

Democracy, elections & political parties

A conceptual overview with special emphasis on Africa

Berouk Mesfin

ISS Paper 166 • July 2008

Price: R15.00



Introduction

Few concepts are more central to the modern state and at the same time difficult to define than the concepts of democracy, elections and political parties. This paper, based on books, book chapters, journal articles and research papers, will nonetheless try to defy the odds and explain these concepts as clearly as possible and in the context of Africa. It is organised as follows. Section one elaborates on the definitions of elections and democracy. Section two considers the quality of elections in Africa as well as the most common perceptions concerning them. Section three briefly describes the selection, categories and operation of the various electoral systems. Section four examines the type and responsibility of the three institutions crucial to carry out and secure the preparation and conduct of elections, namely the electoral commission, the judiciary and the military. Section five discusses the purposes, relevance and constraints of international observation, while section six reviews those of domestic observation groups. Section seven surveys the different attempts to define the concept of political party, identifies its distinguishing characteristics and clarifies its most basic functions, especially those that generally relate to elections. And, section eight finally considers the historical background, leadership, foundation and inadequacies of Africa's political parties.

Elections as prerequisites of democracy

Makinda (1996:557) held that, generally, democracy can be seen 'as a way of government firmly rooted in the belief that people in any society should be free to determine their own political, economic, social, and cultural systems.' More commonly, the concept of democracy is used to describe a political system designed to widen the participation of ordinary citizens in government the powers of which are clearly defined and limited. New democracies, as opposed

to more established ones, are by definition fragile in the sense that they not formally constituted and are less experienced (Pridham & Lewis 1996:1). Vengroff and Magala (2001:130) have gone ahead to contend that new democracies also lack the pre-existence of a political culture of democracy the emergence and growth of which could, however, become possible as a result of institutional modifications independent of economic development.

Nonetheless, the founding pillars of any democratic political system, whether considered fragile or established, remain undoubtedly elections which can simply be taken as the most critical and visible means through which all citizens can peacefully choose or remove their leaders, and which are evidently costly affairs (Anglin 1998:474). In other words, elections are the principal instruments that 'compel or encourage the policy-makers to pay attention to citizens' (Powell 2000:4). Indeed, the winning political party of the elections, or ruling party, is conceived as holding temporarily the mandate of the entire citizenry, only in so far as it continues to win elections. Parallely, political opposition is held to be legal, legitimate and even necessary because there will simply be no real test of the competence of the ruling party without such opposition in elections.

The founding pillars of any democratic political system, whether considered fragile or established, remain undoubtedly elections

Thus, elections require the existence of a multiparty system so that citizens make a political decision by voting for the competing candidates fielded by various political parties holding divergent views and presenting different alternatives. There is general agreement among political scientists that one of the essential components in a healthy democracy is the existence of an enduring opposition that critically checks the day-to-day activities of the ruling party (Kiisa 2005; Ionescu & de Madariaga 1968). In fact, the ruling parties attempt to run the government so as to defend their record and win public approval, knowing that if they fail to do so they may lose office. The opposition



parties point out defects in the ruling parties' public policies and make alternative proposals, hoping that the voters will entrust them with power in a four, five or six years time. 'The opposition, then, is essentially a government-in-waiting' (Kiisa 2005:3).

It follows that, in any political system, the democratic litmus test will be, by default, the peaceful changeover of government power with the opposition winning elections and constituting a government, and the ruling party quietly accepting the results and not responding with violence and intimidation. This has recently occurred in Zimbabwe where the ruling party accepted its defeat in the first round of the elections of 28 March 2008 with trepidation and almost immediately resorted to absurd retribution (Amnesty International 2008). Otherwise, as Mainwaring (2001:190) puts it, 'opportunities for new parties are restricted, not legally, but rather as a result of the low turnover.' Another form of test may be power-sharing (Budge & Keman 1990). Power-sharing arrangement is generally formed when the ruling party's confidence and legitimacy are severely weakened even though it remains strong enough to exercise control over the most important institutions.

The creation of a power-sharing arrangement has the advantage of conferring some sort of legitimacy to the ruling party without discrediting the opposition. It might reduce the ruling party's fear of losing everything and fear of future reprisals while, at the same time, it might assuage the opposition's anxiety that the ruling party might have somehow rigged the elections. That is what occurred in Kenya after the 2007 elections, but only after the unexpected post-elections turmoil which killed 1 000 of its citizens, drove 300 000 from their homes and constituted a considerable setback for its image as Africa's show case of democracy and stability. What is grave is that it may still prove to be more deceitful than genuine and may further undermine the already shaky faith of Kenyans in democracy (Chege, Mukele & Kabeberi 2007:3; Afrobarometer 2006).

Elections in Africa

The conventional wisdom holds that, despite the political overture of the 1990s, there is no place for democracy in Africa because of one-party dominance, restriction of civil liberties, monopolisation of the means of mass communication, marginalisation of civil society, detrimental economic indicators and disrupting foreign interference (Diamond 2008:7-9). A brief revisit of the last two variables is necessary. To be sure, African states have been continuously suffering from inflation and food shortages, inadequate reserves, external imbalances and the burden of debt servicing.

Furthermore, the United States and European states only require a simulacrum of democratic adherence to play down the anti-democratic practices carried out by African governments, and to even reward them with increased assistance. To make matters worse, 'many [African] citizens are beginning to perceive that democracy has distinctive shortcomings including unruly political discourse, a poor record of service delivery, and new opportunities for corruption' (Bratton 2007:5). Adhering to this line of argument developed by political scientists closely studying African politics, Joseph (1999:11) maintains that, in Africa,

the prime purpose of elections will remain the legitimization of whatever regime that currently holds governmental power ... [and] are far from being autonomous operations: they reflect the character of the political order and especially the degree of risk incumbents are willing to tolerate.

According to these political scientists, African elections are, in simple terms, *window-dressing rituals* with no real political meaning other than the stuffing of the ballot boxes behind closed doors. They are just administrative formalities which have become standard *signs of good conduct* adopted by African governments to Western states and international institutions on which they are financially and politically dependent (Adejumobi 2000:66). Doubts have even sprung up whether multiparty systems are altogether appropriate to the highly divided societies of Africa (Young 1993:301), and cynicism has won the day with contentions that, in Africa, 'a flawed election may be preferable to no election at all' (Anglin 1998:474). More expressively, Chabal (2001:3) has written that multiparty competition has not improved accountability, with the exception of Botswana and most notably the island states of Cape Verde and Mauritius, and that it has not led to more sustained economic development.

In Africa where most states are undeniably plural societies marked by deep cleavages among a diversity of ethnic groups (Erdmann & Basedau 2007:15), elections seem to provide the opportunity to legitimise the political and economic pre-eminence of one group, to reward supporters of that group and compel them to adopt greater political conformity, and to reimpose a firm hand on challenging elements within or outside that group (Young 1993:305). In other words, they seem to merely represent an artificial exercise the results of which are instinctively manipulated by a ruling party in order to prevent opposition political parties winning elections despite the fact that citizens might courageously vote for change (Monga 1997:51; Bratton

African elections
are just
administrative
formalities which
have become
standard signs
of good conduct
adopted by
governments to
Western states



& Van de Walle 1997:234–235). The cumulative effect of such a misdemeanour will be, unfortunately, political uncertainty and the sharpening of ethnic politics which will, in turn, inspire the widespread disillusionment of Africa's citizens who will be forced to rethink that the solution to prevailing problems cannot be found within the framework of democracy.

Electoral systems

Nohlen (1996:20) posits that electoral systems determine 'the rules according to which the voters may express their political preferences and according to which it is possible to convert votes into parliamentary seats or in government posts.' Electoral systems are by no means uniform and identical, and the selection of one type of electoral systems depends on two important variables. On the one hand, the content and design of competing electoral systems depend on the socio-cultural, historical, geographic, economic and political conditions of a given state. On the other hand, they just constitute one method determining the nature of the prevailing political system, including its inclusivity towards 'groups that had previously been locked in conflict' (Chege, Mukele & Kabeberi 2007:4), and also the overall shape of the party system, including the way political parties organise and operate internally (Rakner & Svåsand 2007:6).

In the established democracies, alternative electoral systems result from the choice by political parties which is predictably based on each alternative system's expected effects, both immediate and long-term, on their electoral self-interests (Benoit 2004:367). In emerging democracies, on the contrary, what form of electoral system is most appropriate for the consolidation of democratic rule is rarely debated among political leaders, electoral administrators and civil society elements (Barkan, Densham & Rushton 2006:926). In fact, particularly in Africa, Rakner and Svåsand (2007:6) made it clear that

unlike more established democratic systems, we observe that while the electoral formula impacts on the form of representation of parties in the legislature, other factors, like the importance of presidential rule, the regional distribution of voters, and manipulation of constituency design also impact on party representation and contribute to the observed dominance of one party.

Electoral systems are broadly grouped into three major categories with their own variations: the *plurality system*, the *majority system* and the *proportional representation system*. The *plurality system* is variously

called first-past-the-post or winner-takes-all. This system is based on territorially demarcated single member constituencies, with the candidate or party getting the greater number of votes winning in only one round even if the proportion of the votes gained does not constitute a majority (Shively 1999:210). Murithi (2000:3), however, holds that this system constitutes both a structural inadequacy and an obstacle to democracy in Africa's highly ethnicised politics as the votes cast for the losers are considered wasted in the sense that they do not serve as effective instruments for expressing the voters' will. The *majority system* is a modification of the *plurality system* as the candidate only wins if he or she receives an absolute majority of the votes cast in the constituency, that is, one more than 50 % of the total votes cast (Bauer 2001:108–109). An effect of both the *plurality system* and the *majority system* is that they tend to exaggerate the parliamentary representation of the largest political party (Rakner & Svåsand 2007:6).

The *proportional representation system* treats the entire state as one constituency or provides for multimember constituencies. The purpose of this system is to ensure that all political parties are guaranteed a place in legislatures. It is perceived as constituting 'the most adequate system to govern any society with a high degree of segmentation' (Boix 1999:613), although it may also entrench political engagement along ethnic lines if it does not take into account the existing political traditions and the degree of civic and voter education so crucial to its effectiveness (Murithi 2000:6). Under the *proportional representation system*, there are two variations namely the *single transferable vote* and the *party list system*. The *single transferable vote* emphasises the personal rather than

the territorial principle and provides for a candidate to obtain a quota of votes which is approximately the number of votes equal to the total votes cast divided by the number of seats to be filled. In the *party list system*, each competing party receives a specific percentage of seats proportional to the total number of votes gained (Bauer 2001:109).

The institutional framework

Pastor (1999:75) points out that whether 'an election is a source of peaceful change or a cause of serious instability' mainly depends on the character, competence and composition of a number of institutions. Sundhaussen (1998:331), however, cautions that 'older states have had centuries to build [and sustain] the institutions that suited their political culture, but that new states have to do this in a hurry.' All things considered, the most important institution is the electoral commission, which is the permanently functioning institution charged

Electoral systems determine the rules according to which the voters may express their political preferences

with the task of preparing and conducting elections. Goodwin-Gill (1994:41) observes that institutions such as the electoral commission ought to be 'independent, competent and perceived as completely fair by all the candidates and parties participating in the [electoral] process.' Furthermore, the electoral commission's standing will depend on its ability, including resources and real legal prerogative, to impartially handle election-related complaints and effectively redress irregularities, thus effectively facilitating the resolution of a Kenya-like electoral dispute which can easily speed out of control.

Only in this way, can electoral commission build the confidence of the electorate and political parties alike which is essential to generate a credible electoral process. However, in Africa's nascent and fragile democracies, the responsibility for elections is usually conferred to an institution which is not properly insulated from the political pressure and control of political forces, especially the ruling party which has a special interest in the outcome of elections (Pastor 1999:80). This is particularly true in Kenya where the Electoral Commission was 'long ago captured by the leadership of Kenya's ethnically driven political party oligarchs' (Nyamwamu 2008:4). In fact, Nyamwamu (2008:4) charges that, during the 2007 Kenyan elections, the Electoral Commission

found itself totally impotent to resolve a simple dispute over the election results even when the Commission's chairman [Samuel Kivuitu] had for days been on national TV asserting that the electoral results were being cooked by his [own] officials.

Similarly, African states have struggled to ensure the existence of an independent and effective judiciary. The structure, authority, effectiveness and independence of the African judiciary were seriously constrained, from the start, by the structural conditions and practices inherited from the colonial era (Joireman 2001:576–577). There has been, thereafter, little public confidence in the judiciary which, in due course, 'served as passive instruments of legitimation for authoritarian regimes' (Prempeh 2001:260). More recently, because of the growing uncertainty about electoral results, ruling parties have attempted to perpetuate their control over the judiciary and increase the likelihood of judicial decisions that favour their self-interests, further undermining the institution's effectiveness as well as legitimacy in the eyes of many citizens.

Thus, African judges have had to operate in an atmosphere in which the pressure of undue influence from the ruling party is explicit, rendering them unwilling to reach decisions which might be seen as critical of the ruling party. Furthermore, they are appointed, transferred or removed at will, work without computers and other adequate stationary, and

have very limited access to updated legal information. What's worse is that the wide majority of the citizenry has very limited access to even such an ineffective judiciary (Ndulo 2008:91). Taking into account all these shortcomings, African states have enshrined in their constitutions the principles of independence of the judiciary, with southern Africa providing the best example in this regard (Madhuku 2002:233–234). Ndulo (2008:81) specifies the two most important principles of judicial independence as follows

(a) that judicial power must exist as a power separate from and independent of, executive and legislative power, and (b) judicial power must repose in the judiciary as a separate organ of government, composed of persons different from, and independent of those who compose the executive and legislature.

In view of that, the judiciary should operate independently from undue pressures of the executive, legislature and political parties. An independent judiciary should also have financial autonomy to fulfil its own priorities and sufficient resources to offer the appropriate salaries and benefits which are needed to attract qualified candidates (Prempeh 2008:106; Ndulo 2008:87; Madhuku 2002:244). The appointment and removal of judges should be objective and based on merit in order to enhance transparency and attain legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry. Prempeh (2001:270–271) suggested that the main political parties which are represented in national politics should be involved in the appointment process. He reiterated that judges who are selected almost exclusively by the ruling party are less likely to fearlessly apply the law in case of breaches by their benefactors in that party. All things considered, only an independent judiciary 'can effectively review governmental acts and ensure the constitutional guarantee of human rights' (Ndulo 2008:81). It could also, as the Malawian case aptly demonstrates it,

sanction violations of electoral rules ... hinder self-serving alterations of the legal and institutional framework of the elections and preserve space for actors in the political and civil society to perform a meaningful role in the electoral process ... diffuse tension, for example when electoral results are disputed, by providing an arena where the contesting parties can fight out their battles through their lawyers (Gloppen & Kanyongolo 2004:31).

An institution equally important as the electoral commission and the judiciary for the successful conduct of elections and working of democracy is the military. The military is the institution which has the monopoly over the control and use of the physical instruments of violence, and enjoys a relatively high degree of discipline, single-mindedness and centralisation of



authority. Also, the military has a wealth of information which enables it to have the most rationally calculating view towards national problems (Finer 1962:6–13; Kummel & Von Bredow 2000; Janowitz 1977). Civilian supremacy over the military is an essential requirement to the functioning of any democracy. Under such a system of civilian supremacy, the military is allowed to develop professionally and obliged to strictly remain politically neutral. A professional military would carry out the objectives and policies set out by any legitimate civilian group that wields state power as is still the case in Senegal (Vengroff & Magala 2001:149).

But, as Kohn (2001:76) points it out, in fragile democracies, the military has ‘been deeply involved in politics, sometimes preying on society rather than protecting it.’ In fact, especially in Africa, the ruling party attempts to guarantee a loyal and pliable military through a biased system of recruitment, reward and deprivation in order to ensure its political longevity (Bratton & Van de Walle 1997:245; Monga 1999:58). For instance, during the run-up to the Zimbabwean elections of 28 March 2008, General Constantine Chiwenga, the Commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, outright declared that his troops ‘will not respect any president other than Robert Mugabe’ (UN Integrated Regional Information Networks 2008:1). The danger is that the military, recognising this dependence, might be tempted to ease out the ruling party after decrying deteriorating socio-economic conditions, stacking the courts with its cronies, pretending to be above the fray and arranging rigged elections (Monga 1999:58). Thus, Kohn (2001:279–280) argues in detail that

every effort must be made to limit the military to external defense so that it functions as a representative of the whole society, acting in the best interest of the whole nation. Only in the direst of emergencies should military forces be used to secure internal order; they must see themselves, and be seen, as the guardians and not the oppressors of the people ... Tasking the military with everyday law enforcement, as opposed to maintaining order as a last resort, pits the military against the people, with a loss of trust and confidence, eventual alienation on both sides, and a diminishing civilian control.

International observation

The prospects for genuine elections can be further enhanced by international observation which literally means gathering information, by a group of monitors and election experts established by an international organisation or foreign non-governmental organisations,

about ‘every aspect of the organisation and conduct of an election, including the functioning of the national electoral commission, the registration of voters, the course of the campaign, the poll itself, the counting of the ballots, and the compilation of the results’ (Anglin 1998:487). Abbink (2000:11) asserts that it also involves making an informed judgment regarding whether ‘elections have been conducive to the establishment of democracy.’

At a minimum, a well-organised team of international observers can detect organised efforts at fraud in the balloting and counting process (Garber, McCoy & Pastor 1991:107; Pastor 1999:129; Van Cranenburgh 2000:28), and thus make sure that electoral outcomes somewhat reflect the views of the voters. What’s more, the mere presence of international observers can provide voters a sense of security and a reassurance regarding the secrecy of the ballot and the efficacy of the entire electoral process (Garber, McCoy & Pastor 1991:107; Garber & Bjornlund 1992:13). At times, international observers can go further, helping mutually suspicious sides to negotiate acceptable terms of the electoral game (Pastor 1999:131).

A well-organised team of international observers can detect organised efforts at fraud in the balloting and counting process

Pastor (1999:131) points out that, to fulfil the above functions or expectations, international observers need ‘to have the stature and credibility or the access to the [particular] country’s leadership ... [and the] ability to separate the technical from the political side of problems.’ Also, they can encourage all sides to accept the election results, if they are internationally respectable, in order to preserve the credibility and legitimacy of the declared victor in a polarised contest (Pastor 1999:129). Pastor (1999:134) goes further and argues that international observers can

even mediate the implementation of settlements, thus facilitating ‘the political evolution of parties which [may] lack experience in democratic compromise,’ and, in the process, ‘promoting confidence in the [electoral] process and easing the mutual distrust that might otherwise come into full blown conflict’ (Garber, McCoy & Pastor 1991:107).

Nonetheless, international observation is constrained by certain factors. In the first place, it is quite difficult for international observers to answer effectively the question whether elections were free and fair, two issues which cannot be easily distinguished and are rather subject to controversy (Bauer 2001; Goodwin-Gill 1994; Elklit & Svensson 2001). For instance, international observers described Malawi’s 1994 elections as *free and fair*, its 1999 elections as *substantially free and fair* and its 2004 general elections as *free but not fair* (Rakner & Svåsand 2005:16). For that reason, Van Cranenburgh (2000:29) asserts that the declarations of international



observers must be 'founded on sufficient factual data.' Pastor (1999:131) supports this assumption by stating that observers need

to evaluate the entire electoral process. Irregularities of some kind occur, and the problem is to try to determine a pattern to the irregularities that could have biased the election in favour of a particular party.

The international observers also have to take into account the potential impact which their declarations can have on the overall political process and on the attitudes of ordinary citizens (Abbink 2000:11). Indeed, it is usually tempting for international observers to declare most elections free and fair, simply because to do otherwise would be predictably destabilising, and because it would be costly and politically near-impossible to redo elections from scratch. Lastly, international observers may not be entirely familiar with the unique history, socio-cultural outlook, demographic diversity, local languages, communication infrastructure, resource distribution, institutional development, prevailing political conditions and urgent security concerns of the state in which the particular elections are being held.

Domestic observation

Domestic observation groups refer to those groups which originate within the state where the elections are being held and include independently operated non-governmental organisations, churches, human rights bodies, trade unions, women and student organisations. Geisler (1993:634) believes that their most likely objective is 'to represent the electorate, both in their broad-based composition as well as in their mandate, and [that] they have a very large constituency.' They may be more interested in the election process itself rather than its outcome, and may be engaged in civic education programs. Indeed, Geisler (1993:634) holds that 'their observation and monitoring is a continuum which covers the entire democratic process of which they are a part, and therefore does not stop after the elections.' They may address substantive political and legal issues that go beyond Election Day and stretch from the post-elections period to the run-up to the next elections. They may even recommend specific changes in the election law and procedures as they are designed in the abstract and also as they operate in practice. They may also address the composition, organisation, responsibilities and performance of the electoral commission including the efficiency, motivation and integrity of its personnel.

Anglin (1998:491–492) contends that, when compared to international observation, domestic observation

groups are 'more cost-effective, more knowledgeable, linguistically more mobile, available for longer periods, and perhaps more observant of what really matters.' The main concerns regarding domestic observation groups, which are not always viewed benignly by African governments, are their independence and credibility. To be credible, it is crucial for these groups to remain impartial at all times during the entire electoral process, despite enduring budgetary constraints, the existence of a potentially disabling legal environment and the apparent absence of standards to determine the freeness and fairness of elections. They may, however, 'typically rely heavily on outside support' (Anglin 1998:474) and may thus be tied to the organisation that has funded their operation, with their final reports occasionally tailored to the requirements of that particular funding source.

Definition, characteristics and functions of political parties

A prominent writer took political party as 'a fighting organisation in the political sense of the word' (Michels 1962:78), while another author defined it as 'any political group that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office' (Sartori 1976:64). Ware (1995:5) suggested that it is 'an institution that seeks influence in a state, often by attempting to occupy positions in government, and usually consists of more than a single interest in the society and so to some degree attempts to aggregate interests.' Considered to be an authority on political parties, Duverger (1962:17) stated that a political party is 'not a community but a collection of communities, a union of small groups dispersed throughout the country.'

All these definitions offer valuable insights. They all use the concept of political party to designate a nationally and locally articulated political institution that has the ability to engage in political recruitment, to contest elections, to win maximum support at these elections, to control the decision-making positions and personnel of a government, and to make concerted efforts to implement a broad range of public policies (LaPalombara & Weiner 1966:29). It should be noted that, notwithstanding the above-mentioned attempts, no clear and agreed-on definition has been discovered and won acceptance in academic circles (Bell 1981:3; Blondel 1978:13). All in all, a political party is a political institution that has a number of identifiable characteristics.

First and foremost, a political party is established by like-minded individuals, with a common set of beliefs and agreeing on important matters of public policy.

Domestic
observation groups
are more interested
in the election
process itself rather
than its outcome

These individuals are, in a self-conscious manner, determined to gain and hold power on their own or in coalition with other political parties (Shively 1999:224; LaPalombara & Weiner 1966:6; Budge & Keman 1990:10). Furthermore, a political party has a recognised degree of permanence and continuity, its expected life span not depending on the life span of its leaders or founders (Bell 1981:3; Monga 1999:49). Bell (1981:3) adds that each political party possesses a 'distinctive label which distinguishes it from other political groupings.' Moreover, a political party is linked in an organised way to a variable number of citizens, and has a stable structure founded on two levels. On the one hand, there is the national level which operates in the name of the entire political party and where the major decisions are made. On the other hand, there is a subordinate local level geographically dispersed but directly answerable to the national level (LaPalombara & Weiner 1966:6). The relationship between the two levels is by nature diverse and subject to changes in conditions.

Having specified the definition and characteristics of a political party, it is useful to offer some generalisations about its diverse functions in a democratic political system. Indeed, in the course of their competition with one another during the electoral process, political parties perform certain functions without which democracy could hardly exist. Andrain and Apter (1995:145) believe that the primary function of political parties is to 'give voters a choice of candidates who become legislators and executive officials.' And, as Ball (1981:4) points it out, political parties provide the electorate some guidance concerning the different programmes and public policies which candidates commit themselves to pursue. They also attempt to interest ordinary citizens on the issues of a campaign, and to stimulate them to go out to the polls and vote, thus practically engaging in the mobilisation of the entire citizenry (Shively, 1999:227).

Furthermore, political parties recruit young leaders, train and give them experience, and gradually move them to positions of greater responsibility (Shively 1999:227-229; Andrain & Apter 1995:145). Moreover, political parties help to articulate different interests, and, as Andrain and Apter (1995:146) described it, to 'reconcile the conflicting policy preferences of adverse social groups.' Political parties disseminate political ideas, ideologies and programmes. They help members and citizens alike to interpret political information and events, organising or participating in political meetings and discussions on a wide range of political, economic and social issues (Andrain & Apter 1995:146). Finally, depending on their electoral success, some political parties manage the different branches of government,

and shape the formulation and execution of public policies (Andrain & Apter 1995:145).

Anatomy of African political parties

Historically, political parties in Africa emerged as nationalist movements the ultimate objective of which was to attain independence from the political, economic and military domination of European colonial powers. Hodgkin (1961:93) clearly indicates that most of these political parties had a rudimentary form of organisation with the three highest political bodies being the party leader, a central committee or *bureau politique* and an executive committee, which were typically complemented by a National Congress or Conference, different local branches at the bottom and representatives of mass associations of women, workers and the youth. Zolberg (1966:33-35) notes that they were also endowed with a pyramidal and centralised structure having 'a relatively large head in the capital and fairly rudimentary limbs,' and that they were created in a very short time span and led by 'strong personalities with great political acumen and determination.'

The primary function of political parties is to give voters a choice of candidates who become legislators and executive officials

Just after independence, these leaders, representing one particular region or ethnic group, sought to impose and justify a largely discredited one-party system which was, nonetheless, 'accepted and justified as the best solution by the international community and by academia, since the priority was [to protect] the political order against the risk of disorderly mobilisation of grievances' (Gentili 2005:4). Thus, political parties lost all importance as democratic institutions and became tools for authoritarian leaders who articulated the parties' priorities as well as governments' policies, and later on became only interested in the inviolability of their monopoly on power (Morrison 2004:421). This was notably the case in Ghana with Nkrumah, in Cote d'Ivoire with Houphouet-Boigny, in Tunisia with Bourguiba, in Kenya with Kenyatta, in Malawi with Banda, in Zambia with Kaunda, in Cameroon with Ahidjo, in Guinea with Sékou Touré, in Tanzania with Nyerere and in Senegal with Senghor. It is, still and more disastrously, the case in Zimbabwe with Mugabe. It follows that African states and their citizens were forced to rapidly put up with 'the development of a single, not plural, political logic' (Chabal 2001:10).

Bogaards (2004:192) acknowledges that, since then, one central feature of African political parties has been the dominance of one political party which has a grip on the majority of legislative seats and intentionally governs alone. Such dominant parties are mostly advantaged because they will have unfettered access



to and make use of the state resources at their disposal for party financing and other political purposes. Such purposes include de-legitimising and squeezing out the opposition parties as well as undermining their potentially constructive engagement, and may directly result in the detrimental duplication of ruling party and state power. Ottaway (1999:311) draws attention to another central feature when she asserts that long-standing and emergent political parties are, both overtly or covertly, ethnically defined. They tend to solely represent and protect the interests of their respective ethnic groups (Erdmann & Basedau 2007:15–18), especially when elections are close by. This view is echoed by Nyamwamu (2008:3) who raises the compelling case of Kenya where

once the electorate has secured their elite in power through their ethnic votes, their elite discard them, forget them and cut the bridge for the next five years. In the long run, the elite have structured and organised the elections to become a mere ethnic census.

Basedau and Stroh (2008:23) further point out that all African political parties correspondingly display weak roots in society and a very low level of institutionalisation. Rakner and Svåsand (2007:14) went on to explain that

rather than being developed as organisations, parties appear as useful vehicles for ambitious politicians ... The consequence of the personalistic nature of parties is that they are not likely to become institutionalised as organisations. Instead, the party leaders use the party to mobilise sufficient support from the electorate in order to bargain with other party leaders for the dispersion of public goods.

Nowhere is the trend described in the previous quotation more apparent than with the numerous opposition parties which have failed, in many respects, to mount a strong and effective challenge to the dominant political parties in Africa. Indeed, only in a few cases such as Kenya, Senegal and Zambia, opposition parties have won elections and constituted governments. However, based on the experience of these same states, it is possible to argue that opposition parties display a striking degree of continuity with their predecessors, eventually until retribution catches up with them too. Indeed, after they taste the forbidden apple of power, they reconstitute the conditions for the unfavourable participation of an organized and concerted opposition in the run-up to elections and then involve in direct rigging. Diamond (2008:8) provides the rather disappointing example of Senegal where

when longtime opposition leader, Abdoulaye Wade, won the presidency in 2000, ending four decades of Socialist Party rule, there were high

hopes for a new era of democracy, built on some of the continent's oldest traditions of pluralism and liberal thought. But increasingly, the aging President Wade drew power and resources into his own hands and those of his family. In the years leading up to Wade's reelection in 2007, journalists, political activists, singers, and *marabouts* (Muslim spiritual leaders) who criticized Wade or supported the opposition were subjected to physical intimidation and violence. Critics charge the election was marred by vote-buying, multiple voting, and obstruction of opposition voting.

Ottaway (1999:311) left little doubt about the fact that African opposition parties are not formed and united on the basis of distinct public policies, in fact lacking the time and experience to prepare distinguishable and realistic programmes. They are also prone to demagoguery and just build on promises to get rid of the ruling parties which they regard as enemies, on the basis of both ethnicity which remains an important factor in African electoral politics and the stumbling blocks which they face. These opposition parties are, indeed, exposed to manipulation and repression which differ only in degree not in kind across African states. Accordingly, they remain disturbingly weak in terms of subordination to unaccountable leaders mainly interested in 'grabbing a few crumbs of the national pie,' insufficient territorial coverage and organisational capacity specifically between elections, unsatisfactory ideological orientation and programmatic appeal, chronic factionalism, lack of systematic count of members who are few in number, poor funding base, lack of access to media and disunity among themselves (Monga 1999:49–50; Simutanyi 2005:2; Patel 2005; Elisher 2008). All these factors account for the decision by opposition parties to either participate or boycott elections, for their usually poor showing during these elections and even for their inability to stand the test of time. Lindberg (2006:128) is correct when he ascertains that

the participation by opposition parties in free and fair elections may seem a given, just as a boycott may be expected when a ruling regime sets up an orchestrated façade of elections. But opposition parties may participate even when elections stand no chance of being free and fair or legitimate in order to press authoritarian rulers for further concessions and can also stage boycotts in legitimate elections in hopes of discrediting a ruling regime when they stand no chance of winning.

Conclusion

It follows that a number of points are in order. On the one hand, the conceptual assumptions and arguments presented in this paper are not meant to conceal, by

raising the bar to conventionally Western standards, the handful of cases where meaningful and unprecedented changes were effected in Africa through relatively competitive multiparty elections (Benin and Zambia in 1991, Mali in 1992, South Africa and Malawi in 1994, Ghana and Senegal in 2000, Kenya in 2002). Bratton and Van de Walle (1997:180) argue that additional evidence of such changes can be found 'in the persistence of popular protest in the aftermath of flawed or blocked political transition.' For democracy to be strongly implemented in Africa, these kinds of changes constitute an inevitable prerequisite. However, Suttner (2003:10) notes that the changes have, so far, 'not created the social forces that could break the thrall of the dominant type of politics ... [which] continues to exclude meaningful popular participation and, in most cases, retains the distribution of spoils as a fundamental basis of African politics.'

On the other hand, as mentioned in this paper which makes no pretense of comprehensiveness, these suppositions reaffirm the idea that substantial democracy necessitates more than the conduct of *elections without choice* or *caricature elections* (Adejumobi 2000:70). It requires the careful selection of the fairest and most efficient electoral system which should mainly ensure the systematic and regular conduct of elections, the non-discriminatory allocation of votes and the broadest possible representation of all existing political parties. It also requires the state-wide operation of dependable and down-to-earth domestic observation groups. These groups could assist in the preparation and conduct of elections, thus reducing the need for international observation which has become, over time and unconstructively, the most publicised feature of African elections. And, it especially requires the sustainability of de-ethnicised political parties which are diligently involved in mobilising popular support, in linking the demands of all citizens and different groups to political agendas, and in forming either a reasonably institutionalised government or a convincingly effective opposition.

Bibliography

- Abbink, J. 2000. The organisation and observation of elections in Federal Ethiopia. In J. Abbink and G. Hesselning (eds), *Election observation and democratisation in Africa*. London: MacMillan Press.
- Adejumobi, S. 2000. Elections in Africa: a fading shadow of democracy? *International Political Science Review*, 21(1):59–73.
- Afrobarometer. 2006. Kenyans and democracy: sustained support of the principle, but waning satisfaction with the practice. Afrobarometer Briefing Paper no. 25.
- Amnesty International 2008. Zimbabwe: a trail of violence after the ballot. Report, United Kingdom.
- Andrain, C. and Apter, D. 1996. *Political protest and social change: analysing politics*. New York: New York University Press.

- Anglin, D. 1998. International election monitoring: the African experience. *African Affairs*, 97(389):471–495.
- Ball, A. 1981. *British political parties: the emergence of a modern party system*. London: MacMillan Press.
- Barkan, J., Densham, P. and Rushton, G. 2006. Space matters: designing better electoral systems for emerging democracies. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(4):926–939.
- Basedau, M. and Stroh, A. 2008. Measuring party institutionalisation in developing countries: a new research instrument applied to 28 African political parties. German Institute for Global Area Studies Working Paper no. 69.
- Bauer, C. 2001. The 1994 and 1999 electoral process/systems: promoting democracy in South Africa. *African Journal of Political Science*, 6(1):105–122.
- Benoit, K. 2004. Models of electoral system change. *Electoral Studies*, 23:363–389.
- Blondel, J. 1978. *Political parties: a genuine case for discontent*. London: Wildwood House.
- Boix, C. 1999. Setting the rules of the game: the choice of electoral systems in advanced democracies. *The American Political Science Review*, 93(3):609–624.
- Bogaards, M. 2004. Counting parties and identifying dominant party systems in Africa. *European Journal of Political Research*, 43:173–197.
- Bratton, M. 2007. Institutionalising democracy in Africa: formal or informal? Paper presented at the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, United States.
- Bratton, M. and Van de Walle, N. 1997. *Democratic experiments in Africa: regime transition in comparative perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Budge, I. and Keman, H. 1990. *Parties and democracy: coalition formation and government functioning in twenty states*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chabal, P. 2001. Can democracy prevent conflicts in Africa? Paper presented at the Bergen Seminar on Development, Norway.
- Chege, M., Mukele, G and Kabeberi, N. 2007. The electoral system and multipartism in Kenya. Hanns Seidel Foundation, Kenya.
- Diamond, L. 2008. The state of democracy in Africa. In National Intelligence Council (ed), *Democratization in Africa: what progress toward institutionalisation?* Conference Report.
- Duverger, M. 1963. *Political parties*. New York: John Wiley.
- Elisher, S. 2008. Ethnic coalitions of convenience and commitment: political parties and party systems in Kenya. German Institute for Global Area Studies Working Paper no. 68.
- Elklit, J. and Svensson, P. 2001. What makes elections free and fair? In L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The global divergence of democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Erdmann, G. and Basedau, M. 2007. Problems of categorizing and explaining party systems in Africa. German Institute for Global Area Studies Working Paper no. 40.
- Finer, S. 1962. *The man on horseback: the role of the military in politics*. London: Pall Mall Press.



- Garber, L. and Bjornlund, E. 1992. Election monitoring in Africa. Paper prepared for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, United States.
- Garber, L., McCoy, J. and Pastor, R. 1991. Pollwatching and peacemaking. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(4):102–114.
- Geisler, G. 1993. Fair? what has fairness got to do with it? vagaries of election observations and democratic standards. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 31(4):613–637.
- Gentili, M. 2005. Party, party systems and democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Paper presented at the Sixth Global Forum on Reinventing Government, Republic of Korea.
- Gloppen, S. and Kanyongolo, E. 2004. The role of the judiciary in the 2004 general elections in Malawi. Chr. Michelsen Institute Working Paper no.16
- Goodwin-Gill, G. 1994. *Free and fair elections*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- Hodgkin, T. 1961. *African political parties*. London: Penguin Books.
- Ionescu, G. and de Madariaga, I. 1968. *Opposition: past and present of a political institution*. London: Penguin Books.
- Janowitz, M. 1977. *Military institutions and coercion in the developing nations*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Joireman, S. 2001. Inherited legal systems and effective rule of law: Africa and the colonial legacy. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 39(4):571–596.
- Joseph, R. 1999. State, conflict, and democracy in Africa. In R. Joseph (ed), *State, conflict, and democracy in Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Kiiza, J. 2005. The role of opposition parties in a democracy. Paper presented at the Regional Conference on Political Parties and Democratisation in East Africa, Tanzania.
- Kohn, R. 2001. How democracies control the military. In L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The global divergence of democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kummel, G. and Von Bredow, W. 2000. New roles for the armed forces and the concept of democratic control. In G. Kummel and W. Von Bredow (eds), *Civil military relations in an age of turbulence: armed forces and the problem of democratic control*. Strausberg: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr.
- LaPalombara, J. and Weiner, M. 1966. The origin and development of political parties. In J. LaPalombara and M. Weiner (eds), *Political parties and political development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lindberg, S. 2006. Opposition parties and democratisation in Africa. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 24(1):123–138.
- Madhuku, L. 2002. Constitutional protection of the independence of the judiciary: a survey of the position in southern Africa. *Journal of African Law*, 46(2):232–245.
- Mainwaring, S. 2001. Party systems in the third wave. In L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The global divergence of democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Makinda, S. 1996. Democracy and multiparty politics in Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34(4):555–573.
- Michels, R. 1962. *Political parties: a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*. New York: Collier Books.
- Monga, C. 1999. Eight problems with African politics. In L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The global divergence of democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Morrison, M. 2004. Political parties in Ghana through four republics: a path to democratic consolidation. *Comparative Politics*, 36(4):421–442.
- Murithi, T. 2000. Alternative electoral systems: electoral systems and the management of ethnic conflict in Africa. Unpublished paper.
- Ndulo, M. 2008. The judiciary, constitutionalism and human rights. In National Intelligence Council (ed), *Democratization in Africa: what progress toward institutionalisation?* Conference Report.
- Nohlen, D. 1996. *Elections and electoral systems*. New Delhi: MacMillan Press.
- Norris, P. 1997. Choosing electoral systems: proportional, majoritarian and mixed systems. *International Political Science Review*, 18(3):297–312.
- Nyamwamu, C. 2008. After the storm: how to assess the setbacks of Kenya's democratisation process. Paper presented at the Goethe-Institut, Ethiopia.
- Ottaway, M. 1999. Ethnic politics in Africa: change and continuity. In R. Joseph (ed), *State, conflict, and democracy in Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Pastor, R. 1999. A brief history of electoral commissions. In A. Schedler, L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The self-restraining state: power and accountability in new democracies*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Patel, N. 2005. Political parties: development and change in Malawi. Electoral Institute of Southern Africa Research Report no. 21.
- Powell, B. 2000. *Elections as instruments of democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Prempeh, K. 2008. The persistence of imperial presidency in Africa's emerging democracies. In National Intelligence Council (ed), *Democratization in Africa: what progress toward institutionalisation?* Conference Report.
- Prempeh, K. 2001. A new jurisprudence for Africa. In L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The global divergence of democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Pridham, G. and Lewis, P. 1996. Stabilising fragile democracies and party system development. In G. Pridham and P. Lewis (eds), *Stabilizing fragile democracies: comparing new party systems in southern and eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Rakner, L. and Svåsand, L. 2007. Multiparty elections in Africa's new democracies. Chr. Michelsen Institute Report no. 7.
- Rakner, L. and Svåsand, L. 2005. Maybe free but not fair: electoral administration in Malawi 1994–2004. Chr. Michelsen Institute Report no. 5.
- Sartori, G. 1976. *Parties and party systems: a framework for analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Shively, P. 1999. *Power and choice: an introduction to political science*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Simutanyi, N. 2005. Political parties and party system in Zambia. Background paper prepared for Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Zambia.
- Sundhaussen, U. 1998. The military: a threat to democracy? *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 44(3):329–349.
- Suttner, R. 2003. Transformation of political parties in Africa today. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung South Africa Office Occasional Paper no. 19.
- UN Integrated Regional Information Networks 2008. Zimbabwe: military rattle sabres in support of Mugabe. Available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=77254> [accessed 13 March 2008].
- Van Cranenburgh, O. 2000. Democratisation in Africa: the role of election observation. In J. Abbink and G. Hesselink (eds), *Election observation and democratisation in Africa*. London: MacMillan Press.
- Vengroff, R. and Magala, M. 2001. Democratic reform, transition and consolidation: evidence from Senegal's 2000 presidential election. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 39(1):129–162.
- Ware, A. 1995. *Political parties and party systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widner, J. 1999. Building judicial independence in common law Africa. In A. Schedler, L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The self-restraining state: power and accountability in new democracies*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Young, T. 1993. Elections and electoral politics in Africa. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 63(3): 299–312.
- Zolberg, A. 1966. *Creating political order: the party-states of West Africa*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

The ISS mission

The vision of the Institute for Security Studies is one of a stable and peaceful Africa characterised by a respect for human rights, the rule of law, democracy and collaborative security. As an applied policy research institute with a mission to conceptualise, inform and enhance the security debate in Africa, the Institute supports this vision statement by undertaking independent applied research and analysis; facilitating and supporting policy formulation; raising the awareness of decision makers and the public; monitoring trends and policy implementation; collecting, interpreting and disseminating information; networking on national, regional and international levels; and capacity building.

About this paper

This paper develops, in a manageable manner, a conceptual framework in order to adequately define the essentially contested concepts of democracy, elections and political parties. There is much overlap in these concepts which are abundantly used in both academic and policy-making circles, and it is undoubtedly essential to make distinctions between them if a nuanced understanding is to be gained. This paper establishes that democracy denotes mainly a form of political system in which citizens are effectively able to choose their leaders in competitive elections. Furthermore, this paper argues that elections, which need to be administered by impartial electoral institutions, watched over by independent judicial institutions and monitored by qualified observers, should not be conflated with democracy and should only be seen as its primary prerequisites. It also maintains that, despite falling short of both international and local expectations, African elections constitute a necessary condition for democracy to thrive. And, this paper defines political party as a political institution which is sensitive to the demands of particular constituencies, and has the ability to contest several elections. It also uncovers the nature of African political parties which tend to be mostly ethnic-based, personalised and non-institutionalised. All in all, this paper puts forward the thesis that, in Africa as elsewhere, a credible democratic political system requires credible elections which, in turn, require the participation of credible political parties.

About the author

MR. BEROUK MESFIN is currently a Senior Researcher for the Direct Conflict Prevention Programme at the Institute for Security Studies office based in Addis Ababa. He has worked as a defence analyst at the Ethiopian Ministry of National Defence, as a consultant on elections, and as political adviser to the US embassy in Ethiopia. He also worked as a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations at Addis Ababa University, and as a research associate to the Institute of Development Research and the Institute of Federal Studies.

Funder

This paper was made possible through the generous funding of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

© 2008, Institute for Security Studies • ISSN: 1026-0404

The opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute, its Trustees, members of the ISS Council or donors. Authors contribute to ISS publications in their personal capacity.

Published by the Institute for Security Studies
Head Office • P O Box 1787 • Brooklyn Square • 0075 •
Pretoria/Tshwane • SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: +27-12-346-9500 • Fax: +27-12-460-0998
Email: iss@issafrica.org • <http://www.issafrica.org>

ISSN 1026-0404

