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ASSESSING AFRICAN PARTY SYSTEMS AFTER THE THIRD WAVE

Carrie Manning

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the nature of party systems that have emerged in Africa in the wake of the adoption of democratic political systems after 1990. Although political parties help shape core democratic processes and institutions, parties and party systems have received relatively scant attention in the scholarly literature on democratization in Africa. I argue that party systems in most African countries are built on quite a different foundation from the one that undergirds both advanced industrial democracies and the theories about party systems generated by their experiences. I assess the strengths and limitations of the comparative literature on party system development in the light of African experiences, and argue for a more critical examination of concepts from that literature that have been widely used to assess the prospects and progress of party system institutionalization, including pluralism, system fragmentation and volatility.

KEY WORDS ■ Africa ■ democratization ■ party system ■ pluralism ■ political parties

Introduction

In this article, I examine party system development in sub-Saharan Africa following the wave of democratization in the region in the early 1990s. Prior to 1990, only four countries in sub-Saharan Africa (three of them on the mainland) could be accurately described as competitive electoral democracies: Botswana, Gambia, Senegal and Mauritius. Between 1990 and 1995, 38 out of 47 countries in sub-Saharan Africa held legislative elections. By 1994, wrote Bratton and van de Walle (1997: 8), 'not a single *de jure* one-party state remained in Africa'.

The seeds of competitive multiparty politics were scattered broadly on rocky soil, however, and in only a few places have those seeds taken root. Even where the democratic experiment has been successfully sustained, a

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single party, often the former ruling party in the one-party era, has tended to maintain a dominant share of power within the system through control of the executive, legislative majorities, or both. I examine the mixed results of democratization from the perspective of party and party system development.

At a minimum, democracy can be defined as 'a form of political regime in which citizens choose, in competitive elections, the occupants of the top political offices of the state' (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997: 13). Since the structuring of elections, from citizen participation to candidate selection and the presentation of competing political programmes, is done first and foremost by political parties, the growth of effective parties and party systems will necessarily form a major part of the foundation of the new regimes. Parties have received very little attention in the study of Africa's post-1990 democratic experiments.¹ Yet the most serious challenges to the long-term survival of democracy in many African countries are evident in the predominant characteristics of the parties and party systems that are emerging there. As Katz (1980: xi) reminds us:

[M]odern democracy is party democracy; the political institutions and practices that are the essence of democratic government in the Western view were the creations of political parties and would be unthinkable without them.

In the emerging democracies, as in the West, core democratic processes and institutions are shaped by political parties. It is thus imperative to assess who these parties are, what sorts of incentive structures they face, and how they are likely to use and to seek to shape the democratic institutions and processes they are helping to establish.

The argument of this article, in brief, is that party systems in many African countries are built on quite a different foundation from the one that undergirds both advanced industrial democracies and the theories about party systems generated by their experience. Instead of cross-cutting cleavages and flexible pluralism, there is political polarization and a certain fixity of cleavage lines. Pluralism, in the classical sense, is limited by the combined results of the challenges of state-building in Africa, the circumstances under which electoral politics emerged, and the predominance of state involvement in the economy, which has led to very limited private sectors (and hence limited opportunities for the emergence of alternative power centres outside the state.) Electoral politics came not as the culmination of processes of socio-economic change and social pluralism, but rather as a proposed solution to other problems, notably to economic mismanagement and/or violent conflict. Before presenting the argument, I shall describe the main characteristics of post-third-wave party systems in Africa.

Characterizing the Post-Third-Wave Party Systems

In terms of coverage, the democratic third wave in Africa was as expansive as the wave of single-party politics that followed on the heels of independence. Although there were numerous instances of multiparty elections in Africa in the immediate post-independence period, the vast majority of African states moved fairly rapidly toward one-party states in the decade following independence. In 1989, only four *de jure* multiparty systems remained – in Botswana, Mauritius, Senegal and the Gambia.²

The situation changed dramatically after 1990, under the combined pressure of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the adoption of political conditionality by donors, and the protracted economic decline over which long-standing authoritarian governments in Africa had presided. By 1995, virtually all sub-Saharan African countries had held at least one multiparty election. An assessment of electoral experience on the continent since 1990, offered by Nohlen et al. (1999), is summarized in Table 1. Of 41 countries included, 11 have had consistently competitive elections since the democratic opening in 1990, and two more held more competitive elections after one or two problematic polls (Ghana and Comoros). Two countries (Zambia and Niger) slid backward after holding free and fair transitional elections. In the other six countries that held an initial competitive election, all were plunged into civil war before the completion of the next electoral cycle. Eighteen countries have held elections which cannot be categorized as competitive. Thus just over one-quarter of the countries surveyed successfully completed second elections. One of these (Niger) subsequently fell prey to a military coup.

There are, of course, many qualifications that should be added to the discussion of even these countries as successful democratic transitions. Here I focus only on those aspects that bear on the development of parties and party systems. In this respect, two points are important to note.

First, few countries have experienced a turnover in executive power since the onset of multiparty politics. While transitional or founding elections led to a change of regime in 13 cases, after the founding elections incumbent advantage took firm hold (Nohlen et al., 1999). Of the countries in group two, only a handful saw a different party installed in second or third elections. These include Ghana, Senegal, Benin and Madagascar.

Second, former ruling parties enjoy legislative majorities in most sub-Saharan African countries that have made a transition to multiparty politics. Second elections, as Bratton has pointed out, tended to entrench incumbents in power. In 25 of 46 African countries, the majority party in the legislature won more than two-thirds of the vote. In 21 of those countries, the figure is 75 percent (Nohlen et al., 1999).³

A comparison of these data with the data compiled by Bratton and van de Walle from 1994 reveals that post-transition democratic outcomes seem to reflect, with striking regularity, the success or failure of the transition.

Table 1. General elections in Africa since 1990

<i>Nohlen et al. classification (as of 1999)</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Bratton and van de Walle classification, 1994 data</i>
Regular competitive elections held 'for some time'	Mauritius (1967)	No transition (already democratic)
	Botswana (1969)	No transition
	Senegal (1978)	No transition
	Gambia (until 1994)	No transition
Since democratic opening in 1990s, elections have been competitive	Namibia	Excluded from sample
	South Africa	Excluded from sample
	Cape Verde	
	São Tomé and Príncipe	All others classed as successful transition
	Benin	
	Seychelles	
	Madagascar	
	Mali	
	Malawi	
	Mozambique	
	Liberia	Precluded (war)
Competitive second elections not held (dates of founding elections in parentheses) Note that all states in this group succumbed to civil conflict before due date of next elections	Angola (1992)	Blocked
	Congo-B (1992)	Successful
	Burundi (1993) ^a	Blocked
	Central African Rep. (1993)	Successful
	Guinea-Bissau (1994)	Successful
	Sierra Leone (1996)	Blocked
Experienced problems after holding two competitive elections	Zambia (1991, 1996, 2001)	Successful
	Niger (1993, 1995, coup)	Successful
Non-competitive first elections held, but second elections were competitive	Ghana (1992, 1996, 2001)	Flawed
	Comoros (1990)	Flawed
Elections held, but have not been competitive	Algeria	Not in sample
	Burkina Faso	Flawed
	Cameroon	Flawed
	Chad	Blocked
	Côte d'Ivoire	Flawed
	Djibouti	Flawed
	Equatorial Guinea	Flawed
	Ethiopia	Blocked
Gabon	Flawed	

continued

Table 1. Continued

<i>Nohlen et al. classification (as of 1999)</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Bratton and van de Walle classification, 1994 data</i>
Elections held, but have not been competitive	Guinea	Blocked
	Kenya ^b	Flawed
	Mauritania	Flawed
	Nigeria	Blocked
	Tanzania	Blocked
	Togo	Flawed
	Tunisia	Not in sample
	Morocco	Not in sample
	Zimbabwe	Excluded from sample
Officially no party competition	Uganda (since 1986)	Blocked
	Swaziland (1993, 1998)	Flawed
	Sudan (1996)	Precluded (war)

For Bratton and van de Walle, a 'blocked transition' is one in which 'political reforms were launched but never fully realized . . . rulers made insincere and tactical concessions aimed at buying time to shore up collapsing authority, with no apparent intention of implementing elections or surrendering power' (1997: 120). A 'flawed transition' is one in which incumbents sought but were unable to forestall reform. In such cases, the transition went ahead but only at the price of extensive manipulation by incumbents of the rules of the game or the voting process itself. In most flawed cases incumbents were returned.

^a Burundi held its second competitive round of elections in July 2005.

^b Kenya has since held a competitive election in which the incumbent party was defeated (2002).
Sources: Nohlen et al. (1999); Bratton and van de Walle (1997).

Only three cases exist in which a country that experienced a flawed transition went on to hold successive competitive elections: Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania. What can be said of the countries that have held at least one additional competitive election since the transition? Do they share institutional features that set them apart from other cases as a group? There appears to be little to distinguish this group from less successful countries in terms of institutional arrangements. They mirror the characteristics of the broader group in most respects. Africa since 1990 is much like the Africa of the immediate post-independence period of multiparty politics, in which institutional arrangements reflect those in the former colonial power. Most anglophone and francophone countries adopted majoritarian electoral systems (plurality or plurality with majoritarian effects), while most former Belgian and Portuguese colonies opted for proportional representation. Presidentialism is more popular than pure parliamentary democracy across the board. Thirty-seven of 46 sub-Saharan African countries hold direct presidential elections. In most of these countries (29), presidential candidates must obtain an absolute majority; only Cameroon, Malawi and Zambia use a plurality system. In the rest, qualified majorities of different kinds are required.

The small set of apparently successful democratizers in Africa has not, it seems, stumbled on a distinctive institutional recipe for success. Nor are its members different from the larger group in terms of the ability of pre-transition incumbents to retain power or in terms of turnover since the transition. Most likely, it is the relationship between elites and institutions, and in some cases international actors, that accounts for the relatively more successful outcomes of these cases. If this is so, the study of party and party system development would offer one useful angle from which to approach these cases.

African Party Systems and the Problem of Pluralism

The disjuncture between democratic politics in theory and in practice in emergent democracies in Africa, as well as the challenges to accurate interpretation of that practice, is captured in macrocosm in the problematic concept of pluralism. Pluralism is a concept that merits far greater scrutiny than it has generally received in the literature on late democratizers. In particular, it is worth tracing the theoretical lineage of the linkage between pluralism and democracy in order to illuminate what pluralism is supposed to consist of and how it is expected to achieve its purpose of providing the basic foundation for democracy. The concept of pluralism (either in its liberal or more 'communitarian' form, à la Putnam) is an integral part of theories of liberal democracy, and the term commonly features in analyses of democratic development in Africa as well as elsewhere in the developing world (Bentley, 1967; Putnam, 1993; Truman, 1951). Too often, however, the outward manifestations of pluralism, such as a proliferation of voluntary organizations, are erroneously assumed to reflect the kind of underlying social pluralism on which liberal democratic theory relies. Most importantly, in liberal democratic theory pluralism presumes a flexibility of interest association across time as well as multiple and overlapping memberships for any single individual. As I shall argue below, such flexibility is often conspicuously absent in African countries.

Most theoretical work on civil society rests on a shared set of assumptions that harken back both to American pluralist writing in the tradition of David Truman and to the 'civic community' literature recently popularized by Robert Putnam (1993). At the core of both schools of thought is the notion that the existence of many interest groups with overlapping memberships facilitates political stability and creates educated and active citizens equipped with democratic values. By providing channels for representation and participation, a proliferation of voluntary organizations helps to facilitate state-society communication and ensure a credible and accountable state that will not systematically run counter to these organized interests. In some variations, the internal structure of civil society organizations is important. Such perspectives view voluntary organizations as

quintessentially modern, with horizontal authority structures, internally accountable leadership, and thus the potential to serve as small-scale 'schools of democratic life'. In other words, it is the interaction of many overlapping interest groups that serves to guarantee democracy.

Similarly, the 'civic republican' perspective, revived by Robert Putnam's (1993) book on associational life in Italy, maintains that a multiplicity of autonomous voluntary organizations with horizontal authority structures and internal mechanisms for accountability breeds a 'civic community'. This civic community is characterized by mutual trust, respect and shared norms and values which facilitate collective action and have a positive impact on economic performance. In addition to the socializing effects that voluntary associations have on individuals, they also serve to moderate and reshape society by cutting across family, ethnic, regional and religious affiliations. It is not necessarily individual voluntary groups that do this, although for some writers voluntary organizations are by definition 'modern' and eschew such 'primordial' differentiation. Rather, the existence of many competing groups, each of which is focused on the narrow interests of its members, is what produces the desired effect.

This idea has been usefully applied by those who write about today's resurgent civil society in various regions of the world. Often overlooked, however, are two conditions that hold pluralist theory together. First, what causes numerous groups to create cross-cutting cleavages is the fact that one individual is a member of many different groups. Essentially, this means that no single individual defines him or herself solely or even mainly by virtue of belonging to one particular group. Rather, individuals will join a number of groups that together reflect his or her entire portfolio of interests and values. As a result, cleavage lines are fluid and polarization is minimized.

For this condition to hold, however, two things must be true. First, it must be the case that, as Truman (1951) puts it, 'no tolerably normal person is totally absorbed in any group in which he participates . . .', and second, there must be a sufficiently broad array of different kinds of groups to allow people to have multiple memberships. Neither is a safe assumption where civil society is just emerging. To take the second condition first, there is unlikely to be such a broad and differentiated array of civil society organizations that most individuals are affiliated with two or more such organizations with conflicting goals. For one thing, the most likely scenario one can imagine is belonging to different groups that represent one's religion, one's occupational status and one's region. In some places, all of these are likely to coincide. In these cases, individuals have neither partial nor overlapping membership in the interest groups to which they belong. Thus the pluralism that is expected to undergird liberal democracy and socio-economic development is, in the conventional pluralist perspective, a product of both. What may pass for social pluralism in new democracies is not likely to perform the functions pluralism has played in the advanced industrial countries.

It is also important to note here that, in many developing countries, parties are precisely the kind of organization that have, and will continue to argue, that party membership indeed ought to define its members' identity completely. This is particularly true in countries with a history of single-party regimes, as in Eastern and Central Europe and in many African countries. Early students of parties argued that even in multiparty systems it is in the nature of political parties to try to monopolize the loyalty of their followers. For example, Ostrogorski (1964: 354) argues:

[T]o prevent the great mass of adherents on whom rests the power of the party from escaping it, their minds and their wills must be inveigled by every kind of device. As the parties are no longer cemented by principles and ideas . . . they have recourse to mechanical cohesion: they unite their contingents in a superstitious respect for pure forms, in a fetish-like worship of the 'party', to inculcate loyalty to its name and style, and thus establish a mortal mortmain over men's heads.

The concept of multiple, overlapping memberships may be especially problematic where, as in post-communist systems and certain African one-party states, people are accustomed to a political party which seeks to insert itself into all areas of social life and to monopolize associational life. Finally, as Gyimah-Boadi (1997: 283) points out, in Africa severe economic decline and political uncertainty have tended to undermine even the strongest of civil society organizations – middle-class professional associations. This means that there are fewer and fewer organizations to which people can belong.

The second condition of pluralist theory is the notion that a majority of citizens share a set of beliefs that serve as the parameters on interest group competition. As Truman (1951: 535) puts it:

[W]hether [the group interaction process] eventuates in disaster will depend in the future as in the past basically upon the effects of overlapping membership, particularly on the vitality of membership in those potential groups based on interests held widely throughout the society. These memberships are the means both of stability and change.

Truman introduces the notion of 'potential interest groups', in which all citizens have tacit membership. Such 'potential' groups could be mobilized were these fundamentals of the system to be violated. Overlapping memberships and shared belief in the fundamentals are what make a pluralistic political system possible – they are the brakes on both unrestrained diversity and enforced homogeneity.

The associational realms in today's late democratizers tend not to fit this description particularly well. While people may be members of multiple organizations, they may not have multiple memberships in the areas that count – in the more politicized areas where the battle for the scarce resources of the state are played out. In other words, while people have multifaceted social identities, the same might not be true of their political identities. Political identities determine the groups with which people identify when they confront the state and seek to make claims upon it. Thus

what is relevant is not so much the number and kinds of organizations that exist in the associational realm, but what their perceived purposes are for their members.

A brief look at the African context makes clear that the kind of pluralism presumed to be the basis of multiparty politics is absent in many African countries in part as a result of the strategies states have evolved in order to build a basis of political support, despite frequent references to pluralism in the literature on democratization in Africa.

For example, one of the most common assumptions in the literature on late democratizers (especially in Africa) is the notion that the proliferation of voluntary associations and political parties that has accompanied democratization constitutes the creation of a pluralistic civic and political sphere. In one typical characterization, Larry Diamond (1988: 23) maintains:

[A] rich and vibrant associational life has developed in many African countries independent of the state, and this pluralism in civil society has been one of the most significant forces for democracy . . . as they proliferate and mature, such groups spin a web of social pluralism that makes the consolidation of authoritarian domination increasingly difficult.

In this excerpt, a pluralist civil society is simply one with many organizations. Pluralism in this sense says nothing about the nature of those organizations or about the relationship of individuals to them. The use of the term pluralism in this first sense runs the risk of being an empty analytical concept, and it has hindered our understanding of the nature and potential of democratization processes on the African continent.

Second, a society is said to be plural if alternative centres of power exist to check the power of the state. Pluralism in this second sense is rare in Africa, as the state has been the centre of socio-economic as well as political advancement. This has to do with strategies of state-building, economic development and political survival developed by many African leaders to confront the challenges of the post-colonial period.⁴

Both in the first period of multiparty politics in Africa immediately after independence, and in the 'second independence' in the 1990s, parties often grew not out of socio-economic cleavages or struggles over the nature of state authority, but out of elites' urgent need for electoral vehicles which would allow them to compete in the newly devised rules of the political game. Often the easiest basis for mobilizing support is via the politicization of ethnicity. As Widner (1997: 68) reminds us, parties in Africa 'are highly particularistic, offering broad attacks against official corruption but utilizing kin-based or clientelist networks to build constituencies'. This has negative implications for the creation of a flexible pluralism in which individuals combine and recombine on the basis of shifting and multiple political identities.

The role of ideology in party formation and competition tends to be weak in African third-wave democracies, not least because, with the advent of structural adjustment and high aid dependency, all political contenders are

constrained by the same economic model and policy parameters. This is not to say there is no room for disagreement. But the range of alternative economic policy positions parties can realistically offer is limited. Civil society, finally, may look like civil society elsewhere, but it is different in two important ways. First, it is highly dependent either upon the state or external funders for its survival, due first to the long-term dominance of the state in the economy and then to economic decline. Second, it is not at all clear that the liberal modes of pluralist organization presumed in most discussions of civil society are the predominant mode of organization in African civil societies. Civil society organization in Africa often relies on kinship or clientelist networks to organize (Foley and Edwards, 1996; Gyimah-Boadi, 1997; Harbeson et al., 1994; Widner, 1997).

Throughout Africa, states since independence have been the predominant actors in their economies, taking a leading role in the organization of production, distribution and even consumption. Political power and economic power have long gone hand in hand. One implication of long-standing state dominance of the economy and the weakness of the private sectors is that opposition parties find it hard to challenge incumbents. First there is the problem of resources. As Widner (1997: 79) points out, in many African countries 'the present system provides the incumbent party with both easy access to public resources and enormous capacity to intimidate the private sector, preventing it from financing the opposition'. State control of economic resources helps to keep incumbents in power and increases the risk to would-be supporters of opposition parties in the private sector.

Evaluating Party Systems: Africa and the Comparative Literature

The economic, political and social parameters described above have contributed to the emergence of party systems in Africa that tend to share the following characteristics:

- 1 A predominant single party, normally either the pre-transition incumbent or the party that won the first transitional elections.
- 2 A proliferation of small, weak parties normally centred around a well-known public figure (often one with regional support) but devoid of organizational extension and structure.
- 3 Parties that are not easily ranged along a left–right spectrum; instead party platforms look broadly similar in their economic and other policy outlines. All parties tend to be similarly constrained by the imperatives of aid and structural adjustment.
- 4 Parties' links to a 'pluralistically' organized civil society are weak; they may be socially rooted not to liberal, pluralistic interest organizations, but to clientelistic or kinship-based networks.

How do we evaluate the implications of such party systems for the quality and durability of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa? To answer this question, it is worth examining the broader comparative literature on party and party system development. Here we include both the literature on parties and political development (which stresses the role parties play in providing order) and the literature on parties in advanced industrial democracies, which focuses more on parties' influence on the quality of democratic participation and contestation.

As we shall see, much of today's theorizing on regime transition, and especially on parties and civil society, draws heavily on assumptions from the literature on the political development and modernization of the 1950s and 1960s. While some of this literature (particularly Huntington) provides an important framework to help us think about the ways in which parties and civil society might contribute to the construction of stable, participatory political orders, in today's late democratizers the prescriptions of this literature are honoured far more in the breach than in practice. In most of these cases, neither parties nor civil society are capable of fulfilling the classic pluralist vision of 'a strong intermediate structure [consisting] of stable and independent groups which represent diverse and frequently conflicting interests' (Kornhauser, 1959: 30).

Parties and Political Order

Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968) provides what is still the classic statement of the importance of parties for orderly political modernization and development, and it is a useful starting point for understanding the likely role of parties in constructing democratic regimes. For Huntington, strong political institutions, including parties, are essential for controlling and channelling the heightened political mobilization that occurs with the advent of socio-economic progress. As more and more newly mobilized social groups clamour for incorporation into the political arena, an 'organizational vacuum' is created which must be filled by intermediary organizations if the system is to remain stable:

As modernization progresses the need to organize political participation also increases. . . . The longer the organizational vacuum is maintained, the more explosive it becomes.

(Huntington, 1968: 406)

Parties, according to Huntington, perform essential functions in terms of ordering the political system. They provide order and stability in society, and they serve to structure the political process and ensure that citizen participation in that process is orderly. They create new bases for solidarity and identity within society, cross-cutting and alleviating pre-existing cleavage lines, such as clan, ethnicity or religion. They seek to provide a distinctive collective identity for their followers, one that is premised upon

acceptance of the basic rules of the national political arena. Parties also provide order to the political process:

By regularizing the procedures for leadership succession and for the assimilation of new groups into the political system, parties provide the basis for stability and orderly change rather than for instability.

(Huntington, 1968: 405)

For Huntington and most other modernization theorists, modern mass politics was impossible without political parties. Huntington maintains that the eighteenth-century objections to parties as divisive to the body politic are:

. . . less arguments against parties than they are arguments against *weak* parties. . . . The evils attributed to party are, in reality, the attributes of a disorganized and fragmented politics of clique and faction which prevails when parties are non-existent or still very weak. Their cure lies in political organization; and in a modernizing state political organization means party organization.

(Huntington, 1968: 405–6)

For Huntington, parties forge unity out of disparate and potentially dangerous social forces. Parties are first and foremost tools of social organization and control, whether they are ruling parties in a single-party regime or opposition parties in a more open system. This was true for developing countries as much as for advanced industrial nations.

However, it is important to note that modernization theory rests on the assumption that parties will develop in response to similar stimuli in every country – primarily, socio-economic development. In the West, parties were the by-products of the Industrial Revolution and attendant social and political mobilization, and they reflect the social cleavages generated by this mobilization. The momentum comes from the bottom up; party organizations are devices for aggregating and transmitting societal demands. Parties in this scenario are automatically linked to a specific social base, defined by the central social conflicts of the era. Otherwise, mass-based political parties would never have come into being.⁵

As noted above, parties that are emerging in today's late democratizers in Africa, and in some Eastern European and Latin American countries, arose out of a very different context and perform very differently. Today's newly emerging parties have arisen largely in response to political, rather than socio-economic, change; they have emerged suddenly and are not organically linked to any particular organized social group, and so have often resorted to mobilizing people along the issues that are ready to hand – ethnicity, opposition to structural economic reform – without regard for the long-term consequences.

These parties do structure competition, but often in undesirable ways. The whole thrust of the comparative literature on parties is that parties are there to rein in divisive, expansive, even explosive, social forces unleashed by socio-economic modernization processes. In many African states it is just

the opposite – elites use parties to mobilize, aggregate and disaggregate various kinds of social forces. They do not represent social cleavages so much as manage and manipulate them.⁶ The question then becomes not who will control the grasping masses, but who will contain elite competition, for which parties are mere vehicles over which ordinary citizens have little control. Parties' social support in many countries still comes more from the promise of direct access to the state for that base than from the promise of economic policies that will bring growth and, indirectly, improvements in the lives of voters. Thus, while the forms of politics have changed substantially, the underlying logic of politics as an elite-driven enterprise in which the right to control the assets of the state is the only prize that matters has remained.

Parties and the Quality of Democracy

The characteristics of parties in much of sub-Saharan Africa also have important implications for the quality of democratic participation and contestation. Here the emphasis is on parties' role in providing for political inclusion.

In the comparative literature, parties are expected to provide the good of political inclusion in several ways. First, they structure the political socialization of social groups participating or aspiring to participate in the new political system. Second, they provide a distinctive collective identity through which members can be integrated into the political system. And third, they aggregate and channel constituents' demands through the political system in such a way that the system can respond to them. Once again, it is worth examining the circumstances under which parties are actually able to carry out these functions.

Scholarly analyses of democratic development tend to take Western experience as a gauge and a guide to democratization in Africa. Thus, there is relatively little to guide scholars in search of viable alternative frameworks of analysis of party and party system development. In his important volume on democratic consolidation in the third-wave democracies, Diamond (1997: xxiii) notes:

[P]olitical parties remain important if not essential instruments for representing political constituencies and interests, aggregating demands and preferences, recruiting and socializing new candidates for office, organizing the electoral competition for power, crafting policy alternatives, setting the policy-making agenda, forming effective governments, and integrating groups and individuals into the democratic process.

To perform these functions, Diamond and others note, parties should have strong links to a social base, offer distinctive platforms which appeal to a core set of voters and distinguish them clearly from other parties, and be able to attract and retain party activists and potential leaders. Huntington (1968: 408–10) argues that 'a party . . . is strong to the extent that it has

institutionalized mass support' and notes that a key aspect of party strength is 'organizational complexity and depth, particularly as revealed by the linkages between the party and social-economic organizations such as labor unions and peasant associations'. We have already noted that parties' rootedness in social groups may have different implications in many African countries than is foreseen in the comparative literature on parties. At this point, a comparison of the ways in which parties are understood to promote the socio-economic interests of their electoral base in advanced industrial democracies and in many new democracies in the developing world illustrates another important difference.

In the literature on advanced industrial democracies as in emerging democracies, parties' ability to deliver on promises to both voters and activists depends on their ability to win control of a share of government power – whether seats in the legislature or control of executive positions. In both settings, public office is an important source of patronage that aids in the recruitment and retainment of activists and potential candidates for future public office, and is essential to the process of leadership development within parties. In advanced industrial democracies, it is also expected that parties will use control of these offices to translate their platforms into effective public policy. Here is where much of the comparative literature, based on the experience of advanced industrial democracies, diverges from the experience of many emerging democracies in underdeveloped countries.

First, whereas parties in the former have a range of socio-economic policy options to choose from, as noted above the options in most African democracies are severely restricted to a narrow range by aid-dependence. Since the mid-1980s, most African countries have had a large proportion of their foreign aid conditioned upon the restructuring of their economies along neoliberal lines spelled out by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While implementation of these reforms has by no means been uniform or complete across the continent, there is little room for inter-party competition based on economic ideology or major policy changes.⁷

Second, the presumption in the comparative party literature is that by pursuing certain sets of economic policies rather than others, parties in advanced industrial democracies will redistribute national income to their constituents. Economic policies determine the degree to which growth benefits labour relative to capital, or the upper income groups relative to the 'working poor', for example. In emerging African democracies, however, parties will also seek to redistribute the national pie, but often it is not through policies that will affect growth and the distribution of income in the private sector. Instead, government policy affects the degree of access that different groups have to resources still controlled directly or indirectly by the state. Finally, in many of Africa's emerging democracies, parties have few or no resources with which to support themselves between elections, given the weakness of private sectors and the uncertainties of the political future. The resources gained through access to public office – including

salaries for party leaders and activists, the potential to provide various sorts of in-kind patronage to supporters, or even state subsidies for parties represented in parliament – are of vital importance for the survival of these new parties.

Weaknesses in parties themselves and gaps in our knowledge of parties in developing contexts are magnified when it comes to party systems. Says Diamond (1997: xxiii):

[I]nstitutionalized party systems thus increase democratic governability and legitimacy by facilitating legislative support for government policies; by channeling demands and conflicts through established procedures; by reducing the scope for populist demagogues to win power; and by making the democratic process more inclusive, accessible, representative, and effective.

These assumptions rest, clearly, on certain assumptions about the nature of the parties that make up the party system, as well as the context in which the party system operates: the nature of civil society, the particular institutional framework, the strength of institutions, etc. But it is important to note that party systems may well become institutionalized (accepted by all relevant political actors as defining both the principle actors and underlying rules of political interaction) without serving any of these positive purposes for ‘democratic governability’.

First, it is far from clear that parties will necessarily be interested in moderating the demands of their constituents, in channelling their demands through the system in constructive ways, or in constructive political socialization of their followers. All of this presumes that parties themselves have bought into the system and wish to see it preserved. This is not a safe assumption in new democracies where contending elites are likely still testing the limits of the system and striving to define the system in ways that are of maximum benefit to themselves. Instead, political leaders may well be more interested in preserving a degree of uncertainty regarding the destiny of a system about whose merits they still entertain serious doubts. This is likely to be true of incumbents as well as of opposition parties. Kenya is a good example of the former, Mozambique of the latter. In Kenya, President Moi and activists in his ruling KANU party incited violence against perceived supporters of opposition parties in the Rift Valley and in coastal areas before and after the country’s first two multiparty general elections in 1992 and 1996. The ruling party sought to cast this politically motivated violence as inter-ethnic warfare brought on by the tensions of electoral competition.⁸ In Mozambique, the leading opposition party, Renamo, has systematically sought to limit the functioning of formal institutions, including elections and parliament, in favour of informal negotiations between its own leadership and the government. This is part of a strategy to compensate for Renamo’s own organizational weaknesses (Manning, 2002; Wood and Haines, 1998: 107–18). Finally, frequent opposition boycotts also suggest that political actors still uncertain of their own

ability to perform well in the new political system are more likely to want to see it remain unstable and not routinized.

On another level, however, it may be that party system stability or institutionalization is neither as desirable (from the point of view of democratic consolidation) nor as hard to come by as has been suggested. Indeed, as Lipset and Rokkan (1967) suggest, there may well be great durability to the relationships established among parties at the onset of multiparty politics. Lipset and Rokkan's classic argument needs modification before it can be applied to the African context. They argue that parties and party systems capture and reflect underlying social cleavages at the time of party system formation, and then tend to freeze them so that these cleavages continue to structure the political system long after they have lost their historical relevance. In African contexts, parties are not in the first instance reflections of underlying social cleavages so much as creations of elites. These elites then capitalize effectively on existing social cleavages – particularly ethnic, regional, linguistic or religious lines – to gain competitive advantages. But either way, whether they reflect the manipulation of cleavages by elites or the encapsulation by parties of social conflicts spontaneously emanating from society, the lines of political competition may well have considerable staying power.

Moreover, in the absence of exogenous factors that might directly affect resource distribution, successive competitive elections tend to freeze both the distribution of power among political actors in the system and the substantive content of politics that obtained at the onset of multiparty competition. Free markets in electoral competition are probably about as effective at redistributing resources as are fully competitive economic systems. The outcomes will be determined jointly by initial resource allocations and the rules of the game. And those with the greatest resources at the outset are typically those who are writing the rules.

Finally, a brief glance at the cross-national analysis of party systems elsewhere in the world reveals the importance of giving due consideration to the assumptions built into the analysis of party systems in the broader literature, and invites caution in the application of conventional wisdom to disparate contexts. For example, the vast literature on party systems elsewhere in the world, while extremely rich and diverse, reflects a fairly broad consensus about the dimensions of party systems that are of greatest analytical importance to an understanding of how party systems affect political outcomes. These mostly relate to the structure of the party system as a whole, and include most importantly:

- 1 the number of parties (particularly important for stability);
- 2 the fragmentation of the party system (including the diversity of parties that exist, and the implications for coalition-formation and governability);
- 3 the nature and stability of the parties' social bases (parties' rootedness in society, stability of bases, strength of voter identification);

- 4 internal party cohesion (important for ensuring parties will be able to translate platforms into action);
- 5 the basis of inter-party competition (should be ideological and policy-oriented).

These variables, it is argued, can tell us much about the likely stability of a given democratic system and its chances for consolidation.⁹ First, the stability of a party system is thought to be related to the number of parties in it. As is widely argued, though not universally agreed, two-party systems are thought to be more stable than multiparty systems. This assertion assumes that two-party systems are necessarily populated by catch-all parties that more effectively aggregate and moderate societal interests. Parties in multiparty systems, however, may have the luxury of maintaining narrow appeals to smaller constituencies and still gain access to public office. They are likely to cause social and political fragmentation.

African party systems complicate assumptions about the number of parties and the implications for party system performance and outcomes of political competition. While the absolute number of parties is high, the number of relevant parties is relatively low.¹⁰ Of the 11 countries listed in Table 1 as having had consistently competitive elections from the transition on, several have what might qualify as a two-party system. The literature leads us to expect that two-party systems lead to the development of catch-all parties which appeal to a broad cross-section of the population and promote the development of cross-cutting cleavages likely to support the moderation necessary for sustainable democracy. But in Mozambique, for example, an apparently stable two-party system has emerged as a result of political polarization and rigid lines of cleavage born of protracted civil war and the politicization of ethnicity and region. Again, the assumption that party politics rests on a foundation of social pluralism, in the liberal sense, is at the heart of the problem.

Fragmentation is another common indicator of a party system's chances for consolidation. Here, both the number and diversity of the range of relevant parties are important. The degree of fragmentation, as well as ideological distance between parties, has implications for coalition-formation and hence for the stability of governance. Highly fragmented party systems marked by a high degree of ideological distance between parties have more difficulty forming stable governing coalitions. (Consideration must be given to this fact in the choice of electoral systems and institutional framework.) According to Sartori, highly fragmented party systems with high levels of ideological distance between parties tend toward 'polarized pluralism' (1976).

In the African context, the problem of fragmentation owes less to whether or not the electoral system encourages the proliferation of parties, or to the existence of major ideological differences. Instead, it tends to be a function of executive dominance. Most African countries have adopted presidential

or semi-presidential systems and have extremely weak legislatures. In such systems, the real prize is executive power, and there is little incentive for parties to form electoral coalitions that might preclude their own leaders from a shot at the highest position, even if this means they tend to lose out in terms of legislative seats. Another source of difficulty is the collective action problem arising from the strength of the ruling party, which retains a preponderance of economic as well as political power. Small opposition parties may see greater gains coming from bargaining with the incumbent rather than through recourse to a united opposition front.

The nature and stability of a party's links to its social base are captured in the notions of 'social rootedness' and volatility. Volatility measures the degree to which voters have developed a stable party identification (and conversely, the degree to which a party has developed a distinctive identity known and attractive to voters). Social rootedness concerns the links parties enjoy with their social base – how organized, how coherent, how deep. Strong party systems are presumably built upon strong parties, those with 'strong structures, identities, and ties' (Diamond, 1997: xxiv). Cohesive, coherent parties are more likely to survive over time and better able to translate their platforms into action in the form of government policy.

Parties in Africa do tend to lack clear programmatic identities and coherent organization, but they often have strong links to social groups (though not to the kind implied), while at the same time enjoying an excess of autonomy from their base. Yet their bases of electoral support are perhaps too durable. Volatility and fragmentation, among the most common measures of party system development and stability, are clearly not adequate measures of anything in the African context.

Conclusion

The study of party and party system development in Africa's emerging democracies is of the utmost importance to the study of African politics and comparative politics more generally. This discussion of African party systems and the comparative literature suggests that assumptions about the trajectory and outcomes of democratic development in Africa need to be more effectively probed and problematized on the basis of empirically informed analysis of operationalized politics in these systems. As the actors who must define, operate and maintain democratic institutions and processes, and as the intermediaries between the political system and citizens, parties clearly will be decisive in shaping the outcomes of democratic experiments in Africa. But it is not likely that they will do so in the same way that parties have done elsewhere. The role and character of parties depend very much on the degree to which elites choose to make parties, and for that matter democratic institutions, important. Elites may both define the rules of the game and play the game in ways that minimize

or maximize the importance of parties in ways that build party capacity or eviscerate parties. It is important to know how and why they choose either path, and to investigate the implications for the character and survival of democratic politics.

Notes

- 1 Notable exceptions include a recent special issue on parties in *Democratization* 9/3 (Autumn 2002). See, in particular, Carey (2002), Marty (2002), May and Massey (2002) and Randall and Svåsand (2002). On parties and elections in Africa in the early post-independence period, see Chazan (1982), Coleman and Rosberg (1964), Collier (1982), Emerson (1966) and Zolberg (1967), all focused on parties and elections during the first period of democratic decline in Africa, when virtually all of the transitional multiparty regimes created just before independence swiftly transformed themselves into single-party states. On democratization in the 1990s, see Wiseman (1992, 1995) and Young (1993).
- 2 Gambia's experiment with multiparty politics ended in 1994 with a military coup.
- 3 The data from Nohlen et al. (1999) have been updated here from various web sources, including www.agora.stm.it/elections/election.htm; www.ipu.org/parline-e/parline.htm.
- 4 For recent surveys on parties and democracy in Africa, see Kuenzi and Lambricht (2001), Randall and Svasand (2002) and Carey (2002).
- 5 On the development of parties in the West, see Sartori (1976).
- 6 For a discussion of this issue outside the context of developing democracies, see Schattschneider (1975).
- 7 The post-communist countries face a slightly different dilemma which leads to similar results. There, as Lipset points out, the former communist parties aim to stake out territory on both sides of traditional interest-based and class-based cleavages. They are both 'the defenders of traditional authority and privileged interests' and the champions of labour unions and 'the masses'. Lipset's question is pertinent for Africa as well as the former communist bloc: 'How does a policy develop parties firmly rooted in cleavages if there are no stark differences in interests and values at the outset?' (2000).
- 8 Detailed accounts of this violence can be found in Article 19, *Kenya: Post-Election Political Violence*, December 1998; Amnesty International *Annual Report 1998: Kenya*; and Ajulu (1999).
- 9 Note that other considerations, such as the range of parties represented and the proportionality of rules translating votes into seat shares, would be important for questions about effectiveness of a given party system in promoting certain democratic values, such as representation or accountability.
- 10 For a discussion of how to count parties in a party system, see Sartori (1976).

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