



CHATHAM HOUSE



WILEY-  
BLACKWELL

---

A Few Considerations on Democracy in Africa

Author(s): Patrick Chabal

Source: *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Apr., 1998), pp. 289-303

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2623902>

Accessed: 21/09/2009 14:29

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=black>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Royal Institute of International Affairs and Blackwell Publishing are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# A few considerations on democracy in Africa

PATRICK CHABAL

Two recent events have focused attention yet again on democracy in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The first was the arrest on Christmas Day 1997 of Kenneth Kaunda, the founding father of present-day Zambia and its president until 1991. Kaunda, one of the best-known African politicians, was detained for his alleged involvement in a half-hearted (if not farcical) and failed coup attempt by junior officers in October 1997. The second was the predictable re-election, in January 1998, of Daniel arap Moi to Kenya's presidency—a post he has occupied for 19 years—following a campaign and elections claimed by the opposition to have made free and fair political competition impossible.

These two cases are significant because they highlight the outcome of two diverging transitional trends in contemporary African politics. Zambia was one of the first African countries in which multi-party elections led to the end of one-party rule and the replacement of the incumbent leader. Indeed, Frederick Chiluba's massive electoral victory of 1991 and the smooth transition to the post-Kaunda regime were hailed at the time as vindication for the view that democracy could take root in Africa. Kenya, on the other hand, exemplifies a process of blocked political reform in which the determination of the president to hold on to power and the division of the political opposition have combined to prevent a change of regime.

What is happening in Zambia and Kenya is also important because it raises the question of whether democracy in Africa is being consolidated or dissipated. The experience of Kenya seems to indicate that where a regime wants to prevent democratic change it can find the means to do so. The recent re-election of Chiluba in Zambia appears to show that democratically elected leaders are no less prone than their predecessors to seek to stay in office by what many have described as widespread abuse of power. Does this mean that democracy is unlikely to survive on the African continent? Or is it merely an indication that democratization is likely to be both a difficult and a protracted process?

<sup>1</sup> I exclude from this article consideration of South Africa on the grounds that its history is too distinct from that of the rest of colonial black Africa to justify comparative treatment at this stage.

This article attempts to cast new light on these questions by concentrating attention on the conceptual and analytical framework of present debates. The point here is not to discuss in detail the experience of the African countries in which multi-party elections have taken place.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is to draw attention to the assumptions, validity and limits of current interpretations of that experience. My aim is to review the main arguments in support of and against the view that present political trends in Africa are favourable to greater democratization. Enough time has now elapsed since the first multi-party elections in 1990 for us to reconsider whether they did indeed mark a watershed in the political evolution of the continent.

There has undeniably been in black Africa over recent years a very widespread and significant change in the nature of the political regimes in place. In the years 1989–94, most African countries moved away from single-party political systems. Multi-party elections were held, some of which resulted in the incumbent governments and leaders relinquishing power in a peaceful political transition. The most recent and sophisticated book on the question considers that by 1994 democratic transitions had taken place in 16 countries, while flawed transitions had occurred in another 12. Transitions had been blocked or impossible in only 14 countries.<sup>3</sup> Since 1994, some African countries have held their second multi-party elections, and in some instances (Benin, São Tomé e Príncipe) these elections have seen the return to power of the leaders and/or parties previously defeated at the polls.

Although on such evidence it appears that democracy is being consolidated in Africa, there are also indications that the process of democratization, such as it is, is fraying at the edges. In the first place, there is the persistent claim that multi-party elections are controlled and distorted, when not actually rigged, by incumbent regimes. Secondly, there is the nagging doubt that democratically elected regimes have every intention of subverting the momentum for political liberalization by ruling much as the previous one-party regimes did. Thirdly, there are very obvious limits to the actual democratic nature of functioning multi-party systems, chief of which seems to be that such systems have no place for political opposition. Finally, and most ominously, there is the unavoidable fact that where multi-party elections have failed to bring about genuine improvements, Africans have begun to lose faith in 'democracy'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A useful summary of the literature published on democratic transitions in Africa will be found in Rob Buijtenhuijs and Elly Rijnierse, *Democratization in sub-Saharan Africa, 1989–1992: an overview of the literature* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 1993) and Rob Buijtenhuijs and Céline Thiriou, *Démocratisation en Afrique au sud du Sahara, 1992–1995: un bilan de la littérature* (Leiden: African Studies Centre/Bordeaux: CEAN, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic experiments in Africa: regime transitions in comparative perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> In some instances they appear ready to support or condone unconstitutional regime changes (e.g. coups) which, typically, promise to reduce corruption and inequalities.

There is, in short, some indication that what has all too readily been interpreted as a systemic political change in the direction of greater democratization may well turn out to be no more than a surface phenomenon: undoubtedly a transition, but not necessarily a democratization—at least, not in the sense in which that term is usually understood in the West. Whether this relatively gloomy view of the apparently successful introduction of multi-party politics in Africa is justified or not, it behoves us to take seriously the possibility that the political transitions currently under way may not lead to the establishment of Western-style democracy on the continent. I propose here to review the analytical significance of the current debate about the political liberalization of contemporary Africa by looking in turn at the roots, meanings and limits of democratization.

### **The roots of democratization**

The main debate here is clearly between those who contend that political liberalization has been driven primarily by internal political dynamics and those who argue that it is essentially the outcome of external factors. The debate is significant, not because it is in and of itself important to adjudicate between internal and external factors, but because the quality of our political analysis of contemporary Africa undoubtedly hinges on the sharpness of our understanding of the nature of political causality in those transitions.

Those who have stressed the primacy of internal factors have highlighted five main factors: (1) the erosion in the legitimacy of the one-party state; (2) the decline in all aspects of state capacity; (3) the failure of development; (4) the depth of the economic crisis; and (5) the strength of political protest and/or pro-democracy movements.

There is, of course, little doubt about the political deficiencies of post-colonial African governments; nor is there much uncertainty about the desire among most Africans for more efficient and accountable governments. Beyond these general statements, however, the situation is rather more complex than it at first appears. What is clear is that the roots of Africa's problems lie very largely in the failings of its economies.

It is a frequently voiced argument that Africa's present predicament is primarily the result of its dependent position in the world economy. In truth, however, it is now plain that one-party states were singularly inept in managing their post-colonial economic inheritance. For reasons which cannot be discussed here in detail, most African governments were unable to establish the minimum productive basis required for the economic well-being (and sometimes even the survival) of their people.

Some countries were economically better endowed than others. Some governments were better at managing the economy than others. But in the end, following the global economic crisis triggered by the first oil crisis in the 1970s, most African countries suffered grievously. Within a decade, production had

declined, export earnings had collapsed, debt had soared and so had food aid requirements. Even economically successful countries such as Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya found themselves seriously indebted and in deep economic crisis. Poorer countries were reduced to surviving on foreign aid.

Because in the first 15 years of independence (1960–75) African economies had been relatively prosperous, the claims made by one-party states to be well suited to the twin task of national integration and development appeared to have some validity. In times of economic crisis, however, the weaknesses of these African political systems were soon exposed. As resources dwindled, states were less and less able to fulfil their neo-patrimonial functions, either in providing employment or in enabling state resources to be distributed by patrons to their clients.<sup>5</sup>

As internal discontent grew, African regimes became more repressive. Repression, however, was politically costly—not just because it engendered an ever-tightening cycle of political violence, but also because it diverted state resources from more productive activities. Without doubt the decade of the 1980s was one of enhanced coercion and violence in Africa. Opposition to the regimes in place increased, as did the desire for more political accountability and greater respect for human rights.

The present African crisis, therefore, has its origins in the wholesale collapse of this neo-patrimonial system. Governments have sought to maintain themselves in power by sheer force. It is these excesses, and the progressive decline of African economies, which have prompted greater political opposition and demands for better governance. The question is, nevertheless, whether this opposition favours a radically different, and more democratic, form of politics as well as a proper political programme of reform because of a coherent analysis of what has gone wrong, or whether it would merely like to see a return to a more efficiently functioning neo-patrimonial system in which it would have a stake.

Of course, there is no doubting that there are a large number of Africans who profess to reject the neo-patrimonial logic and who argue in favour of democracy. Many intellectuals, writers, lawyers, journalists, academics and businessmen are well aware that the present political order cannot deliver the economic growth the continent so desperately needs. They know that the defence of the status quo is not much more than a smokescreen for those who seek to avoid responsibility for their misdeeds while desperately clinging on to power. It is they who have been at the forefront of political opposition, and many have paid dearly for it.<sup>6</sup>

It is debatable, however, whether internal opposition to African regimes would have led to a move towards multi-party liberalization in the absence of the external factors discussed below. Until the demise of communism, the

<sup>5</sup> For a relevant discussion of neo-patrimonialism, see Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic experiments*, ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> For a brilliant example of such sentiment, see Wole Soyinka, *The open sore of a continent: a personal narrative of the Nigerian crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

opposition's model of governance was more akin to that of Rawlings's Ghana or even Sankara's Burkina Faso—that is, strong, mobilising, one-party states and 'left-wing' regimes—than the multi-party parliamentary regimes which have been readily advocated in the past few years. As for popular opinion, there is hitherto no compelling evidence that it was consulted by those who took on the mantle of opposition, or that its ideas of political reform fitted the type of multi-party system which is now the norm.<sup>7</sup>

Unsurprisingly, therefore, our conclusion must be that the root cause of political liberalization in Africa cannot be thought to lie exclusively in the internal dynamics of these countries.<sup>8</sup> Although popular dissatisfaction with existing regimes has been high in most African countries at least since the late 1980s, it is impossible to state with any conviction that such opposition would have resulted in a transition to multi-party politics without the very specific combination of outside factors triggered by the change in the world system that began in 1989.

This is emphatically not to say either that there is not in Africa a very strong desire for more accountable governments or that, where it is historically feasible, a democratic political system is not intrinsically desirable. It is merely to point to what I believe to be a more realistic judgement about the links between internal political processes in Africa and the recent proliferation of multi-party regimes on the continent.

Those pointing to the causal weight of external factors emphasize three aspects: (1) a more conservative outlook on North–South relations in the West; (2) the widespread imposition of structural adjustment programmes; and (3) the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War.

The more conservative political atmosphere in the West (embodied most notably in the Reagan and Thatcher administrations) gave rise to a foreign policy agenda on which aid to Africa was accorded a lower priority and support for one-party states diminished. The West became more critical of the failures of African regimes and of their repressive excesses. Sympathetic observers found it more difficult to defend the actions of African governments to Western domestic opinion. In short, the West lost patience with the 'excuses' given by African rulers (or their supporters) to explain the ruin of their policies. Since one-party political systems and state-directed development had failed, the time had now come for political and economic liberalization.

Second, the deepening economic crisis in Africa forced African governments to seek higher levels of aid. As debt spiralled upwards, the West began to impose

<sup>7</sup> There is considerable evidence that many ordinary Africans remain unconvinced of the merits of multi-party systems. See the opinions of some Lusaka dwellers in Jean-Pascal Daloz, "Can we eat democracy?": perceptions de la "démocratisation" zambienne dans un quartier populaire de Lusaka', in Jean-Pascal Daloz and Patrick Quantin, eds, *Transitions démocratiques africaines: dynamiques et contraintes (1990–1994)* (Paris: Karthala, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Bratton and van de Walle, in *Democratic experiments*, argue emphatically that democratic transitions in Africa are to be explained primarily in terms of the evolution of domestic politics; they view external factors merely as the context within which internal change took place.

tighter and more onerous conditions. Countries seeking aid were compelled to adopt structural adjustment programmes.<sup>9</sup> Soon, the rescheduling of debt and even bilateral financial aid were tied to structural adjustment. Irrespective of whether or not structural adjustment will, or even can, have the economic effects anticipated by the World Bank, what is clear is that it is in practice tied to political liberalization. Indeed, some would argue that the World Bank has a hidden, political, agenda. Certainly, it cannot merely be a coincidence that in so many countries democratization followed structural adjustment.

The third external factor which has influenced political change in Africa is the demise of communism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. The effects have been twofold. First, Gorbachev's foreign policy reforms and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower brought a diminution of support for its erstwhile allies and the application of pressure by Moscow for the resolution of the conflicts to which it was party (for example in Afghanistan and in Angola). The Soviet Union also greatly reduced, or cut off altogether, financial and economic aid. Countries such as Angola and Mozambique which relied on the Soviet bloc were now left to seek support from the West. Since the end of a bipolar world resulted in Western supremacy, pressure on African states to institute political reforms along Western democratic lines became well-nigh irresistible.

Another consequence of the downfall of communism has been a collapse in the legitimacy of socialism as a workable, or even desirable, political programme. Consequently, there has been pressure from the West to do away with all manner of 'socialist' or *socialisant* policies in Africa. Furthermore, the widespread belief in the West that socialism was responsible for the advent of one-party politics in Africa has been an additional motive for demanding democratic reforms.

The immediate effect on Africa of the post-1989 situation was to make it clear to all African governments that the West now dictated the economic and political agenda for the continent. In the context of the late 1980s and early 1990s that agenda consisted of a systematic programme of economic and political liberalization. Strict political conditionality became the order of the day. No longer was it possible to sustain the argument, fashioned out of the dominant social and economic theories of the 1960s, that development would in due course induce democratization. Democracy was now seen as a condition of, a prerequisite to, development.

In sum, then, a review of the evidence suggests, as always seemed likely, that the recent transition towards multi-party political systems in Africa is the outcome of a singular combination of internal and external factors.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This is not the place to discuss the merit of structural adjustment. Indeed, one can scarcely do so in the abstract since its value is best adjudged in the concrete effects it has in specific countries and not in its putative theoretical excellence. Broadly, however, structural adjustment seeks: (1) to remove the impediments to the operation of the free market (e.g. subsidies or monopolies); (2) to reduce state expenditures, particularly the cost of the civil service; (3) to reduce inflation and stabilize the currency at a realistic level; (4) to spur the production of export crops or other foreign exchange earners.

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, I think time will show the Bratton and van de Walle argument (*Democratic experiments*) on the causal relation between domestic political protest and political liberalization—statistically sound as it may be—to have been overly dismissive of the key external factors which I have mentioned.

### **The meanings of democratization**

Whatever the roots of the political transitions currently under way in Africa, there is at the moment much confusion about the precise meaning of democratization. This confusion is more than definitional; it is analytical and ideological. At heart, the debate is about both the nature of power in Africa and the possible political trajectories of African countries in the years to come.

The analysis of the recent political evolution of Africa has hitherto largely focused on the modalities of the democratic transition. Indeed, it has often been narrowed down to a discussion about elections. While it is true that elections are at the core of democratic politics, there must be some danger that the present obsession with elections will obscure processes of political change (or, indeed, continuity) which are likely to determine the fate of democracy in Africa.

What form(s) does democracy take in Africa today? The evidence of political liberalization is threefold: (1) the end of the one-party political system; (2) the emergence of political competition; and (3) the holding of free and universal multi-party elections.

Multi-party elections have now taken place in most African countries. In some—such as Cape Verde, Benin, São Tomé e Príncipe and Zambia—the incumbent government and president were swept aside. In others—such as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Angola and Cameroon—they were re-elected. In a few—Guinea, Ethiopia, Kenya—there have been accusations of irregularities, intimidation, rigging and violence. Undoubtedly, the sight of Kenneth Kaunda humbled by his erstwhile trade unionist opponent must have comforted those who believe in democracy. Conversely, however, the ability of Daniel arap Moi or Paul Biya to manipulate the electoral process must have chilled those Africans who saw in multi-party elections a means of bringing politicians to heel.

Political analysts, however, must go beyond the immediate events and ask a more fundamental question: do multi-party elections mean democratization? In other words, are the elections currently being held in Africa an indication that democracy is becoming more entrenched on the continent?

To ask that question is in effect to ask what democracy is. I do not propose here to attempt to give 'a' single, and necessarily prescriptive, definition; rather, I wish to tackle the question from a variety of angles. There are several possible approaches; I will focus here on the four most common: the instrumental, the institutional, the cultural and the historical.



### *The instrumental approach*

The instrumental approach, currently the one which is dominating debate, concentrates on the practical means—the procedure—by which a democratic political order is established. The emphasis here is on two fundamental aspects of formal democracy (as it is understood in the West): the mechanisms for political change, and elections.

The first refers to the legal and constitutional framework which ensures that elected governments govern and defeated governments leave office. This includes the terms and length of political mandates, as well as the conditions under which elections are held and their results implemented. Above all, it concerns the mechanisms to be instituted in order to ensure the regularity of political change (both in government and the presidency) by means of recognizably valid elections.

The second is seen as the key to the establishment of the democratic political order. The conditions for freely contested elections must be put in place. For this to occur, there must be unimpeded party electoral competition (registration of parties, free speech, right of assembly and fair financing of electoral campaigns). There needs to be agreement on the procedures for the registration of all eligible voters, the establishment of an independent electoral commission and the organization of the elections themselves. Most importantly, the elections must be seen to be free and fair. Finally, the result of the elections must be accepted by all and immediately executed.

Those who focus on this aspect argue, rightly, that without proper procedures there can be no political liberalization and that the practice of regular elections establishes precedents for the deepening of democracy. Nevertheless, the emphasis on procedural matters can easily make us forget that multi-party elections in and of themselves cannot guarantee a transition to democracy, let alone the survival of a democratic political order.<sup>11</sup> Recent criticisms of the now well-entrenched Chiluba regime in Zambia suggest that such elections may simply be the means by which one single-party state replaces another. If this is the case, in Zambia or elsewhere, then, clearly, the transition to democracy will require more than the holding of regular multi-party elections.

### *The institutional approach*

An institutional approach focuses less on procedure than on the systemic relationships between the recognizable constituent bodies of the political order. At the apex of the institutional framework stand the constitution and the legal system. Without a democratic constitution and a politically independent judiciary to uphold it, there can be no democracy. Beyond this, it is argued, there must be three institutional mechanisms at work: (1) a structure of

<sup>11</sup> As, to be fair, Bratton and van de Walle do recognize (*Democratic experiments*).

representation; (2) a working parliament; and (3) an effective system of direct political accountability.

The first is perhaps the most complicated in Africa. Indeed, formal democratic theory would stress the need for individual representation. However, for reasons having to do with the importance of communal, racial, regional, ethnic and religious forms of identity, any system of representation operates within a collective rather than individual context—by which I mean that either representatives are chosen for reasons having to do with their communal affiliations or that elections are interpreted on particularistic grounds.

Of course, it is true that in all countries representatives are selected partly on ascriptive grounds. Yet the democratic order cannot function properly (in Africa or elsewhere) unless it is accepted that, once elected, representatives will have to balance the interests of their constituencies with those of the country as a whole. The notion, common in Africa, that the representative is elected for the sole purpose of furthering the interests of those who elected him/her is fundamentally inimical to the democratic order as we know it in the West.

The need to have a working parliament (even in semi-presidential systems) cannot be overestimated—indeed, it is the hallmark of Western democracy. By ‘working parliament’, I mean an assembly which is in session most of the year and in which it is possible for the party having lost the election to operate as a viable opposition. Unless there is parliamentary scrutiny by a genuine opposition given the means to do its job, any elected assembly runs the risk of becoming a mere rubber stamp of executive authority—as, indeed, generally remains the case in Africa.

A working parliament must also possess the power to enforce direct political accountability on government. This means not just that government must answer to parliament but that parliament is endowed with the right to dismiss government from office through a vote of no confidence. This has yet to happen in Africa and there is some scepticism about the likelihood of governments on the continent accepting the full implications of such a democratic form of accountability. Finally, and subject to the usual caveats, a working parliament should be able to amend the constitution.

### *The cultural approach*

The cultural approach considers the political culture which favours and sustains democracy. This is a difficult topic, for two reasons. First, since most present-day democracies are Western, emphasis on such cultural attributes necessarily means painting a Western image of democracy. Second, in so far as political cultures vary in different parts of the world, such focus on Western political ‘virtues’ may implicitly be perceived as criticism by non-Western peoples.

Nevertheless, if one is to consider the transition to a democratic system institutionally akin to the Western, it will be impossible to avoid discussion of its cultural dimensions. Theorists of political culture emphasize the following

democratic attributes: (1) a democratic mentality; (2) a culture of representation; and (3) a notion of accountability.

The first, though somewhat vague, refers to a political culture in which the rulers and the ruled are in accord over both the desirability and efficiency of a democratic political system. This is a taller order than may at first appear. In countries with no democratic traditions (or with traditions of democratic failure<sup>12</sup>) there are no intrinsic or historical reasons for trusting the democratic system to deliver a way out of a political or economic crisis—in Africa or elsewhere: witness the current difficulties in the political transition of a number of east European countries such as, for example, the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Romania and Bulgaria.

Furthermore, a democratic mentality means a political culture in which individuals trust the mechanics of the democratic system of representation. Democracy rests on an accepted notion of the political supremacy of the individual citizen *qua* political agent. In other words, a culture of representation presupposes that rulers and ruled alike accept the political primacy of individual representation expressed by means of a single, secret and discrete vote. Here too, there are serious difficulties in countries where cultural traditions are not congruent with such notions of individual representation.

But all this is nothing without a political culture in which there is widespread acceptance of democratic norms of accountability. Although it is often argued that democratic accountability is enforced by means of multi-party elections, the truth is that such is only the case in countries where political accountability is democratic in the first instance. The one presupposes the other. Moreover, the one can only derive from the other. Elections are only meaningful as a method of accountability where they are recognized as embodying the legitimate political will of individual citizens—which is far from being straightforwardly the case in contemporary Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Political accountability is the mechanism by which the rulers are made to account to the ruled for their political actions. This has taken many different forms over the course of human history. For instance, precolonial Africa had very specific means by which chiefs were held accountable. When the rains failed some might be put to death. Democratic accountability, on the other hand, is much more specific (and perhaps less lethal!) in that it is almost entirely tied to the electoral process. However, since the African post-colonial political order does not formally recognize 'traditional' forms of political accountability, failures of democratic accountability are dangerous. Any deficiency in the quality of elections or the operation of the parliamentary system invalidates democratic accountability, leaving a void at the centre of the political order.

<sup>12</sup> It is well to remember here that most African countries started independent life with a democratic constitutional order, the dissolution of which is now part of their political history.

<sup>13</sup> The failure to recognize this problem is one of the central weaknesses in the argument presented by Bratton and van de Walle in *Democratic experiments*.

*The historical approach*

There is, finally, a historical approach to the question of political transitions in Africa. Democracy as we know it in the West today is not a system which appeared *sui generis* at a certain point in the history of humankind to bestow on a certain group of people the bounties of an inherently superior political method. Western countries are democratic not because some new regime abruptly and arbitrarily put in place the instruments of a democratic order. They are democratic because democracy is the political order which has emerged from several centuries of economic and political change as the most effective and legitimate system of political accountability.

In other words, democracy is the end result of a long and complex political process and not the outcome of conscious policy decisions taken at a particular point in time to establish 'a better' political order. Although it is true that democracy is a system with a well-defined and well-regulated constitutional, legal, procedural and institutional framework, it cannot be stressed enough that what makes it work is not so much that framework as the general consensus within society about the legitimacy and efficacy of the democratic political order.

For this reason, I think it might be fruitful to approach the question of democracy from the comparative perspective of the historical evolution of Western and African polities. Here we might remind ourselves (1) that the birth of Western democracy was both protracted and violent; (2) that the emergence of democracy was underpinned by the development of a uniquely dynamic and productive economic system—capitalism; and (3) that the effective functioning of democracy rests on the widest possible agreement about the legitimacy of the relationship between individual representation and parliamentary political accountability.

Democracy is thus an inherently fragile political system. Where consensus dissolves or where the economic basis of democracy withers, the whole political order is in jeopardy and may collapse (as it did in Germany in the 1930s). It is obvious that Africa has never enjoyed the economic strength and political stability which, in Europe, made possible the emergence of democracy. Furthermore, the continent is at present suffering an acute economic and political crisis. Under such conditions, then, it might well be asked whether there are any grounds for thinking that the recent multi-party elections in Africa are likely to result in viable democracies on the Western model.

Unfortunately, the very real possibility that present political transitions will fail to bring about greater political accountability could have serious practical consequences. The most immediate danger is that disillusionment and cynicism will lead to the dilution of the democratic aspiration. If multi-partyism brings few benefits to the mass of the population, if it is merely the sham which enables deeply compromised and unpopular regimes to stay in place, now with a new democratic legitimacy and with foreign financial support, then it is to be

feared that Africans might well give up on democracy altogether. Political analysts must thus be prepared to consider the limits of the present transitions in Africa.

### **The limits of democratization**

The debate here turns on the extent to which the recent political transitions have been sufficiently institutionalized to provide a viable political platform for overcoming the crisis in which most African countries find themselves. In other words, has democratization as it is at present to be seen in Africa produced an adequate political framework for the reforms which need to be implemented in order to increase political accountability and spur sustainable economic development?

On this issue there are strong views. Some analysts argue forcefully that, for all its shortcomings, nascent democratization in Africa has brought about fundamental change,<sup>14</sup> for at least two sets of reasons. First, because the opening up of the political system and the new democratic practices (competitive politics, elections, freedom of the press, etc.) have set precedents which it will be difficult to extinguish. Second, and more controversially, because these new democratic practices have altered the notion of the political 'good'. Henceforth, non-democratic regimes will irrevocably lack legitimacy.

Others argue, perhaps slightly less forcefully because their message is not so palatable, that the 'transition to democracy' is nothing of the kind. It is merely one of the many political transformations through which African countries have gone since independence. Their view is that democratization was largely induced from outside, that it amounted to little more than flawed multi-party elections, and that the practices of the newly elected regimes have differed little from those of their predecessors. Moreover, they argue, events since the first multi-party elections have confirmed their fears—both because these ostensibly democratic governments have displayed many of the same features as single-party regimes and because they have failed to accept the rigours of the political compromises required by democracy.

This is in part a dialogue of the deaf, since each side focuses attention on different aspects of the recent political transitions. Each can rely on the evidence of what has happened in some African countries, while conveniently neglecting what has happened elsewhere. For example, it can be argued that the re-election in Benin of the old socialist leader Kérékou (now, of course, a declared democrat) was a triumph of democracy. Conversely, the recent coup in Niger, overthrowing as it did a democratically elected president and prime minister who had conspired in bringing about political stalemate in the country, can be adduced as proof that democracy does nothing to solve the fundamental

<sup>14</sup> A view taken by Bratton and Van de Walle, *ibid.*

political divisions in any particular country. In view of present events, should Zambia be seen as a pioneer in the transition to democracy or a country in which the democratically elected regime has abused power so as to prevent democracy from working to its disadvantage?<sup>15</sup>

The question is not simple, and it would serve no purpose to try to approach it simplistically. Much of the argument is sterile, concerned as it is to prove a point, often for reasons which have little to do with Africa. Pitted against each other are those who want to show that the rolling tide of history is now bringing democracy to the most remote corners of the known world and those who believe that democracy (as we know it) is not possible in backward African countries.<sup>16</sup> Although it would be easy to point out that both arguments are ahistorical and flawed, this would in no way deter their proponents, for the simple reason that their viewpoint is ideological rather than analytical.

More consequential, perhaps, is the question of whether there is, or will be, a causal relation between the present political transitions and greater economic development in Africa. Judged by the emerging consensus on the matter—in which there is agreement between previously opposite perspectives, such as those of the World Bank and of the radical Nigerian social scientist, Claude Ake<sup>17</sup>—it would appear that the question is settled. Democracy is indeed now seen as a prerequisite to development; and development is, quite naturally, taken to be the only way out of the present crisis.

A closer analysis of this consensus, however, reveals diverging premises. On the one hand, there are those who argue that only democracy can free up the market which will drive economic growth; on the other, there are those who see democracy as the only way of ensuring that the state will be able to foster the necessary development. The one views democracy as a way of minimizing the role of the state and maximizing the role of the market; the other sees democracy as the mechanism for ensuring that the state will do what the market has hitherto failed to achieve. Here too, the debate is vitiated by the fact that both sides hold normative positions, since in practice there is to date in Africa no evidence decisively to support either argument.



What is at issue here is whether a focus on democratization is the most appropriate, or even the most useful, starting point for understanding contemporary African politics. Judging by the number of publications on the

<sup>15</sup> Among others, President Chiluba has often attempted to muzzle the press. He also introduced legislation of dubious legality to make it impossible for Kenneth Kaunda to challenge him in the last presidential elections.

<sup>16</sup> These two positions are illustrated by two notorious and influential American articles: F. Fukuyama, 'The end of history', *National Interest*, 16, 1989 and R. D. Kaplan, 'The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime, overpopulation and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994.

<sup>17</sup> See World Bank, *Adjustment in Africa: reforms, results and the road ahead* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1994) and Claude Ake, *Democracy and development in Africa* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1996). [Claude Ake's tragic death in a plane crash in 1997 was a great loss to African social science.]

subject, it would appear that the question of democracy is paramount. Furthermore, the newly emerging consensus on the causal importance of democracy for development in Africa reinforces the notion that political analysts as well as practitioners should concentrate their efforts on this issue.

The political realities of contemporary Africa and the conceptual and ideological pitfalls which we have identified above suggest to me, however, that a focus on democratization does not necessarily serve the analytical cause well. Whatever the meaning(s) of the present moves towards greater political liberalization, the limits of democratization are such as to reduce the heuristic utility of an approach to politics which concentrates primarily on the so-called transition to democracy. In short, the debate about democratization is all too often ideological, or normative.

My own approach is resolutely analytical. I have explained elsewhere why I think it more useful to focus on the question of political accountability rather than democracy when discussing contemporary African politics.<sup>18</sup> The point here is not just semantic. Democracy is a political system in which political accountability is enforced primarily through elections and parliamentary scrutiny. The reverse, however, does not necessarily apply. Elections and parliaments in and of themselves are no guarantees of a well-grounded system of political accountability.

If this is the case, then it is more important to ask whether there are, or are likely to be, sufficiently effective and legitimate forms of political accountability in post-colonial Africa than to ask whether they are 'democratic' or not. By this I mean that it is ultimately more significant for Africans to know that their rulers are accountable to them in ways which they consider legitimate than to take part in the formal 'rituals' of multi-party democracy.<sup>19</sup>

Let me be clear here. I am not saying that elections are unimportant; merely that they are no substitute for effective political accountability. Whether elections enhance political accountability or not depends less on how truly 'multi-party' they are and more on the quality of accountability they bring about in the postelectoral period. Where, as in Kenya, for example, multi-party elections are seen by the majority of the population merely as a way for the old political elites to legitimate their continued dominance of a de facto one-party system, then they are not likely to contribute much to greater and more sustained political accountability. The same is likely to occur when, after the elections, all meaningful opposition is suppressed—as is the case in most African countries.

However difficult it may be to assess political accountability in post-colonial Africa, unless we can devise a political analysis capable of doing so it will be well nigh impossible seriously to gauge the prospects for democracy. The

<sup>18</sup> See Patrick Chabal, *Power in Africa: an essay in political interpretation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> As President Museveni of Uganda has argued with vigour.

starting point for such an analysis must be a realistic understanding of what is actually happening politically on the continent. The conclusion of my most recent research is that a focus on multi-party political liberalization is liable to distract us from enquiring into the deep causes of the present political crisis in Africa. This is because in order to identify the reasons for the apparent disorder of black Africa we must begin by making sense of the multifarious and complex ways in which political accountability operated in the neo-patrimonial political systems that developed everywhere after independence.<sup>20</sup>

If, as I believe, it is not so much the absence of formal democracy but the deliquescence of the neo-patrimonial system which caused discontent in the 1980s, then we should be careful not to take too normative a view of the prospects for democracy in Africa. The development of political systems endowed with greater political accountability may turn out not to follow the apparently well-worn paths of Western multi-party democratization. The future of the continent may be less cheerful than the supporters of democratic theory believe; but it may also be less bleak than the failures of formal multi-party democracy suggest.

<sup>20</sup> My next book—P. Chabal and J. -P. Daloz, *Africa works: the political instrumentalisation of disorder* (forthcoming 1998)—provides a new paradigm for the analysis of politics in post-colonial Africa which seeks to explain the three most intractable paradoxes of its 'modernity': that is, the informalization of politics, the apparent 're-traditionalization' of society, and the ways in which so many can profit from apparent economic 'failure'.