



**The Role of Political Parties in Democratic
Development in Africa:
Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?**

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I. Introduction

Africa is often seen as a continent of conflict, posing particular challenges of governance, political stability, and democratic development. A more nuanced perspective suggests that some countries, such as South Africa, Ghana, Senegal, and Botswana have recently made significant moves toward creating legitimate and generally successful governance systems, which demonstrate the potential for democratic consolidation. In others, the picture is considerably more mixed. Some governments have succeeded in adopting the form of democracy but not permitting its spirit. Other leaders, most notably, President Yoweri K. Museveni of Uganda, have gone further, arguing that a definition of democracy as relevant for contemporary Africa does not necessarily even include political pluralism based on multi-party politics. This issue of whether competing political parties are a basic prerequisite of a democratic system is of highly contemporary relevance, especially in light of emphasis placed on the New African Initiative (championed, among others, by Presidents Mbeki of South Africa, Obasanjo of Nigeria, and Wade of Senegal), which includes the promotion of pluralist democracy on the African continent as a critical component.

This ambivalent relationship of Africa and democracy is a part of Africa's heritage. To generalize across a continent and history, traditional rule contained (and still does) some elements of democracy juxtaposed against arbitrary and authoritarian political traditions. Similarly, while colonialism's legacy was probably more destructive than helpful, it did introduce some contemporary democratic institutional features such as elections and national parliaments. In the post-independence period, dictatorial rule did, in some cases, permit the development of a sense of national identity which can facilitate the development of democratic institutions.

In recent years many African countries have moved to expand political freedoms and introduce or reintroduce of democratic political systems. This trend is the result of both internal dissatisfaction with single-party rule and an evolving international climate that has increasingly promoted international norms of democratic functioning and linked investment, foreign aid, and debt relief with progress in developing democratic institutions.

Some current critiques of the functioning of democracy in Africa suggest that serious limitations on political parties are a viable alternative to democracy's perceived ills. This article examines and challenges this perspective. While recognizing that some of the critiques have elements of justification, this piece queries their overall rationale and argues that leaders who take this skeptical attitude towards parties are seeking to have their proverbial cake and eat it too. They may be permitting some level of greater civil liberties but are not allowing true political pluralism, especially the possibility of alternance in power. This article argues that competitive political parties are at the root of democracy, and to significantly circumscribe their activities creates an African version of what Fareed Zacharia has labelled as "illiberal democracy" – the form, but not the true functioning of democracy.

A key intellectual leader of this party-skeptic approach is President Museveni of Uganda, who has the longest history of dealing with this problem by severely restricting political party freedoms. It would be wrong, however, to see Museveni as the only leader imposing serious restrictions on the *de facto* or *de jure* ability of political parties to organize. Indeed, this approach has often been associated with the “New Leadership” proponents in Africa – men who have come to power through guerilla movements and who profess to understand that the corrupt, authoritarian leadership of the past is not the wave of the future. Those who share this skepticism of political parties include Presidents Kagame in Rwanda and Asias in Eritrea, and Prime Minister Meles in Ethiopia. Eritrea and Rwanda have moved very slowly in legalizing parties, and in fact as of this writing have yet to do so, while Ethiopia allows freedom of political expression within narrowly proscribed, although amorphous, limits.

In addition, at times over the past three decades, countries such as Nigeria and Senegal have placed constitutional limitations on the permitted ideological orientations of political parties. Other governments have developed a wide, growing, and imaginative range of more subtle impediments in the way of parties. These may include, but are certainly not limited to, restrictive candidate eligibility requirements, limits on the freedom to campaign, use of government resources for partisan electoral purposes, selective voter registration policies, and electoral systems which have been carefully constructed to achieve a pre-ordained result. The Ugandan case therefore merely illustrates that of a significant number of countries.

This article begins by outlining the arguments put forth by proponents of single or “non” party systems. It then critiques these arguments. The final section presents ideas on how some of the important underlying issues raised by advocates of limiting political party activity could be addressed, within a framework of meaningful political pluralism.

II. The “Museveni” Approach

Since Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in Uganda in 1986, political party activities have been proscribed. Legally, political parties are allowed to exist in name, but normal activity associated with political parties, such as campaigning, fundraising, holding political rallies, and endorsing candidates are outlawed. Many political party rallies and meetings have been halted, sometimes with the use of force, since the legal restrictions have been in place. Political opposition and elections operate through candidates running based on their “personal merit,” not under the name of a political party. A five-tiered governing system was formed from the village to the national level. Elections are held on a theoretically non-partisan basis. Proponents of this system argue that democracy is still intact, but that it functions without political party representation.

Museveni is not the only advocate of this idea of “non-partisan” democracy. In his book Compatible Cultural Democracy: The Key to Development in Africa, for example, the Ghanaian/Canadian academic Daniel Osabu-Kle argues that partisan democracy has

many pitfalls. He suggests that in a partisan democracy, it is very possible that the elected representatives may not honor their election promises or not fully adhere to the requests of their constituents. Osabu-Kle also posits that in partisan democracy an elected official's primary loyalty is to the party rather than to the people. He also argues that there are certain preconditions for partisan democracy to be successful, which have yet to be met in many African countries. In regard to civil society, for example, "It [partisan democracy] also requires a civil society that has reached the stage of political development at which it is matured and informed enough to be not easily deceived by the vain promises of politicians, and disciplined enough not to resort to violence or any other act that is not conducive to peace or harmony."¹

President Museveni claims that the "Movement" system is a way to ensure democracy while avoiding the perceived pitfalls of multiparty politics. This system operates under the stated goals of preserving national unity and promoting national stability. By abolishing the activity of political parties in the government, this system allegedly supports national unity by doing away with partisan politics. In Uganda for example, the National Resistance Movement under the leadership of Museveni, claims to be a "clear-headed movement with clear objectives and good membership."² This implicitly suggests that alternative political organizations are not needed.

To understand this Museveni and "New Leadership" position, it is necessary to examine their arguments against political parties. These are many and vary considerably in importance and justification. The core argument is that parties breed conflict in fragile nation states. Because political parties will align along regional or ethnic lines they will not operate from a national perspective. They represent narrow sectarian, interests without a commitment to a broader sense of nationhood and collective well-being. As they compete against each other, physical conflict and violence are often the result. Museveni, for example, has argued that a weak sense of nationhood fosters strong divisions within national borders. He refers to these ethnic divisions as "tribalism," and writes, "One of the biggest weakening factors in Africa is tribalism and other forms of sectarianism. In Africa, we encourage unprincipled divisions."³

This perspective is often accompanied by liberationist-style anti-imperialist critiques. For example, Osabu-Kle writes, "On one independence day after another, political appointments in the former colonies merely shifted from representatives with white skin to those of black skin... But a true de-colonization of Africa means the breaking down of the exploitative structures of colonialism and their replacement with nationalist goals oriented to the service of the African populations."⁴ Museveni has stated that "African weakness is what permitted the Europeans to exploit us, and this weakness must be solved."⁵ This line of thinking can lead to the implication that because

¹ Osabu-Kle, Daniel T. *Compatible Cultural Democracy: The Key to African Development*, p. 15. 2000, Broadview Press Ltd.

² Museveni, Yoweri K. *What is Africa's Problem?*, p. 21. 1992, NRM Publications.

³ Ibid, p. 42

⁴ Osabu-Kle, p. 54.

⁵ Simmons, Ann M. "Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, Change for the Better, or Rule of the Gun?". *The Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2000.

“European”- developed political structures, such as political pluralism, are imported they are necessarily therefore inappropriate for African contextual realities.

History does show that political parties may purposely promote violence to achieve their ends. Examples of this violence can be seen in Uganda and Rwanda. Under the rule of former President Milton Obote, the Uganda People’s Congress engaged in widespread human rights violations in pursuit of maintaining power. In Rwanda, violence followed in the wake of attempts to develop an inclusive and democratic system reflected in the 1993 Arusha Accords. The government, controlled mainly by Hutus, moved very slowly and hesitantly to cede power to a political system that included widespread Tutsi participation, and genocide eventually took place. Burundi followed a somewhat analogous scenario, with the ethnic groups reversed. Spokesmen representing the “New Leadership” in Africa continually point to these types of examples to justify the positions constraining the ability of parties to organize and/or to operate.

A second argument against political parties is that they are seen as authoritarian, urban-based groupings of small elites, and do not reflect grassroots views. In Uganda, the Movement presents the Uganda People’s Congress and the Democratic Party as prime examples of this. This argument emphasizes that tradition, political patronage, a lack of a democratic political culture and institutionalization within parties, and the personalization of politics all tend to reinforce the dominant position of small leadership cliques. This often promotes the balkanization of opposition parties, as there is a surfeit of would-be leaders and a deficit of followers.

Third, Museveni argues that he is responding to popular sentiment, which is against political parties. He suggests that the population seeks unity and stability. According to him, the people understand that aligning themselves with a political party is not in their own best interest, and it will only serve to divide the country even more. He writes, “The masses are tired of sectarianism.”⁶ Museveni argues that the people want Uganda to be united and possess a strong national identity. According to Museveni, this is exactly what his “Movement” stands for. Elsewhere, in Eritrea, where draft legislation permitting the creation of political parties has been under consideration, representatives of the ruling movement have claimed that people are asking why there must be a multiplicity of political parties.⁷ In fact, senior officials in the ruling movement who called for greater political openness have been imprisoned.

Museveni suggests that the only way to deliver stability and create a strong national identity is through eliminating the freedom of political parties to operate at the grass roots level. He also states that most political freedoms and human rights can be maintained through the “Movement system,” which brings together everyone. This argument provides another rationale – that by doing away with the intimidation that is allegedly inherent to contemporary partisan politics in Africa, the “Movement” system is actually more democratic. Museveni argues that the “Movement” is not a political party, but rather it transcends partisan politics.

⁶ Museveni, Yoweri K. What is Africa’s Problem?, p. 43, 1992, NRM Publications.

⁷ Interview with the author, June 2000.

Another reason for abolishing pluralistic activity, according to the “New Leadership”, is that parties are corrupt. In this view, corruption is preeminent on two levels. First, votes can be bought and parties continually do this. To justify their rule, many leaders of one-party states have accused political parties in Africa of participating in this type of activity quite frequently. Second, parties are willing to be bought. Because many parties do not have firm principles or ideals, they are willing to be paid off to advocate a specific view or policy. As a result, according to this argument, parties lose legitimacy and they do not truly represent the views of their followers. Loose coalitions result, which lead to frequent government instability. Development suffers as a consequence. To cite one example in support of this view, in Nigeria in the 1980s, after Alhaji Shagari was elected, two of the opposition political parties formed the Progressive Parties Alliance in the stated aim of promoting peace, stability, and unity. In fact the Progressive Parties Alliance’s main purpose was to uproot Shagari from office, and political pluralism turned into conflict.⁸ A widespread view emerged that parties were undermining the fragile Nigerian democratic experiment in order to serve personal agendas. As a result, the subsequent military coup received considerable initial public support.

Many political parties in African countries do not have a broad support base of individual financial and volunteer contributions upon which to draw. The relative shallowness of the private sector also reduces the potential for obtaining funding from a variety of corporate sources. At the same time, private firms have an incentive to support ruling parties, given that government contracts continue to provide a lucrative share of business. In some instances, newly formed parties rely on a limited number of wealthy patrons, while others are funded largely by their founders. This increases the tendency for personalization of politics, and for parties to be associated with individuals rather than platforms. In some cases, political parties have attempted to establish business ventures to generate resources, but this can lead to serious conflict of interest, particularly when the parties are in government.

A corollary argument put forth by the advocates of one-party states in Africa is that political parties do not have clear policies. Party platforms, when they exist, are often full of generalities about support for human rights and democracy and they opt for some type of mixed economic system. Party leaders often will change their platforms without consulting or otherwise seeking the input of the party rank and file. As a result, illiterate, uneducated, or uninformed voters may not know for what they are voting, or make a voting decision not on policy grounds but on more visceral group identification criteria.

Another problem with parties articulated by the “New Leadership” group is the timeline that is expected of them. In this current era of democratization and globalization, both overt and more subtle forms of pressure, particularly from the western nations, push African countries toward developing democratic institutions quickly. However, critics argue that while the West had the luxury of decades and even centuries to develop these

⁸ Osabu-Kle, Daniel T. Compatible Cultural Democracy: The Key to African Development. 2000, Broadview Press, Ltd.

institutions, including political parties, Africa is expected to pass through this process almost literally overnight.

A related problem is the lack of a middle class. Even in advanced democracies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, political parties did not fully develop until after the Industrial Revolution. At this time, a significant middle class was created which resulted in the promotion of such key components of democracy as a civil society and a class of people who could exercise accountability over and place demands upon government. This, in turn, led to the articulation and aggregation of interests that required a more pluralist political environment. These trends helped to promote democracy.

This argument also posits that in “Asian Tiger” countries such as Taiwan and South Korea, pluralist democratic politics did not take root until after considerable economic development. This produced the middle class structure largely analogous to that which occurred in western democratic nations, and it led to popular movements toward democracy (and governments that recognized this). Political parties were able to operate successfully given this level of social and economic development. With the possible exception of countries such as Botswana and Mauritius, most African nations have not experienced the extent of economic development, including the expansion of the middle class, associated with the countries cited above. In fact, many believe it will be quite some time before Africa will ever experience the characteristics necessary to build successful democratic institutions. This argument suggests a sequential “development first, then political pluralism” approach.

III. Comments on Political Party Critiques

The “Museveni School” critiques have varying levels of merit. The cumulative impact of this line of reasoning is to provide a justification for political structures that are lacking in fundamental elements which are necessary for a pluralist, democratic system. . This section argues, however, that individual merit does not make them, in their collective entirety, valid. This point is of critical importance, since a central element of democratic function is the transparency and accountability in political processes provided by competing political parties. The following critiques are keyed to the points outlined in the previous section.

Parties breed conflict in fragile nation states - It is clear that in certain circumstances after the advent of multi-party politics, violence – some of it large-scale - has occurred. The Rwandan genocide, for example, took place after the Arusha accords permitted the existence and functioning of political parties. The Central African Republic and Congo Brazzaville have both seen widespread civil strife after the advent of democratic government. This somewhat facile argument, however, does not constitute a causal relationship. As is true with the case of Bosnia and other non-African states, discord and tensions had existed for many years, and the relaxation of authoritarian rule resulted in the expression of suppressed sentiments. More fundamental reasons for this violence are

the long-standing social and economic inequities that existed, and the pressure of regional or ethnic sentiment being tamped down by political repression.

Continued authoritarian rule cannot eliminate violence; it only serves to delay and deepen animosities. The Congo (formerly Zaire) is a good case in point. Mobutu's dictatorship created a veneer of placidity and stability that was quickly dissipated as his grip on power and health eroded. The result has been utter chaos and the division of the country into a series of de facto zones of influence.

There is no doubt that at times parties have proven to be divisive groupings within certain countries. However, to abolish the idea of pluralism altogether is not the proper solution, nor a step toward a democratic Africa. The argument put forth by leaders and proponents of the "New Leadership" groups that parties breed conflict in fragile nation states is one that throws out the proverbial baby with the bath water. The final section of this article suggests that a more reasonable approach is to examine the problems with political party functioning, and try to change the conflicting views. To simply abolish political parties because certain elements may cause violence is in itself undemocratic, and doesn't solve the underlying problem.

Authoritarian, urban-based groupings of small elites - Many, although not all, parties have some of the negative characteristics ascribed to them in this argument. Democracy is an evolutionary process, however. To expect that parties would spring whole cloth from authoritarian environments and shed all of the characteristics of the previous political culture is not realistic. To develop into multi-faceted and policy-focused parties is a process that inevitably takes time. As democracy evolves so do parties. It is not helped by muzzling the parties, as is the case in Uganda. The claim that parties are isolated and autocratic becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if they are allowed to exist but not to operate. A better way would be to create incentives for the parties to be more inclusive and to find ways to broaden their appeal within different communities. It is unrealistic to do away with all types of pluralism simply because some parties may have authoritarian aspects.

This system is more democratic - In actuality, the Movement system is single-party rule in disguise. By abolishing the activity of political parties, the "New Leadership" group in Africa is taking an authoritarian stance in the government under the guise of promoting unity and stability. The Movement system is also personalist and lacking in institutionalization. How likely is it, for example, that the system would survive the person of President Museveni? Who would take the reins of an authoritarian regime in Uganda after Museveni steps down, or otherwise passes from the scene? A likely scenario is a scramble for power. Furthermore, people in these countries still identify with a particular party. Often a candidate's affiliation is known, even if he or she is not publicly allowed to state it.

Other short-lived examples exist where the government has dictated severe limitations on the existence of political parties, ostensibly in the name of balancing democracy and national unity, although regime survival was most likely the paramount

consideration. For example, in 1986, Nigeria's military rulers sought to introduce the appearance of pluralism by proposing a two-party system, where one party would be "slightly left of center," and one party "slightly right of center." This approach quickly collapsed due to widespread domestic and international criticism.

Senegal also has experimented with constraints on political parties. In 1976, an amendment was passed that limited political parties to three specific political ideologies. One party would be the liberal democratic party, another would be the Marxist-Leninist party, and the third would be President Senghor's own Socialist Party. These examples demonstrate that the idea of placing severe constraints on parties to operate and function (as opposed to banning them outright) is not new. This system existed without the ruling Socialist party's grip on power being seriously challenged until domestic and international pressures resulted in a broader liberalization of the political system in the late 1980s.

Parties are corrupt - Museveni and others argue that corruption is rife among political parties. This proposition is extremely difficult to prove one way or the other. Whatever its validity, it is clear that the preceding single-party era resulted in massive corruption. Without another group or party to act as a pluralistic force, the single-party rulers and elites were able to manipulate and run the government in any direction desirable. A second generation challenge of democratic consolidation is to institute systems of transparency and accountability that can reduce, if not totally eliminate, political corruption. To some extent, oversight by opposition political parties, the press, civic organizations, and other grassroots bodies is beginning the process of developing such systems. Countries such as South Africa, for example, have begun to pioneer ethics legislation for Members of Parliament.

Political parties do not have clear policies - This argument carries with it considerable validity. It is important to ask, however, what standards are used to qualitatively judge political parties. Certainly in the case of western countries, it took many years for parties to develop broad identities. In the contemporary world, with the advent of mass media and civil society organizations (which can also serve as popular channels of voices for change), as well as the decline of ideology as a motivating force, the challenges of imbuing parties with clear policy content and personality are manifold.⁹

Furthermore, parties are manifestations of priorities and concerns of various elements within society. The more the bases for their existence are determined by the state, the more they will lack in legitimacy. If the reality of a country is that people support parties at least in part on the basis of ethnicity as a part of its self-identity rather than by any ideologically-oriented positions, then that must be accepted. There are ways within a pluralist framework to attenuate the worst manifestations of ethno-nationalism. Some of these are outlined in the following section.

While some parties may not successfully voice their platform to their constituents, there are many ways to ensure greater communication between the party and its followers than

⁹ Diamond, Larry. Developing Democracy, p. 96, 1999, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

by simply abolishing the party itself. Parties need better organizational skills and processes to stay in close touch with their followers. More thorough communication will lead to more defined policies and political ideals. Clear policies will develop over time, but parties need the opportunity to exist and refine their communication skills.

The lack of middle classes - To suggest that a middle class must exist before a democratic system can be possible is questionable on a number of different grounds. First, this does not explain the case of countries such as Bangladesh, Madagascar, Mali, and Mongolia, to cite a few examples. All of these nations have annual per capita GDP figures of well under \$2,000, but they have successfully begun the process of developing democratic institutions.¹⁰ While evidence clearly demonstrates that richer countries are more likely to be democracies, it does not demonstrate that poorer countries cannot begin a process of democratic development and consolidation. Przeworski and colleagues have noted that “Democracies can survive even in the poorest nations if they manage to generate development, if they reduce inequality, if the international climate is propitious, and if they have parliamentary institutions.”¹¹ He draws the conclusion that there is no economic requirement for democracy to begin to develop, as Museveni and others suggest.

This leads to a second critique. Even if this argument were true, at what point would a country become “fit” for democracy? Who would set the criteria and decide this? Certainly governments in power would have a vested interest in this question.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this argument represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what democracy is and how it develops. Democracy is not something that doesn’t exist one day and does the next. To use a graphic metaphor, democracy is like the colors of the rainbow, always changing, and evolving into the next stage of colors. Democracy is a learned, not inherited system. In most cases it is evolutionary, and rarely can a “moment” be identified when a country has passed into a phase of consolidated democracy. Policies that serve to postpone, at best, the development of democratic institutions can serve to simply keep an authoritarian government in power. Any type of requirement for a democratic government causes the authoritarian party to maintain power as long as those requirements are out of reach, and serves as an excuse for never trying to pursue a successful democracy.

IV. Future Democratic Development and Recommendations

While the arguments of those skeptical of political parties have some validity, taken in totality their logic implies that party activity must be restrained and serve as a way to let off pressure rather than reflecting the reality of alternance in power. This section suggests policy options that the international community, governments, civil

¹⁰ UNDP Human Development Report, NY, 2000.

¹¹ Przeworski, Adam; Alvarez, Michael; Cheibub, Jose Antonio; and Limongi, Fernando. “What Makes Democracies Endure?” Diamond, Larry et al eds. Consolidating the Third Wave of Democracies, p. 49, 1997, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

society groups and political parties could usefully address as they consider ways to promote viable and pluralist democratic institutions in Africa.

The appropriate response to the types of problems outlined in the first two sections of this article is not for governments to overreact, and pretend that it is possible to develop democratic institutions without pluralism in the form of competitive political parties. Instead, it is important to create a context in which parties can promote democracy, not challenge it. A number of constituent elements of internal political party functioning deserve greater attention and creative thought. These include actions related to a) the internal structure and functions of political parties and b) the broader institutional context in which democratization takes place, which can either nurture or adversely affect the environment in which political parties function.

Actions in the former arena may include:

- improving internal structures and democratic functioning;
- increasing knowledge of and responsiveness to public opinion; and
- developing party platforms and policies.

The latter concern the development of political party “enabling environments” that can help mainstream parties into the process. This refers to the regulations, laws, and general attitude taken especially, but not solely, by the government regarding the functioning of political parties. Relevant actions may include:

- establishing credible requirements for party registration and candidacies;
- developing codes of conduct or other conflict resolution mechanisms for political parties that reflect fundamental democratic values;
- encouraging the possibility of public financing;
- integrating relevant traditional democratic governance traditions;
- recognizing the role that regional organizations can play in promoting constructive political party functioning; and
- considering broader governance institutional design issues that could help foster effective functioning of political parties.

Internal Party Functions

Improving internal party democracy. Developing a democratic political culture does not concern simply the relations between parties, government, and other elements of society. It also involves the internal functioning of political parties. In general, the more consolidated a democracy is, the more its parties function internally according to democratic principles. Countries can encourage nascent democratic systems to promote internal democracy in several ways. These can include regular terms of service and alternance in leadership positions, the use of two-way communication channels with mid-level and grass roots membership, regular and special party conferences, and volunteer recruitment and training sessions.

Considering public opinion. In democratizing environments, political competition has led mainstream parties to reach out to hitherto marginalized groups, while education and greater understanding of political processes has encouraged more active participation of society. In many African countries, this process is just beginning. Heightened understanding of public opinion naturally feeds into this process.

Because in a democracy the views of ordinary citizens carry weight, resources should be devoted to expanding the infrastructure and capacities of public opinion gathering and measurement in African countries. The more parties become inserted in the reality of the country and understand bottom-up perspectives, rather than dictating from top-down, the more viable they can become.

To provide an anecdotal example, the author directed a political party training program in Benin in the mid-1990s. Part of the project included a focus group in a village in the northern part of the country, in which villagers were asked to identify 3-4 leading issues that they would like to see political parties address. Party leaders in the capital of Cotonou were then asked, if they were villagers in the northern part of the country, what issues they would like to see addressed by the parties. The two sets of responses were very different, with the villagers seeking assistance on local economic development projects, and the party leaders articulating broader, more national issues. When party leaders were informed of this discrepancy, they were faced with the realization that they were not in touch with grassroots, popular opinion, and they began to seek ways to address this problem.

Development of Party Platforms and Policies. Obviously, each party has the responsibility of determining its own platform. The government or any other type of regulatory agency, should not dictate attempts to shape platforms because they will increase the risk that the parties themselves will be delegitimized (in some cases, of course, that is exactly what short-sighted governments are seeking to achieve). Platform and message development could be fostered by greater internal democracy and the solicitation of perspectives from party membership and outside sources. Many parties must determine how to expand their scope and appeal to maximize their chances of success. The need to build coalitions and use the politics of compromise has not often been a feature of the more authoritarian post-independence political systems that are now being replaced.

The Broader Institutional Context

This context is shaped by the regulations and the environment in which parties operate and function. Much can be done to shape the behavior of parties without delegitimizing them. Two points are worthy of note here. First, the parties' external environment can draw inspiration from or form a part of the emerging international norms and standards that reflect a growing universal consensus regarding the specifics of what makes a country a democracy or not. Some examples include the key role that election observers

play in assessing the legitimacy of electoral processes; elements of meaningful political participation, such as access to the media and party functioning; and appropriate institutional development.

The second issue in determining the legitimacy of these requirements is the process by which they are adopted. A secretive, unilateral, or otherwise limited basis of decision-making is likely to prove more dangerous than one in which a wide range of political sentiment and thought is solicited and given due weight.

Establishing credible requirements for party and candidate registration. As noted in the previous section, the question of the extent to which parties must meet certain requirements to permit them to legally function is very controversial. These requirements should be as minimal as possible because the more wide-ranging and intrusive they become, the more they risk delegitimizing the system. Nonetheless, certain requirements may have merit, as they can attenuate some of the criticisms about political parties previously outlined. For example, a requirement that a party demonstrate a national character may calm fears that parties would be divisive and fan regional and/or separatist violence. Each time a requirement is levied, however, it risks carrying with it complicating factors. For example, how is a national character to be defined and proven? If signatures are required from residents of different parts of the country then how many? How can their authenticity be verified? Could a party have bought these signatures? How could this be (dis)proven?

Other election-related issues include the grounds for candidate (in)eligibility, regulations or laws concerning campaigning, and the voter registration process. In Cote d'Ivoire and Zambia, the evolving democratic system has been sorely tested by candidate citizenship requirements, which have had the effect of rendering invalid the candidacies of highly popular political figures. Thus, on the basis that it is better to err on the side of inclusiveness and participation in a democratic system, party registration pre-requisites and limitations on candidate eligibility should be kept to a minimum.

Developing codes of conduct or other party-specific methods of conflict resolution. An increasing number of countries have adopted some form of codes of conduct that lay out the "rules of the game" to which parties adhere. Codes of conduct can help address concerns about the possibility of parties resorting to violence or other behavior that violates the spirit, if not the law, of a democratic political culture. These may be voluntary or codified in some form. In Bosnia, for example, a code has been developed to help promote legitimate electoral processes. Political parties are prohibited from arousing sectarian controversy in the form of literature or speech. One specific section states that "Parties and politicians should not betray the confidence which they enjoyed by virtue of their official position." Coercion and intimidation are particular targets of these codes of conduct, and all political parties are enjoined to follow the guidelines. Sanctions for parties not abiding by the code of conduct can include warnings, de-registration or limitation of party activities, and monetary fines.

In African countries, party and campaign funding issues are also highly sensitive, given the relative newness of competitive politics. Procedures and practices are only now being established to address them. Parties outside of government complain that ruling parties divert public funds for campaign purposes, while ruling parties at times argue that non-governmental organizations are established to receive donor funds that are then channeled into support for opposition parties. While some countries have passed legislation governing funding of political parties, this effort could be expanded and greater public awareness would help ensure that it is adhered to. At the same time, greater transparency of funding procedures, together with more stringent disclosure and accounting requirements, would go a long way to addressing real or perceived problems surrounding party funding.

Countries such as Pakistan and Nepal have also experimented with codes of conduct for political parties. In 1997, a code indicated that, “The political parties shall not propagate any opinion, or act in any manner prejudicial to the ideology of Pakistan, or the sovereignty integrity or security of Pakistan.”¹² Though this code is general in wording, the idea that political parties must act in a certain manner for democracy to be successful has been laid out. Codes of conduct can help address concerns about the possibility of parties resorting to violence or other behavior that violates the spirit, if not the law, of a democratic political culture. Even if some of these codes have not been particularly effective initially, they represent a trend for the future that can be strengthened.

In addition, some countries have experimented successfully with other types of mechanisms designed to minimize, if not eliminate, destructive conflict between political parties. Impartial and independent ombudsmen, for example, can address or give a hearing to legitimate party concerns before they reach the stage of threatening the democratization process.

Encouraging the possibility of public financing. Given the newness of competitive politics, the high cost of campaigning, and the relatively limited resource base in most African countries, political party funding and campaign finance are of specific concern. In established democracies, rules governing political party funding and campaign finance have evolved over time. While they differ from country to country, these rules are all designed to limit corruption and undue advantage, and promote transparency and accountability. Most countries also provide a degree of public funding to political parties that meet certain legally-mandated requirements. Political party funding has particular resonance in African countries, where the advantages of incumbency can often be overwhelming.

Integrating indigenous traditions. Indigenous African traditions that reflect in part the communitarian aspects of democracy. For example, the institutions of ganwaa (alternance in power) in the Oromo of Ethiopia, khotla (consultation) in Botswana, and gacacca (administration of justice and dispute resolution) in Rwanda are some elements of

¹² Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Contesting Candidates for General Elections, 1997 (Pakistan).

traditional African governance that can be integrated into more “modern” democratic systems.¹³

This recommendation needs to be applied carefully, however, because in multi-ethnic societies, the question must be asked “whose traditions?” Some ethnic groups may not easily embrace or adopt those of other groups in the same country. Nonetheless, to the extent that they can be accepted, adapted and used in conjunction with more modern democratic practices, the development of democracy in Africa is likely to be strengthened.

Integrating regional organizations. The existence of continent-wide or regional bodies such as the OAU, ECOWAS, the East African Community, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), provides further opportunity to integrate international democratic norms at the country level. The record of these regional organizations in promoting democratic governance is mixed, but improving. Increasingly, these organizations can take inspiration from activities of other groups such as the Organization of American States, which has adopted a firm and collective approach toward member states that were risking slipping back into authoritarianism. While not doing away with the nation-state, the development of these regional organizations can lead to institutional changes that limit the power of the state to act in an arbitrarily coercive and undemocratic fashion. They can also possibly play a role in terms of promoting international norms about political parties based on broader themes than simply ethnicity or internal regionalism.

Incorporating consociational institutional design. Finally, the challenge of democratic development is exacerbated by many African countries’ adoption of the highly centralized political institution models of their former colonial powers. These have not always been appropriate to the regional socio-political contexts of the host country, and often have had the effect of reinforcing a winner-take-all/zero-sum nature of politics. This, in turn, has upped the stakes for political parties and has had the result of promoting violence and discord through parties struggling for the prize of centralized power.

On the other hand, reflecting the importance of consensus decision-making in African political tradition, many of the successful political transitions have had some element of consociationalism to them. This term refers to democratic institutional design that emphasizes the inclusion of different elements of society, with the desired effect being the development of a positive-sum political system, rather than the “winner-loser” aspects of democracy.¹⁴ In a number of so-far successful experiments in democracy, consociational principles have been reflected in the widespread use of some form of proportional representation in election systems, institutional recognition of ethnic or regional interests (such as in special voting districts for the Tuareg population in Niger), the structure and nature of national conferences, and the maintenance in power for at least a transitional period of formerly authoritarian rulers.

¹³ For more information on this topic, see Osabu-Kle, *op cit*.

¹⁴ See Arend Lijphardt, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

This approach can help nurture political parties, because the range of entry points for political participation are broadened. Unlike highly centralized systems where power is tightly held and controlled, parties in a system with consociational elements have more of an opportunity to demonstrate to their supporters that they can participate in and benefit from the system.

While South Africa represents the best model of participatory African transitions in the sense of including the loser in the process, it is not the only one. Many countries, for example, held national conferences in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a way of peacefully ending autocratic rule. They found ways to treat former leaders honorably and to preserve a role for them and their political movements in the democratization process. Benin reformed its electoral system to include increased proportionality, thereby ensuring greater regional and ethnic representation in the legislature.

Consociational theory, however, does bring with it a set of criticisms that are especially pertinent in the African context.¹⁵ Some argue that it is too focussed on elites. This argument does not reflect the reality of African politics, however, in which elites do have significant and often commanding roles in governing their nations. Another argument questions the wisdom of institutional arrangements in which the practice of political identification by ethnic group is legitimized. This argument implies that ethnicity does not play an important role in the political life of more established democracies. It also ignores the reality of contemporary African politics, in which regional or ethnic identification is a central issue. It also suggests a permanence or immutability of these arrangements that need not be the case. Consociational arrangements can exist for limited or transitional periods of time. This presents the possibility that as democracies become more established they may adapt institutions to reflect the amount of importance given to ethnic or other special considerations as appropriate.

Another set of criticisms relates to the feasibility of consociational structures. Not all the elements cited by proponents of consociationalism can always be found in African nations. In addition, to be successful, consociationalism requires that the elites conducting the negotiating produce constituencies that support the compromises that are required. This is often a difficult and at least partly unsuccessful task.

One of the greatest challenges is how to inculcate democratic systems in environments in which great ethnic/regional discord prevails. Consociationalism works better with a multiplicity of different groups. In a context with only a couple of different groups its success becomes problematic. Second, in countries with weak state institutions and low levels of economic development, it may be too complicated to implement a fully consociational model. Third, at least in the short run, it tends to be more expensive than more majoritarian structures because various institutions and levels of government are needed (countries such as Senegal have decided not to continue upper chambers at least in part for these reasons). Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, it may be difficult to

¹⁵ See Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, (Berkeley University of California Press, , 1985) pp. 568-576.

convince, or if necessary, force autocratic regimes to truly open up and accept the at least partial loss of power that is inherent to the governing regime when consociational change occurs. Thus, the utility of a consociational approach must be carefully considered, as well as how, in what for a, and with which participation these decisions are made. The international community can be helpful, but in most cases it cannot take the lead.

More emphasis should be placed on disseminating institutional examples from democracies in Africa and around the world concerning inclusive ways in which issues such as constitutional development, legislative structures, decentralization, and separation of powers are being addressed. Architects of democratic institutions must be persuaded to dare to think creatively about how democratic values and their socio-political realities can be accommodated. They must not simply opt for wholesale adoption of the former colonial power's institutions. The international community must also continue to work to create peaceful regional environments in which democratic development can take place. This is a long-term process, as witnessed by the range of successes and failures that have accompanied multilateral efforts at making and keeping the peace in a seemingly growing number of flash points around the continent.

Strategies also need to be developed to make it more difficult for authoritarian governments to decide that the only alternatives are either continued complete power or their total defeat. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that creating a positive sum political environment, in which access to power may be spread broadly across the political spectrum with little regard to popular support for the various political actors, does not go so far as to tip the scales and render the system fundamentally undemocratic.

Conclusion

It is tempting to suggest that political legitimacy can be achieved by some form other than by allowing pluralism to be expressed, but experience suggests otherwise. Whether an autocrat chooses an overtly anti-pluralist institutional structure, or tries to finesse the issue by permitting a veneer of pluralism without a meaningful possibility of alternance in power, the effect is similar. While the argument can be made that brusque, rapid and total political change through democratic means may result in violence and social unrest, a stand-pat approach of limited or no political opening is likely to result in greater violence and discord in the future. The ideas presented in the last section of this article suggest ways in which these issues can be approached within a framework of universal democratic values and institutions.