather than extralegal manipulation to remain in power. The role of electoral commissions, the (ab)use of state resources, particularly the state media is important in this aspect.
- Established political parties do not nominate viable candidates for contested positions.

Elections should mean competition over policy and distributing benefits for elected officials and their constituencies. However, in dominant party regimes, elected officials, especially legislators, have limited power over policy making and elections may be better understood as competition over access to state resources.

IV: THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN CONTESTATION AND STABILITY

Some of the most stable political regimes and also the regimes now rated as most promising from a development aid perspective have one party dominant systems that have not experienced alternations in power.

In these systems citizens develop a cynical view of parliament, willingly supporting incumbent policies in return for personal enrichment.

Electoral commissions serve as tools for the ruling party to exclude and prevent oppositional actors full access to the electoral process.

Vote rigging, fraud and intimidation are regular aspects of elections.

Turn-out at elections is going down. In many countries electoral participation is under fifty per cent – Mozambique and Zambia.

The tendency to favour stability over power alternation should be critically examined. If the ruling party faces real prospects of losing power, it may be induced to create institutions that protect it when out of power, such as a strong independent judiciary. Empirical evidence suggest that power alternations will increase the quality of government through strengthening vertical and horizontal accountability.

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