

# Rethinking Democratization in Contemporary African Politics

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## Abstract

This paper is intended to rethink democratization in African countries, which has been associated with hope and disillusion, since the beginning of the 1990s. African countries and people have undergone dramatic political transformation or turbulence in the transition from an authoritarian regime, led by military leaders or a one-party system, to a multiparty system promoting political freedom and participation. However, conflicts and civil wars have occurred concurrently on the continent. Democratization remains one of the most crucial political milestones in Africa's postcolonial political history and the most serious challenge in contemporary African politics. First, this paper briefly revisits postcolonial political history in Africa. Then the paper examines the political impacts, problems, and challenges of democratization in contemporary African countries by focusing on the factors and actors that have brought about democratization. Lastly, the paper reflects on the positive and negative views adopted in examining and understanding democratization in Africa.

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When the “third wave” of democratization hit the African continent, there was an outburst of optimistic scholarship voicing hopes for a “second liberation” that soon turned into sour commentaries on the lack of “real” change. (Lindberg 2009, 25)

## 1. Introduction

In the first decade of the 21st century, Africa’s political, economic, and social circumstances changed. Africa is no longer the hopeless continent (including archipelagic countries) where people live in miserable poverty and conflict under a brutal dictatorship, even if these issues remain serious challenges. African countries are no longer destined to be viewed as incurable patients or untalented students by the international (aid) community (de facto Western donor countries). Meanwhile, some European countries suffered a severe economic crisis in the first decade of the 21st century, and economists and policymakers worldwide began to expect Africa to be the locomotive of world economic growth. Consequently, African voices became more influential and listened to worldwide over the subsequent years.

In the 2010s, African countries celebrated their 50th anniversary of independence. Yet scholars of politics and journalists have been more likely to highlight bitter political experiences in postcolonial African history. Indeed, we have witnessed many tragic conflicts or long and brutal authoritarian regimes in African countries, especially before the dawn of democratization.

Recently, democracy has once again been highlighted as a focal issue in international relations. The US government hosted the Summit for Democracy at the end of 2021 and invited about 110 countries to attend, excluding China, Russia, and other potential adversaries (US Department of State, 2021). Democracy again became the US alliance’s ideological weapon in the New Cold War framework.

This paper aims to revisit the process and experiences of democratization in African countries to examine its achievements, predicaments, and challenges and review political perspectives on the coming era. Democratization is still one of the most crucial challenges and a political reform that has brought about the most significant political change in postcolonial African history. Although three decades have passed since democratization began on the African continent, it remains a crucial issue in African politics. In other words, the democratization experience covers approximately the second half of Africa’s postcolonial political history. Therefore, this paper roughly distinguishes two parts of Africa’s postcolonial history: the pre-democratization and democratization challenge periods. This paper

revisits and examines the democratization process in African countries to understand the history of and perspectives on African politics in the 21st century.

## **2. Overview of democratization in Africa**

### **2.1. Definition of the concept of democratization**

Democratization is the process of transforming the political system into a more democratic one. However, the concept of democracy itself has not necessarily been understood in a unique way in political science, leaving the question “What is democracy?” open. In this paper, the author understands democratization as the political reform process to ensure free political competition and broader political participation to establish a more liberal society principally by achieving the conditions described in the concept of polyarchy (Dahl 2000, 90-91).<sup>1</sup>

In studies on democratization in Africa, there has been a noticeable trend of analyses distinguishing two phases of the democratization process—namely, the democratic transition and democratic consolidation phases—to classify and simply understand this process. It seems relatively easier to study the democratic transition process than its consolidation process. In addition to its definition, the democratic transition period is more observable in cases of the political system transforming from an authoritarian regime to a more democratically reforming regime with the accompanying constitutional and institutional changes. Political changes are significantly visible to outside observers during the transition period. Practically, democratization is the political reform from a military or one-party regime to a multiparty system, which includes organizing presidential and legislative elections in the final phase of the transition process to choose leaders in the new democratically reformed political system.

Democratic consolidation means that political actors and citizens understand and act by respecting and promoting democratic rule through experience, regular elections, and nationwide dialogue without resorting to violence. How can we measure or analyze the achievement or progress of democratic consolidation related to political consciousness and behavior not only in political society but also in

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1. Lindberg (2009, 315–316) mentions, “Most of the contemporary comparative work on democratization is conducted in reference to Dahl’s understanding of polyarchy as the minimal but also empirically possible expression of democratic ideals. ... I am surprised by that even today since his list of key explanatory variables includes so many of what the literature still holds as important factors.”

civil society and in the broader population? How to examine or evaluate the process of consolidating democratization and in which conditions or criteria it should be achieved remains ambiguous.

Although three decades have already passed since the dawn of democratization in African countries, more time is needed to conclude the democratization process in Africa. While Western aid donor countries tend to watch and examine in the short term (e.g., 5 or 10 years), no country in global political history, including Western democratically developed countries themselves, has achieved democratization within such a short period. Over the decades or even centuries, countries have experienced countless states of political turmoil, setbacks, and regime turnovers that follow a zigzag path. However, three decades would seemingly be an appropriate period to revisit the first phase of the democratization process.

## **2.2. Postcolonial political history and democratization in Africa**

African countries achieved independence after European colonizers gave up their rule. The year 1960 was called “the year of Africa,” when 17 African states gained independence. However, this decolonization process did not build genuine nation-state or democratic governance. Despite the slogan of integrating ethnic groups and regions, the political situation became extremely unstable and tension arose in struggles for state power among political leaders, regions, and ethnic groups.

After independence, politically incited violence, such as military coups d'état or invasions by rebel forces, became the potential way to seize state power owing to the impossibility of achieving regime turnover through legitimate measures, such as elections. In particular, serious civil wars broke out in Congo and Nigeria in the 1960s that claimed millions of victims.

The interests of powerful Western countries in natural resources often underpinned these civil wars and their continuation. Access to the revenue (rent) from natural resources has been one of the most crucial causes of conflict or civil war in Africa, in addition to the “resource curse” (Auty 1993), which has hindered industrialization and sustainable economic development. In the case of Congo, the mineral resource-rich Katanga province declared its independence in the early 1960s, several years after Congo gained independence. In Nigeria, the Republic of Biafra (Southeastern region), the oil-producing region, declared its independence from the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the mid-1960s.

These postcolonial civil wars dominated the African continent in the first decades after independence, during the most crucial period of the Cold War between

the United States and the Soviet Union. Financial, material, and political support from the West and the East to governmental and/or rebel forces made such conflicts more complicated to resolve.

Although African conflicts have often been explained by ethnic rivalries or disputes, a complicated ethnic diversity does not necessarily cause armed conflict. After long struggles over political, economic, historical, social, and cultural interests, ethnicity has been strategically manipulated as a symbol to highlight the “enemy” and clarify the target to attack. Foreign interventions worsened and prolonged the Congolese and Nigerian conflicts in the 1960s.

Before the development of the Washington Consensus, in which major Western donor countries demanded that African countries adopt the multiparty system as a condition of foreign aid (so-called conditionality), Western countries had been willing to support authoritarian regimes in their commercial, diplomatic, and military interests to maintain and expand their influence against communist influence in Africa during the Cold War period. Western countries privileged political stability in African countries because of the threat of regime change brought by revolutionary forces with communist allies. This international situation enabled leaders of African countries to maintain authoritarian regimes, such as a one-party or military regime, until the end of the Cold War. Newly established revolutionary regimes needed close relations with communist regimes, such as the Soviet Union and China. In these fragile authoritarian regimes, violence was the sole means to achieve political turnover.

**Table 1: Number of successful coups d'état from 1950 to 2022**

Number of successful coups d'état	Countries
9	Burkina Faso
6	Benin, Nigeria, Sudan
5	Burundi, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Sierra Leone
4	Comoros, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, Niger
3	Central African Republic, Guinea, Lesotho, Togo, Uganda
2	Algeria, Chad, Congo (Rep. of), Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Rwanda
1	Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Gambia, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, São Tomé, Seychelles, Somalia, Tunisia, Zimbabwe

Source: Duzor and Williamson (2022), simplified and supplemented by author

During the 1960s and 1970s, frequent military coups d'état occurred as practical means for regime change. Several years after a coup, military leaders were likely to retire from the national army by establishing their own personally customized political party to appeal for so-called normalization of the political process or a return to civilian rule while retaining their power in the army and systematically excluding opponents from the political arena. Politically motivated violence would then repeat this cycle of regime change.

The 1980s are occasionally called the "lost decade" for Africa. The economic situation worsened due to the decline in prices of natural resources, especially oil, in international markets. Despite the massive spending on international aid over the decades, African countries had not achieved the remarkable economic development that donor countries had expected. Western donor countries generally shared a common understanding that the African states had not tackled socio-economic development. In the dramatic transformation in international relations brought about by the end of the Cold War, Western donor countries drastically changed their behavior toward African countries. They began to demand economic and political reforms they perceived as unavoidable, such as privatization, liberalization, and democratization, to improve the governance of African countries.

In addition to the end of the Cold War, we cannot neglect the internal political transformation in each African country. Even after almost three decades of independence, African people could not enjoy political freedom under the (less development-oriented than Asian regimes) authoritarian regimes. African people and civil society struggled for regime change, and economic recession pushed these movements. The late 1980s witnessed storms of demonstrations and protest movements against African governments, calling for a more democratic political regime under a multiparty system.

The end of the Cold War encouraged movements for democratization in Africa for two reasons. The first, mentioned above, was the change in Western donor countries' behavior regarding aid disbursement. The second one was that after the fall of communist regimes, the one-party regimes led by national vanguard parties remarkably lost their legitimacy and *raison d'être*. The end of the Cold War definitely damaged confidence in the one-party system. After the waves of pressure for democratization, requiring the introduction of the multiparty system, coming from inside and outside each African country, political leaders, who had been mounting stubborn resistance, finally accepted political reform.

### **3. Journey to democratization in Africa**

#### **3-1. Dawn of democratization**

The political change or democratization process has not progressed uniquely and straightforwardly in African countries. The political situation has transformed through political and international environmental change. During the democratic transition process in the early 1990s, scholars of African politics were more inclined to focus on which factor was crucial to launching democratization in African countries. They classified internal (domestic) and external (international) factors to analyze the democratic transition.

On the one hand, African leaders faced strong pressure for political reform and liberalization from domestic actors. In the late 1980s, people were frustrated by the inefficiency, corruption, inequality, and violence under Africa's one-party authoritarian regimes. However, the incumbent leaders were neither willing nor capable of reforming national politics by themselves, because political liberalization would reduce or end their political domination. Further, while there were enhanced requirements for democratization, new political leaders came from outside political society. Finally, this new political requirement and movement became influential, often recognized as "civil society." State leaders had to start negotiating with new (or non-traditional) political forces.

On the other hand, Western donor countries were requiring African countries to adopt democratic reform as the conditionality of foreign aid. Initially, African leaders resisted this pressure from aid donor countries. However, under heavy economic dependence on foreign aid, the African leaders could not maintain this resistance for long. Despite their reluctance, authoritarian leaders had to accept political reform.

Regarding the dawn of democratization in African countries, Western scholars tend to focus on international pressures rather than domestic movements to explain the reasons for countries' adoption of democratization. It is easier for outsiders to observe much more visible elements in the change in international circumstances brought by the end of the Cold War delegitimizing the one-party system and donor countries' pressure by imposing conditionality for foreign aid.

However, as time passed, African countries gradually adopted the multiparty system and began holding regular elections. At the institutional level, this requirement from aid donor countries was formally carried out. In addition, several years later, donor countries changed their attitude toward democratization, which had

once been part of the conditionality, and decreased their pressure on African countries. Western countries instead started focusing on “good governance,” which required a more administration-friendly reform than a troublesome political reform. As the political situation in Africa changed, researchers of African politics shifted their focus from international to domestic factors.

During the initial period of democratization, scholars vigorously discussed which actors had mainly led the democratic transition process in African countries. It was a question of whether the ancient regime leader or a new leader from outside the incumbent political society had the initiative to undertake this democratic transition. It was a focal question about whether democratization would come from above or below.

In the case of democratization from above, which began under the authoritarian leaders’ control and allowed them to maintain their political influence until the final stage of democratic transition, the elections were controlled by former regime leaders and merely confirmed their legitimacy. In the case of democratization from above, we could not expect much political progress toward Dahl’s concept of polyarchy. However, democratization from above could not be expected in African countries because of the authoritarian leaders’ unwillingness to relinquish power voluntarily.

In fact, democratization from below has been broadly observed in African countries. One of the most symbolic democratization-related events from below was the organization of the (Sovereign) National Conference,<sup>2</sup> which principally took place in French-speaking African countries.

The National Conference, inspired by the French Revolution in the late 18th century, took place to launch the democratization process. The historical model of the National Conference was the *Convention Nationale* (1792–1795). As indicated by the neologism “*Françafrique*,” which refers to a particular historical connection and close personal network intertwining political leaders in France and Francophone Africa (former French colonies), these African countries had to share some part of history under the French education system during the period of French colonialism. Ironically, French history (revolution) would continue to haunt political actors at moments of drastic political change in Francophone African countries.

The National Conference temporarily suspended incumbent state structures, such as the National Assembly, government, and constitution, and ruled during a

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2. On the democratization process launched by the National Conference, see Iwata (2000, 2004).



transitional period under the provisional supreme authority. Its goal was to carry out free and transparent elections to complete the democratic transition after the political institution was changed and reformed. The National Conference introduced its Act (*Acte de Conférence Nationale*) for the transition period as the provisional constitutional law, the High Council of the Republic (*Haut Conseil de la République*)<sup>3</sup> as the temporary legislative organization, and the government of transition.

The National Conference was requested to organize in francophone African countries as well as Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, and Nigeria, even if it did not necessarily occur in these countries (Eboussi Boulaga 1993, 15). Indeed, the National Conference was not necessarily organized in all francophone African countries. In fact, the majority of these countries did not adopt the National Conference or only partially carried out a national dialogue forum without temporarily transferring state sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

During the National Conference and democratic transition period, the president's (head of state) executive power was reduced to ceremonial functions, such as signing international treaties and receiving the diplomatic corps. The president performed his function under the transitional government set up through the National Conference. The president had to transfer the personnel management of the army to the prime minister of the transitional government<sup>5</sup> during the transitional period. Representative members of the National Conference from broadly selected organizations were counted from hundreds to more than 2,000 in each organizer country. A prolonged term of the transitional regime would bring a heavy financial burden (Eboussi Boulaga 1993, 12-13).

### **3.2. Challenges and obstacles in democratic transition and consolidation**

Cheeseman (2020) classifies modes of democratic transition (from above, stalemate patterns, from below) and their features and outcomes in a table. It is not necessarily all democratic trials that follow his patterns. However, this classification is

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3. In Benin, Niger, Togo, and Zaire, it was named Haut Conseil de la République (High Council of the Republic). In Chad, it was named Conseil supérieur de la transition (Transitional Superior Council). In Congo, it was named Conseil supérieur de la République (Superior Council of the Republic). In Gabon, a provisional legislative institution was not established.

4. In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Comoros, Guinea, Mauritania, Republic of Central Africa, and Madagascar, presidents rejected the requirement of the National Conference. The government organized a national dialogue forum without transferring state sovereignty to discuss the democratic transition (Du Bois de Gaudusson et al., 1997, 1998).

5. In Congo, command of the national army was transferred to the prime minister of the transition government (Baniafouna 1995, 51-55).

helpful for grasping the trend and expecting potential outcomes of the democratic transition process in African countries.

**Table 2: African transition trajectories**

<b>Mode of Transition</b>	<b>Main Features</b>	<b>Typical Outcome</b>
<b>From above</b>	Limited reform enacted and controlled by the incumbent elite	Incumbent victory, limited openings, and dominant-party state
<b>Stalemate</b> (Externally managed)	Stalemate between warring parties broken by internationally managed peace process and elections	Extremely fragile democratic gains dependent on continued international engagement
<b>Stalemate</b> (Externally triggered)	Stalemate between government and opposition broken by pressure for elections from international actors	Weakly grounded democratic gains, emergence of electoral-authoritarian regimes
<b>Stalemate</b> (Domestically triggered)	Stalemate between government and opposition broken by “corrective coup,” paving the way for multipartyism	No immediate gain but greater potential for reform, depending on will of the new ruling junta
<b>Stalemate</b> (Negotiated)	Stalemate between government and opposition leaders broken by elite compromise between moderates from both sides	Protection of core interests of all parties, stable democratic gains
<b>From below</b>	Overwhelming pressure for change led by domestic protest movement	Incumbent defeat, potential for democratic consolidation

Source: Cheeseman (2020, 43)

Since the early 1990s, democratization has not necessarily ensured political freedom and stability in African countries. In extreme cases, several countries experienced armed conflict after political instability and confusion. The Ivorian crisis in the 2000s is an emblematic case of the post-democratization conflict.

In the 1960s–70s, Côte d’Ivoire enjoyed a very positive reputation as the most politically stable African country that was achieving economic growth, called the “Côte d’Ivoire’s miracle,” under the strong leadership of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and his one-party system with the Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire (PDCI). As the wave of democratization rushed toward Côte d’Ivoire, President Houphouët-Boigny attempted democratization from above to sustain his political domination under PDCI, his political machine. Although Côte d’Ivoire introduced the multiparty system in 1990, PDCI remained dominant after the multiparty election. After

Houphouët-Boigny died in 1993, Henri Conan Bedié succeeded him and was victorious in the presidential and legislative elections while de facto excluding political opponents, such as Alassane Ouattara (former prime minister in the Houphouët-Boigny administration), by manipulating the law (Du Bois de Gaudusson et al., 1997, 263-266). In 1999, Bedié was ousted in a military coup d'état—the first successful regime turnover by a military coup in Côte d'Ivoire's postcolonial history. The military regime led by General Robert Guéi caused political tension due to his electoral fraud. Finally, he was assassinated. Laurent Gbagbo, a long-time opposition leader against the PDCI regime, was elected president of the Republic in 2000.

Despite the re-establishment of the civilian regime, Côte d'Ivoire remained divided by rebel forces (e.g., *la force nouvelle*) based in the northern region. Peace agreements were repeatedly concluded, such as the Marcoussi Agreement in 2003, but were repeatedly violated. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), France, and the African Union dispatched peacekeeping operation forces and staged military interventions in Côte d'Ivoire. After President Gbagbo repeatedly violated the agreement for presidential elections to normalize the political situation, an election eventually took place in 2010. After this presidential election, Côte d'Ivoire again fell into a storm of violence due to Gbagbo's refusal to accept the electoral result and attempt to overturn it. Alassane Ouattara declared victory, and the international community recognized his victory and supported his camp. After several months of armed clashes, Gbagbo was arrested in Abidjan. Côte d'Ivoire regained political stability and achieved economic recovery under the Ouattara administration (World Factbook-Cote d'Ivoire, 2022).

The Gambia embraced the multiparty system after winning independence in 1965. However, Yahya Jammeh ascended to power through a military coup d'état in 1994. Jammeh kept his personally ruled authoritarian military regime in place under a pseudo-multiparty system while appealing to his self-proclaimed spiritual power to cure patients of HIV/AIDS with bananas (Brisbane Times, 2007). After 22 years of rule of fear, he was over-confident to be re-elected "as programmed" in the presidential election held in December 2016 (World Factbook-The Gambia, 2022). However, Adama Barrow unexpectedly defeated his contender. Similar to Gbagbo, Jammeh refused the result of this election and tried to cancel it. However, he had to accept stepping down under severe pressure from the international community, especially from ECOWAS, with the presence of Senegalese troops sent to the border with the Gambia.

In Niger, the democratic process was initiated from below and seemed to keep advancing after the National Conference through to the first fair election in its

postcolonial history. However, Niger's democratic process was reversed by the military coup, which General Bare Mainassara attempted in 1996 (Du Bois de Gaudusson et al., 1998, 156-160). After three years of his personal rule, he was assassinated in 1999. Mamadou Tandja was democratically elected in 2000. However, he sought to remove the limitation of the presidential term in 2009, one year before the end of his second (final) term, by modifying the constitution to become de facto president for life. The coup ended Tandja's regime in 2010. Niger marked the worst record of any African country in undergoing three regime turn-overs by coups d'état since the start of its democratic transition in the early 1990s. After the transition period, Mahamadou Issoufou was elected president in 2011. In 2021, Mohammed Bazoum was elected president (World Factbook-Niger, 2022) and Niger began returning to democratization.

The international community (practically, Western countries) expected changes in the political system and behavior of political actors through the democratization process—that is, establishing a more democratic political culture to control state resources to escape personal rule, authoritarianism, and nepotism. This subject is related to the concept of democratic consolidation.

In his edited book *Le (non-)renouvellement des elites en Afrique sub-saharienne* (Non-renewal of Elites in Sub-Saharan Africa), Jean-Pascal Daloz focuses on the political elites' behavior after democratization started. According to Daloz, the generation of political leaders changed through democratization process, but the political behavior of elites did not (Daloz 1999, 19). They maintained their traditions, such as regionalism, clientelism, corruption, the struggle for private interests, personalization of political parties, and instrumentalization of civil society, even after the regime change.

At the dawn of democratization in Africa, this reform was expected to create and spread the democratic culture of political elites and people. A newly (re)introduced democratic system can only be sustained and developed under political actors' fair games and people's continuous dedication to political participation. In the one-party regime, people could not practice the political choice of their own will. Voting was merely a ritual ceremony to re-legitimize the incumbent authoritarian leader and his regime. After democratization started, African people were required to choose their representatives by expressing their own will and responsibility for their choice and acting in democratic engagements in politics. Although certain countries fell into political instability after democratization trials were launched, in general, the governance of African countries has not remarkably worsened (Van de Walle 2003, 306-307). With three decades of experience, we can observe gradual

changes in the behavior of political actors and people who neither try nor support seizing power by armed force and think of the country's interests from a long-term perspective, although the political turnover by military coups has still occurred.

## **4. Evaluations of Africa's democratization**

### **4.1. Positive views of democratization**

There is no doubt in my mind that Africa has gradually become more politically and economically free over the past almost 20 years and that apart from analyzing the most important causes, this new landscape of institutions, norms, actors, and actions have important effects as well. (Lindberg 2009, 46)

This section examines and reviews the democratization processes and experiences in African countries in the last three decades. Among political scientists, negative perceptions are dominant in evaluating democratization in Africa. However, we cannot dismiss the positive and potential aspects of democratization. This section examines Africa's democratization experiences from both perspectives.

Although pessimistic views on political transformation in Africa in the post-Cold War era broadly dominate among scholars of African politics, peaceful regime turnovers, repeatedly organized elections, and some signs of democratic consolidation have been more frequently and regularly observed, such as in Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, and South Africa. However, the progression of democratization has not necessarily been straightforward.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some African countries repeatedly and increasingly experienced elections without any interference from military coups d'état or civil wars. Peaceful regime turnovers through elections are no longer surprising events in the 21st century, although certain electoral violence remains a serious concern in African politics.

Elections have regularly taken place in African countries. However, in reality, the sitting president is often likely to win. For instance, from 2007 to 2012, there were 14 changes in top leadership following a nationwide vote, but in only three cases (Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Zambia) did an incumbent lose. In another 11 cases, incumbents died in office (one case), reached their term limit (five cases), or

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6. Some researchers evaluate the regime change narrowly with the case only where the incumbent head of state or government is defeated in the election. However, this paper recognizes regime change according to more realistic criteria when a new leader from a political force or party other than the incumbent regime is elected.

were ousted in coups prefatory to a new election (Opalo, 2012, 83). Opalo classifies political systems into four types between democracy and autocracy, as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Types of African political systems**

<b>Electoral Democracies</b>	<b>Emerging Democracies</b>	<b>Consolidating / Consolidated Autocracies</b>	<b>Ambiguous</b>
Benin Botswana Cape Verde Ghana Lesotho Mali Mauritius South Africa	Kenya Liberia Malawi Sierra Leone Zambia	Angola Burkina Faso Cameroon Central African Republic Chad Congo-Brazzaville Congo-Kinshasa Djibouti Equatorial Guinea Eritrea Ethiopia Gabon Gambia Guinea Madagascar Mauritania Rwanda Sudan Swaziland Togo Zimbabwe	Burundi Côte d'Ivoire Guinea-Bissau Mozambique Namibia Niger Nigeria Senegal Somalia South Sudan Tanzania Uganda

Source: Opalo (2012, 84), simplified by the author

Through the regular presidential, legislative, and municipal elections, we can observe the significant change in political behavior, which has become more competitive and democratic, in some African countries, though not in all countries on the continent. These peaceful regime transitions and the regular repetition of elections have been relatively freer and fairer than before the democratization process was launched in Africa. The democratic experiences have been accumulated year after year at the continental level, albeit in a non-linear way or often accompanying money politics during the early phases of democratic transition. These incidents have been observed in the history of democratic transition throughout the world, including in Western countries. However, such a democratization trend in Africa could not be expected until the end of the 1980s. We should recognize that this is remarkable and unignorable progress in African politics.

Since Ghana and Benin launched their democratic reforms, they have each kept a positive reputation as some of Africa's most successful democratization cases. However, their democratization trials have not necessarily been easy.

Even the more pessimistic scholars, who label political reform trials in developing countries "competitive authoritarianism" and do not recognize a political transformation as democratization, examine Ghana as an exceptional (unexpected) achievement of democratization in Africa. Authors who espouse the competitive authoritarianism theory, who are likely to understand the democratic process in developing countries negatively, mention,

Ghana's democratization is not explained by our theory. Rather, it was a product of Rawlings's leadership (and, specifically, his investment in credible democratic institutions) and opposition strength. (Levitsky & Way 2010, 307)

Ghana has experienced harsh political events in its postcolonial history. Since winning independence from the United Kingdom in 1957, the Ghanaian people have lived under authoritarian regimes. The founding president and ideological father of Africa's unification, Kwame Nkrumah, was ousted by a military coup d'état in 1966. After the first successful attempt, the military coup became the outstanding means for regime change before the dawn of democratization in Ghana. The young military officer, Jerry Rawlings, took power after his second coup attempt in 1981 and led a revolutionary regime.

Rawlings was one of the rare African military leaders who voluntarily accepted the transition to democratization. Ghana faced a difficult economic situation in the 1980s and was required by Western aid donor countries to adopt political reform at the beginning of the 1990s. Given the severe economic crisis and heavy dependence on foreign aid, Ghana had no choice but to accept its democratic transition. The Rawlings administration changed Ghana's constitution by introducing a multiparty political system and allowing opposition parties to freely enter the political system. Rawlings won the first democratically conducted presidential election in Ghana in 1992.

Ghana is also a rare case of an African country that experienced a successful and peaceful democratic transition carried out from above on the incumbent leader's initiative. Since 1992, Ghana has held eight peaceful presidential elections without any suspension of the democratic process by a military coup d'état, and it experienced three regime turnovers through close elections in 2000, 2008, and 2016. Therefore, Ghana exemplifies the hope of democracy in Africa, especially a

two-party democracy. It has had one of the most successful democratization processes in Africa. At the same time, Ghana has faced political challenges, such as violence, problematic electoral management, the patronage system, corruption, voting behavior along ethnic and regional lines, and weakness in checking the current power. However, Ghana has not faced any massive post-electoral violence, such as Kenya's post-electoral nationwide violence that occurred in 2007. Through its democratization experience, Ghana has improved its electoral management through the National Electoral Commission (NEC), which has tried to maintain its independence from state power (Gyimah-Boadi 2009, 138-149).

However, we can find some positive signs in Ghanaian politics that the media, civil society, and the NEC have functioned correctly (Jockers et al., 2010, 99-100). Ghana's NEC was established in 1993 and has successfully managed tense elections. The NEC managed and finalized the close presidential elections, in which the incumbents were defeated by their contenders (Gazibo 2020, 180).

Ghana has experienced regime turnovers through elections with significant swings in votes (Jockers et al., 2010, 111). The Ghanaian political situation has significantly improved compared to neighboring countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Burkina Faso (Jockers et al., 2010, 100).

Benin has experienced as many troublesome political events in its postcolonial history as Ghana. Benin and Ghana have experienced similar political histories at almost the same time. After gaining independence from France in 1960, the Beninese people lived almost entirely under military regimes until 1990. Benin underwent six successful military coups d'état. The last successful coup was directed by Mathieu Kérékou in 1972. Kérékou led his military-revolutionary regime by adopting Marxism-Leninism and changed the state denomination to the People's Republic of Benin.

However, like Ghana, Benin faced an economic crisis in the 1980s, the lost decade for Africa, and faced strong demands for political reform by domestic civil society organizations in the late 1980s, in addition to the pressure from Western countries. Finally, Kérékou had to accept the organization of the Sovereign National Conference (*La conférence nationale des forces vives de la nation*) by civil society organizations in 1990. The National Conference established special transition institutions while reducing President Kérékou's power during the transition period. The transition regime established the new democratic constitutions by organizing a referendum and hosting presidential and parliamentary elections under a multiparty system. Therefore, Benin is one of the most emblematic cases of peaceful democratic transition from below with civil society forces.



Even three decades after the dawn of democratization, Benin's political institutions established in the democratic transition remain respected and working under democratic rule, although politics is likely conducted by personal networks and regional connections (Cheeseman 2020, 46-47).

The National Autonomous Electoral Commission of Benin (*Commission électorale nationale autonome*, CENA) was established in 1995. It is composed of 23 members representing political parties, often dominated by opposition parties. Despite the confusion and disputes about and within the CENA, it remains a reliable institution for conducting elections in Benin and recognized turnovers of power (in 1996, 2006, and 2016). Gazibo (2020, 180) considers Benin one of Africa's more consolidated democracies.

While it remains emphatically true that “elections do not equal democracy” – that there is much more to having democracy and making it work than free, fair, and truly competitive elections – it is also the case that institutionalizing free and fair elections, with rigorous and effective electoral administration, is a crucial aspect of democracy. (Diamond 2009, xviii)

It is of course impossible to conceive of representative democracy without elections. (Lindberg 2009, 6)

Democratization is a political reform that requires a sufficiently long time, sometimes more than half a century, to achieve. Democratization might not necessarily be an appropriate agenda for foreign aid conditionality, which usually targets concluding in a very short term, such as a couple of years. Consequently, we cannot draw a definite conclusion about democratization in Africa after only two or three decades of experience, but we can consider introducing a multiparty democratic system as the beginning of a long political reform road accompanying many turbulent experiences in African countries. However, we have observed pessimistic results and many hopes and progress in democratization in African countries.

Studies on African democratization have been principally based on the Western ideal model. Thus, Western scholars have likely viewed democratization in Africa in comparison with (subtracting from) their own “true” democracy, which has been fostered in the Western world.

In the late 2000s, international circumstances significantly changed the democratization requirements in Africa. The new trend was brought from China. In contrast to traditional Western donor countries, China does not request

democratization as a condition of aid for African countries to deliver economic cooperation. This Chinese approach was later called the Beijing Consensus (Alden 2007, 105) in the Western world, in contrast to the Washington Consensus. This approach was welcomed by African countries, which had received pressure and sanctions from Western donor countries. African countries have tried to establish a close relationship with China. Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe developed the African “Look East” policy to approach China (Alden 2007, 59).

#### **4.2. Negative views on democratization**

This empirical phenomenon surely contributed to the broad category of “semi-democracy” used in the 1970s and 1980s, giving way to an increasing number of “democracies with adjectives” in the 1990s. (Lindberg 2009, 2)

We have observed positive and negative signs and evaluations of democratization in African countries. In the international community (de facto Western countries), negative views became dominant among scholars of African politics a decade after democratization was launched in African countries.

At the dawn of democratization in the early 1990s, in the post-Cold War era, the international community and Africanist scholars relatively shared an optimistic feeling in political perspectives on Africa’s future while occasionally referring to “Africa Renaissance,” “rebirth,” and “Second Liberalization.” However, pessimistic views gradually became dominant a decade after democratization was initiated in African countries (Gyimah-Boadi 2004, 1).

In the late 1990s, Western governments (donors) no longer strongly required democratization and political reform in African countries as aid conditionality. After the 9/11 incident, the United States changed the direction of its African policy by highlighting security issues rather than democratization. European countries also shifted their African policy to more security and refugee issues. In recent decades, emergent donors, such as China and India, have expanded their influence in Africa. These emerging influential donors are unlikely to request political reform in African countries. Economic and diplomatic motives are more crucial for these emerging countries to work with/in Africa.

At the dawn of democratization in Africa, France, one of Africa’s most influential donor countries at that time, categorically declared its orientation to democratization as its aid conditionality, announced by President François Mitterrand at the France–Africa Summit in 1990, which was later called the Declaration of La Baule. However, after a couple of years, France minimized its pressure and support

for democratization and returned to its traditional stance to keep its political influence and safeguard its economic interests in Africa, particularly in French-speaking countries. Thus, democratization is no longer at the top of the agenda in the African policy of the Western donor community in the 21st century, although rhetoric has remained on its agenda.

As backlash after the high expectations for democratization, pessimistic views and evaluations spread rapidly among Western scholars of African politics. Several years after the political liberalization process started in Africa, political scientists tried to understand the ongoing political reform in African countries by adding adjectives to the word “democracy,” such as “semi-,” “formal-,” “electoral-,” “partial-,” “weak-,” “illiberal-,” and “virtual-,” to express their reservations concerning political reforms in non-Western regions (Ottaway 2003, 7). Such rhetoric presupposes that democracy exists to some extent. At the same time, there was a common understanding among Western scholars of African politics that “full-” democracy has been established in the Western world.

The majority of negative opinions have been induced from the political reform in Africa in light of phenomena such as electoral fraud, political violence, corruption, limited contribution to economic development, and strained cohabitation in a multi-ethnic society. Scholars viewing African politics pessimistically have understood that the multiparty system neither resolved political problems nor made the behaviors of political actors and people more democratic as donor countries had expected.

One remarkable feature of the democratization process is the increase in money’s influence in political life. Money is always an indispensable resource for conducting political activities everywhere. However, it is evident that people speak about money more frequently and openly in African politics compared to the pre-democratization time.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Ghana has maintained its positive reputation for democratization as a “star pupil” in Africa in the eyes of the international community since the 1990s (Lindberg 2010, 132). According to Lindberg’s case studies on Ghana, expenditures on electoral campaigns have increased. For example, in the parliamentary election campaigns, a candidate consumed US\$3,000 in 1996, \$10,000 in 2000, \$40,000 in 2004, and \$75,000 in 2008, with the most expensive campaign on record estimated by the candidate at \$600,000. Members of parliament need to print more T-shirts in campaigns not only for their election staff but also for ordinary voters in the constituency and offer personal assistance to maintain their influence. T-shirts might be considered an important item by politicians to attract voters. The author once asked someone why people wear T-shirts displaying a candidate’s face. She said, “It is a free T-shirt,” not because she supports this candidate. The increasing role of money in politics is generally acknowledged, even though this trend is more remarkable among ministers and presidential candidates than ordinary parliamentarians (Lindberg 2010, 123-124).

During the early years after democratization launched, money was likely to be considered a more essential and powerful tool in political games. Political actors faced more severe competition compared to the one-party authoritarian regime era. They needed to spend more money or other resources on electoral campaigns in order to win the more “democratic” elections. It is likely that the international community would criticize such a situation as corruption.

However, such a scenario might be called the first initiation of democratization, instead of the rule of armed forces, violence, or mobilization by the army and dominant party under a one-party regime. While state violence became less influential, money began talking more powerfully in the political arena during the initial years after democratization. This phenomenon is not only related to African and new democracies but has been universal, including throughout the first and second waves of democratization in Western countries.

Although scholars of political science have not been willing to highlight money in the electoral process in a political transition, no election can take place without money, not only for holding the election but also for running electoral campaigns. Money is the indispensable gasoline of politics, and it talks much more directly in the first elections during a political transition period, which is not unique to Africa.

A large number of political regimes in the contemporary world... have established the institutional façades of democracy, including regular multiparty elections for the chief executive, in order to conceal (and reproduce) harsh realities of authoritarian governance. Although in historical perspective the authoritarian use of elections is nothing new, contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes take the time-honored practice of electoral manipulation to new heights. (Schedler 2006, 1)

After countless attempts to examine and interpret the democratization process and cases in Africa by limiting its meaning with the use of particular adjectives, many Western scholars studying African politics have gradually abandoned the concept of democratization or democracy. Instead, they have adopted the idea of “renewed” authoritarianism, adding an adjective for precision or to distinguish their understanding of the political process from “traditional (old)” authoritarianism to understand the political process in African countries in the post-Cold War era.

As time has passed since the political liberalization reform started, pessimistic views on political transition have spread among scholars of African political studies. Concepts derived from authoritarianism have expanded their influence in the

study of African politics. For instance, “semi-authoritarianism,” “electoral authoritarianism,” or “competitive authoritarianism” have been some of the most repeated “nuanced” concepts based on authoritarianism related to the political process in Africa since the 1990s.

Ottaway (2003) highlights the semi-authoritarianism concept in *Democracy Challenged*. Semi-authoritarianism does not mean a failed democracy. It is a controlled condition of democracy that the regime adopts to prevent competitive democracy with a formal “democratic” system, such as the multiparty system.

According to Ottaway, the political situation in developing countries is not based on democracy but on authoritarianism. “Semi-authoritarianism” is no longer a type of democracy but a different political category. The characteristics of semi-authoritarianism are the “transfer of power through controlled election,” “weak political institutionalization,” “gap between political and economic reform,” and “limitation of civil society” (Ottaway 2003, 15–19). The semi-authoritarian regime is a political hybrid with no political competition to seek power. However, minimal political space, such as political parties, civil society, and the press, is permitted (Ottaway 2003, 3).

Electoral authoritarian regimes play the game of multiparty elections by holding regular elections for the chief executive and a national legislative assembly. Yet they violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so profoundly and systematically as to render elections instruments of authoritarian rule rather than “instruments of democracy.” Under electoral authoritarian rule, elections are broadly inclusive (they are held under universal suffrage) as well as minimally pluralistic (opposition parties are allowed to run), minimally competitive (opposition parties, while denied victory, are allowed to win votes and seats), and minimally open (opposition parties are not subject to massive repression, although they may experience repressive treatment in selective and intermittent ways). (Schedler 2006, 3)

The concept of electoral authoritarianism highlights elections deployed in an authoritarian style. In electoral authoritarianism, elections are institutionalized and take place regularly but are controlled and manipulated by the authoritarian regime with accompanying electoral fraud or restriction of the opposition’s participation to ensure a comfortable result in favor of the incumbent regime. Although this is distinguished from democracy and full-authoritarianism, regime turnover is not expected through elections under the electoral authoritarian regime.

Unlike authoritarian regimes that permit limited forms of pluralism in civil society, EA (electoral authoritarianism) regimes go a step further and open up political society (the party system) as well to limited forms of pluralism. (Schedler 2006, 5)

According to Schedler (2006), minimal civil liberty is ensured for the activities of civil society under the electoral authoritarian regime, although political turnover cannot be expected through civil society's interventions and elections.

In recent years, the idea of competitive authoritarianism has influenced political scientists to gain a better understanding of the political process experienced in developing countries in the post-Cold War era.

Levitsky and Way (2010) distinguish competitive authoritarian regimes from full-authoritarian and full-democracy regimes. They classify the political regime in most developing or non-Western countries as a "competitive authoritarian regime" while broadly covering its range and strictly limiting the range of full-authoritarian regimes and full democracy:

Competitive authoritarian regimes are distinguished from full authoritarianism in that constitutional channels exist through which opposition groups compete in a meaningful way for executive power. Elections are held regularly and opposition parties are not legally barred from contesting them. Opposition activity is above ground: Opposition parties can open offices, recruit candidates, and organize campaigns, and politicians are rarely exiled or imprisoned. In short, democratic procedures are sufficiently meaningful for opposition groups to take them seriously as arenas through which do contest for power. What distinguishes competitive authoritarianism from democracy, however, is the fact that incumbent abuse of the state violates at least one of three defining attributes of democracy: (1) free elections, (2) broad protection of civil liberties, and (3) a reasonably level playing field. (Levitsky & Way 2010, 7)

According to Levitsky and Way, as well as other scholars highlighting the concept of authoritarianism, it is not appropriate to adopt the concept of democracy to understand the political transformation of a hybrid regime in non-Western countries and regions after the end of the Cold War but better to understand this as a subtype of renewed authoritarianism.

Rather than "partial," "incomplete," or "unconsolidated" democracies, these

cases should be conceptualized for what they are: a distinct, nondemocratic regime type. Instead of assuming that such regimes are in transition to democracy, it is more useful to ask why some democratized and others did not. This is the goal of our study. (Levitsky & Way 2010, 4)

According to Levitsky and Way, under competitive authoritarian regimes, relatively competitive elections regularly occur in which opposition parties and candidates can participate without bare exclusions of opposition and severe fraud orchestrated by the authority. However, these elections are not entirely free and fair while skewing the rule and field to limit opponents' opportunities to sustain the incumbent regime's dominance (Levitsky & Way 2010, 8).

Levitsky and Way propose three indicators (*Western linkage, Western leverage, and organizational power*) to measure and classify political regimes in the post-Cold War era, distinguishing competitive authoritarian regimes from the full-authoritarian regime and full democracy. They consider that non-Western countries would become more democratic when Western linkage and leverage are strong; in other words, the Western influence is strong. When the (domestic) political, executive power is strong, these countries will likely become more authoritarian.

**Table 4: Predicted and actual regime outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990–2008**

Case	Linkage	Organizational Power	Leverage	Predicted Outcome	Actual Outcome
Benin	Low	Low	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Democratization
Botswana	Low	High	High	Stable Authoritarianism	Stable Authoritarianism
Cameroon	Low	Medium	Medium	Stable Authoritarianism	Stable Authoritarianism
Gabon	Low	High	Medium	Stable Authoritarianism	Stable Authoritarianism
Ghana	Low	Medium	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Democratization
Kenya	Low	Medium	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Unstable Authoritarianism
Madagascar	Low	Low	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Unstable Authoritarianism
Malawi	Low	Low	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Unstable Authoritarianism
Mali	Low	Low	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Democratization
Mozambique	Low	Medium High	High	Stable Authoritarianism	Stable Authoritarianism
Senegal	Low	Medium	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Unstable Authoritarianism
Tanzania	Low	Medium High	High	Stable Authoritarianism	Stable Authoritarianism
Zambia	Low	Medium Low	High	Unstable Authoritarianism	Unstable Authoritarianism
Zimbabwe	Low	High	High	Stable Authoritarianism	Stable Authoritarianism

Source: Levitsky and Way (2010, 306)

These authors overevaluate Western influence (linkage and leverage) on the political transformation of developing countries. Western countries did not promote

political liberalization in their foreign policy toward the Third World in the Cold War era but thoroughly supported authoritarian regimes to enlarge Western alliances against the Soviet Bloc. Even after the Cold War ended, political liberalization was not the principle objective of their African policy. We need to be careful about the flexibility of the behavior of Western countries toward political development or liberalization.

Western aid donors have been inclined to require a clearly visible change and judge the result of the political transformation in the short term, such as five years or so. Moreover, these countries have evaluated the democratic process in Africa and other developing regions from a perspective based on an imagined model of democratization.

Democratization is a political reform, not a magical panacea that resolves all political problems by bringing economic development to developing countries. Western countries underwent the same long, non-linear process earlier. They are prone to easily put aside their own experiences of a long and painful history when they require democratization of others. No Western country carried out this painstaking reform within five years or even a decade. African countries also need sufficient time and patience to digest democratic reform according to their economic, political, and social contexts.

## **5. Conclusion: Democratization in Africa between hope and disillusion**

There is an understandable temptation to load too many expectations on this concept and to imagine that by attaining democracy, a society will have resolved all of its political, social, economic, administrative, and cultural problems. Unfortunately, “all good things do not necessarily go together. (Schmitter & Karl 2009, 13)

This paper traced and examined the democratization process and experiences in African countries. This is one of the most crucial challenges for political development in Africa.

In the early 1990s, aid donor countries straightforwardly required political reform; in other words, democratization presupposed that political liberation would bring economic development and administrative efficiency to African countries. However, democratization has not automatically resolved all political, economic, administrative, and cultural problems (Schmitter & Karl 2009, 13-15).

Despite various negative evaluations or analyses, democratization has



certainly brought about critical political changes and improvements, such as peaceful regime change through relatively freer and fairer elections, even with some irregularities due to lack of experience; enlargement of freedom of the press, which has improved political transparency; and active political involvement in civil society.

We have observed multiple peaceful regime turnovers through elections in African countries like Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, and Zambia since the 1990s. Indeed, these positive phenomena are not necessarily observed in all African countries. In some countries, we should recognize the completely opposite realities working against democratization, such as in Angola, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and many other countries. It is not difficult to point out and criticize visible problems or violations of democratic rules during three decades of African democratization trials. However, these pessimistic visions often neglect various positive political changes and progress.

In conclusion, political development does not necessarily bring economic development in the short term. We do not find any direct correlation between political and economic development as aid donors expected or forced on aid recipient countries at the beginning of the post-Cold War era. Economic development in African countries in the 21st century is a more appropriate case. This still heavily depends on the rising prices of natural resources. Engagements and efforts for democratization do not necessarily bring GDP growth in the very short term. However, trials and experiences of democratization improve the business environment, which makes business more competitive and creates a more transparent society in the long term. Freedom of expression should not be ignorable to conduct business freely.

Democratization is not a political reform that can be fully achieved within a couple of years or even one or two decades. Undergoing this process requires sufficient and appropriate time depending on each country's historical, social and political contexts. In addition, African countries continue to tackle enormous challenges in state- and nation-building after around a half-century of their history as sovereign states. Meanwhile, these African countries have been required by the international community (aid donor countries) to simultaneously carry out democratization and economic development for decades. It must be the toughest challenge, which not all countries have faced, in world political history. It takes a sufficiently appropriate amount of time to carry out democratization; there are no shortcuts.

We need to keep carefully watching democratization in Africa in the longer term while keeping a critical eye but not necessarily a pessimistic view.

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