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

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

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

This lecture attempts to cast a fresh look on these questions by concentrating attention on the conceptual and analytical framework of some of the debates. The point here is not to discuss in detail the experience of the African countries in which multi-party elections have taken place (Buijtenhuijs & Rijnierse 1993; Buijtenhuijs & Thiriot 1995). Rather it is to draw attention to the assumptions, validity and limits of current interpretations. My aim is to review the main arguments in support of, or against, the view that the present political transitions in Africa are favourable to greater democratisation. Enough time has now elapsed since the first multi-party elections (in 1989/1990) to re-consider whether they did indeed mark a watershed in the political evolution of the continent.

There has undeniably been in Black Africa a very widespread and significant change in the nature of the political regimes in place. In the years 1989-1994, most African countries moved away from single-party political systems. Multi-party elections were held, some of which resulted in the incumbent governments and leaders relinquishing power in a peaceful political transition. By 1994, it was estimated that democratic transitions had taken place in sixteen countries while flawed transitions had occurred in another twelve. Transitions had been blocked or impossible in only fourteen countries (Bratton & de Walle 1997: 120). Since 1994, some African countries have held their second, and even third, multi-party elections and in some instances (Ghana, Benin, Cape Verde, São Tomé e Príncipe, etc.) these elections have seen the return to power of the leaders and/or regimes parties previously defeated at the polls.

Although on such evidence it appears that democracy is consolidating in Africa, there are also indications that the process of democratisation, such as it may be, is fraying at the edges. There is, firstly, the persistent claim that multi-party elections are controlled and distorted, when not rigged, by incumbent regimes. There is, secondly the nagging doubt that democratically elected regimes have every intention of subverting the momentum for political liberalisation by ruling much as the previous one-party regimes did. Thirdly, there are very obvious limits to the actual democratic nature of functioning multi-party systems, chief of which seems the inescapable conclusion that such systems have little place for political opposition. Finally, and most ominously, there is the inescapable

fact that where multi-party elections have failed to bring about genuine improvements, Africans have begun to lose faith in "democracy".[1]

There is, in short, some indication that what has all too readily been interpreted as a *systemic* political change in the direction of greater democratisation may well turn out to be no more than a surface phenomenon - undoubtedly a transition, but not necessarily democratisation, at least not in the sense in which it has usually been understood in the West. Whether this relatively gloomy view of the relative successful introduction of multi-party politics in Africa is justified or not, it behoves us to take seriously the possibility that Africa's present political transitions may not lead to the establishment of a Western-style democracy on the continent.

I propose here to review the analytical significance of the debates about the political liberalisation of contemporary Africa by looking respectively at the roots, meanings, and limits of democratisation.

(i) The roots of democratisation

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

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

There is little doubt about the political deficiencies of post-colonial African governments, nor is there much uncertainty about the desire among most

[1] In some instances they appear ready to support or condone the return of unconstitutional regime changes (e.g., coups) which, typically, promise to reduce corruption and inequalities.

Africans for more efficient and accountable governments. Beyond these general statements, however, the situation is rather more complex than at first appears. What is clear is that the roots of Africa's problems very largely lie in the failings of its economies.

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

Some countries were economically better endowed than others. Some governments were better at managing the economy than others. But in the end, following the global economic crisis triggered by the first oil crisis in the seventies, most African countries suffered grievously. Within a decade, production had declined, export earnings had collapsed, debt had soared and so had food aid requirements. Even economically successful countries like Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya found themselves seriously indebted and in deep economic crisis. Poorer countries were reduced to surviving on foreign aid.

Because in the first fifteen years of independence (1960-75) African economies had been relatively prosperous, the claims made by one-party states to be well suited to the twin task of national integration and development appeared to have some validity. With the economic crisis, the weaknesses of these African political systems were soon exposed. As resources dwindled, states were less and less able to fulfil their neo-patrimonial functions - either in providing employment or in enabling state resources to be distributed by patrons to their clients (Bratton & de Walle 1997).

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

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

Of course, there is a large number of Africans who profess to reject the neo-patrimonial logic and who argue in favour of democracy. Many intellectuals, writers, lawyers, journalists, academics, and businessmen are well aware that the neo-patrimonial political order cannot deliver the economic growth the continent so desperately needs. They know that the defence of the status quo is not much more than a smokescreen for those who seek to avoid responsibility for their misdeeds while desperately clinging on to power. It is they who have been at the forefront of political opposition and many have paid dearly for it (Soyinka 1996).

It is debatable, however, whether internal opposition to African regimes would have led to a move towards multi-party liberalisation in the absence of the external factors discussed below. Until the demise of communism, the model of opposition was more in tune with Rawlings' Ghana or even Sankara's Burkina Faso - that is, strong, mobilising, one-party states and "left-wing" regimes - than with the multiparty parliamentary regimes which have been readily advocated in the past few years. As for popular opinion, there is no compelling evidence that it was consulted by those who took on the mantle of the opposition or that its ideas of political reform fitted the type of multi-party system which is now the norm.[2]

Unsurprisingly, therefore, our conclusion must be that the root cause of political liberalisation in Africa cannot be thought to lie exclusively in the internal dynamics of these countries.[3] Although popular dissatisfaction

[2] There is considerable evidence that many ordinary Africans remain unconvinced by the merits of multi-party systems. Many do not understand the meaning of democracy, so surveys such as the Afrobarometer must be taken cautiously.

[3] Bratton & de Walle argue emphatically that democratic transitions in Africa are to be explained primarily in terms of the evolution of domestic politics; they view external factors merely as the context within which internal change took place.

with existing regimes had been high in most African countries for at least a decade, it is impossible to state with any conviction that such opposition would have resulted in a transition to multiparty politics without the very specific combination of outside factors triggered by the change in the post-1989 world system.

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

Those pointing to the causal weight of external factors emphasise three aspects: (1) a more conservative outlook on North-South relations in the West: (2) the widespread imposition of structural adjustment programmes and (3) the post-1989 collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War.

The more conservative political atmosphere in the West (symbolised by the Reagan and Thatcher administrations) led to a foreign policy agenda where aid to Africa became a lower priority and support for one-party states diminished. The West became more critical of the failings of African regimes and of their repressive excesses. Sympathetic observers found it more difficult to defend the actions of African government to Western domestic opinion. In short, the West lost patience with the "excuses" given by African rulers (or their supporters) to explain the ruin of their policies. Since one-party political systems and state-directed development had failed, time had now come for political and economic liberalisation.

Secondly, the deepening economic crisis in Africa forced African governments to seek more and more aid. As debt grew the West began to impose tighter and tighter conditionalities. Countries wanting aid were compelled to adopt structural adjustment programmes.[4] Soon, the rescheduling of debt and even bilateral financial aid were tied to structural

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

adjustment. Whether structural adjustment could ever have the economic effects anticipated by the World Bank, what is clear is that it was in practice linked to political liberalisation. Indeed, some would argue that the World Bank's hidden agenda is political. Certainly, it cannot merely be a coincidence that in so many countries democratisation followed structural adjustment.

The third external factor which has influenced political change in Africa is the demise of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The effects have been twofold. First, Gorbachev's foreign policy reforms and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower have meant that support for its erstwhile allies diminished and that Moscow applied pressure for the resolution of the conflicts to which it was party (e.g., Afghanistan, Angola). The Soviet Union also greatly reduced, when it did not cut altogether, financial or economic aid. Countries like Angola and Mozambique which relied on the Soviet bloc were now left to seek support from the West. Since the end of a bipolar world resulted in Western supremacy, pressure to institute in Africa political reforms along Western democratic lines became well-nigh unstoppable.

Another consequence of the downfall of communism has been a collapse in the legitimacy of socialism as a workable, or even desirable, political programme. Consequently, there has been pressure from the West to do away with all manner of "socialist" or "socialisant" policies in Africa. Since it was commonly believed in the West that socialism was responsible for the advent of one-party politics in Africa, there was thus a further reason for demanding democratic reforms.

The immediate effect on Africa of the post-1989 situation was to make it clear to all African governments that the West now dictated the economic and political agenda for the continent. In the context of the late eighties and early nineties that agenda consisted of a systematic programme of economic and political liberalisation. Political conditionalities became the order of the day. No longer was it possible to sustain the argument, fashioned out of the dominant social and economic theories of the sixties, that development would in due course induce democratisation. Democracy was now seen as a condition of, a pre-requisite to, development.

In summary, then, a review of the evidence suggests, as always seemed likely, that the transition towards multi-party political systems in Africa

was the outcome of a singular combination of internal and external factors.[5] However, there is today every prospect that China's investment in Africa will also influence the political development of the countries with which it is most closely linked and this is likely to affect the nature of democratisation in the years to come in ways which we cannot fathom today.

(ii) The meanings of democratisation

Whatever the roots of political transitions in Africa, there has been much confusion about the precise meaning of democratisation. This confusion is more than definitional; it is normative and ideological. It is at heart a debate both about the nature of power in Africa and about the possible political trajectories of African countries in the years to come.

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

So what form(s) has democracy taken in Africa? The evidence of political liberalisation is threefold: (1) the end of the one-party political system; (2) the advent of political competition; and (3) the holding of free and universal multi-party elections.

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

[5] In this respect, I think time will show that the Bratton & de Walle argument on the causal relation between domestic political protest and political liberalisation - statistically sound as it may be - to have been overly dismissive of the key external factors which I have mentioned.

those Africans who saw in multi-party elections a means of bringing politicians to heel.

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

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

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

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

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

Those who focus on this aspect argue, rightly, that without proper procedures there can be no political liberalisation and that the practice of regular elections establishes precedents for the deepening of democracy.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on procedural matters can easily make us forget that multi-party elections in and of themselves cannot guarantee a transition to democracy, let alone the survival of a democratic political order.[6] The criticism of the Chiluba regime in Zambia suggested that such elections may simply have been the means by which one single-party state replaced another. If this is the case, then, clearly, the transition to democracy requires more than the holding of regular multi-party elections.

An *institutional* approach focuses less on procedure than on the systemic relationships between the recognisable constituent bodies of the political order. At the apex of the institutional framework stand the constitution and the legal system. Without a democratic constitution and a politically independent judiciary to uphold it, there can be no stable democracy. Beyond this, there must be three institutional mechanisms at work: (1) a structure of representation, (2) a working parliament; and (3) an effective system of direct political accountability.

The first is perhaps the most complicated in Africa. Indeed, formal democratic theory would stress the need for individual representation. However, for reasons having to do with the importance of communal, racial, regional, ethnic and religious forms of identity, any system of representation in Africa operates within a collective rather than individual context. By which I mean, either that representatives are chosen for reasons having to do with their communal affiliations or that elections are interpreted on particularistic grounds (Chabal & Daloz 1999).

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

The need to have a working parliament (even in presidential systems) cannot be over-estimated - indeed, it is the hallmark of Western democracy.

[6] As, to be fair, Bratton & de Walle do recognise.

By working parliament, I mean an assembly which is in session most of the year and in which it is possible for the party having lost the election to operate as a viable opposition. Unless there is parliamentary scrutiny by a genuine opposition given the means to do its job, any elected assembly runs the risk of becoming a mere rubber stamp of executive authority - as generally remains the case in Africa.

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

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

Nevertheless, if one is to consider the transition to a democratic system institutionally akin to the Western, it will be impossible to avoid discussion of its cultural dimensions. Theorists of political culture emphasise the following democratic attributes: (1) a democratic ethos; (2) a mechanism for representation; and (3) a notion of accountability.

The first, though somewhat vague, refers to a political culture in which the rulers and the ruled are in accord over both the desirability and efficacy of a democratic political system. This is a taller order than may at first appear. In countries with no democratic traditions (or traditions of democratic failures[7]) there are no intrinsic or historical reasons for trusting the democratic system to deliver a way out of a political or economic crisis - in

[7] It is well to remember here that most African countries started independent life with a democratic constitutional order - the dissolution of which is now part of their political history.

Africa or elsewhere. Witness the difficulties in the political transition of Russia and a number of Eastern European countries such as, for example, the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Romania and Bulgaria.

Furthermore, a democratic ethos means a political culture in which individuals trust the mechanics of the democratic system of representation. Democracy rests on an accepted notion of the political supremacy of the individual citizen *qua* political agent. In other words, a culture of representation pre-supposes that rulers and ruled alike accept the political primacy of individual representation expressed by means of a single, secret and discrete vote. Here too, there are serious difficulties in countries where cultural traditions are not congruent with such notions of individual representation (Chabal 2009).

But all this is nothing without a political culture in which there is a widespread acceptance of democratic norms of accountability. Although it is often argued that democratic accountability is enforced by means of multi-party elections, the truth is that such is only the case in countries where political accountability is democratic in the first instance. The one pre-supposes the other. More, the one can only derive from the other. Elections are only meaningful as a method of accountability where they are recognised to embody the legitimate political will of individual citizens - which is far from being straightforwardly the case in contemporary Africa.[8]

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

[8] The failure to recognise this problem is one of the central weaknesses in the argument presented by Bratton & de Walle.

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

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

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

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

Unfortunately, the very real possibility that present political transitions will fail to bring about greater political accountability could have serious practical consequences. The most immediate danger is that disillusionment and cynicism will lead to the dilution of the legitimacy of the democratic aspiration. If multi-partyism brings few benefits to the mass of the population, if it is merely the sham which enables deeply compromised and unpopular regimes to stay in place, now with a new democratic legitimacy and with outside financial support, then it is to be feared that Africans might well give up on democracy altogether. Political analysts must thus be prepared to consider what the limits of the present transitions in Africa might imply.

(iii) The limits of democratisation

The debate here turns on the extent to which the recent political transitions have been sufficiently institutionalised to provide a viable political platform for overcoming the crisis in which most African countries still find themselves. In other words, is democratisation as it is presently to be found in Africa a political framework for the reforms which need to be implemented in order to increase political accountability and spur sustainable economic development?

On this issue there are strong views. Some analysts argue forcefully that, for all its shortcomings, the beginnings of democratisation in Africa are fundamental (Bratton & de Walle 1997), for at least two sets of reasons. First, because the opening up of the political system and the new democratic practices (competitive politics, elections, freedom of the press, etc.) have set precedents which it will be difficult to extinguish. Second, and more controversially, because these new democratic practices have altered the notion of the political "good": from now on non-democratic regimes will irrevocably lack legitimacy.

The others argue, perhaps slightly less forcefully because their message is not as palatable, that the transition to democracy is nothing of the kind. It is merely one of the many political transformations through which African countries have gone since independence. Their view is that democratisation was largely induced from outside, that it amounted to little more than flawed multi-party elections, and that the practices of the newly elected regimes have differed little from those of their predecessors. Moreover,

they argue, events since the first multi-party elections have confirmed their worries - both because these ostensibly democratic governments have displayed many of the same features as single-party regimes and because they have failed to accept the rigours of the political compromises required by democracy.

This is in part a dialogue of the deaf, since each side focuses attention on different aspects of the recent political transitions. Each can rely on the evidence of what has happened in some African countries - while conveniently neglecting what has happened elsewhere. For example, it can be argued that the re-election in Benin of the old socialist leader Kérékou (at this stage, of course, a declared democrat) was a triumph of democracy. Conversely, the 2010 coup in Niger, overthrowing as it did a democratically elected president and prime minister who had conspired in bringing about a political stalemate in the country, can be adduced as proof that democracy does nothing to solve the fundamental political divisions in any particular country. In view of such events, should Zambia be seen as a pioneer in the transition to democracy or a country in which the democratically elected regime abused power so as to prevent democracy from working to its disadvantage?[9]

The question is not simple and it would serve no purpose to try to approach it simplistically. Much of the argument is sterile, concerned as it is to prove a point, often for reasons which have little to do with Africa. Pitted against each other are those who want to show that the rolling tide of history is now bringing democracy to the most remote corner of the known world and those who believe that democracy (as we know it) is not possible in backward African countries.[10] Although it would be easy to point out that both arguments are a-historical and flawed, this would in no way deter their proponents, for the simple reason that their position is ideological rather than analytical.

More consequential, perhaps, is the question of whether there is, or will be, a causal relationship between the present political transitions and greater

[9] Among others, President Chiluba attempted to muzzle the press. He also introduced legislation of dubious legality to make it impossible for Kenneth Kaunda to challenge him in the last presidential elections.

[10] These two positions are illustrated by two notorious and influential American articles: F. Fukuyama, "The End of History" and R.D. Kaplan, “The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime, overpopulation and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet”.

economic development in Africa. Judged by the emerging consensus on the matter - in which there is agreement between previously opposite perspectives, like those of the World Bank and the radical Nigerian social scientist Claude Ake (Ake 1996)[11] - it would appear that the question is settled. Democracy is now indeed seen as a pre-requisite to development - and development is, quite naturally, taken to be the only way out of the present crisis.

A closer analysis of this consensus, however, reveals diverging premises. There are, on the one hand, those who argue that only democracy can free up the market which will drive economic growth. There are, on the other hand, those who see democracy as the only way of ensuring that the state will be able to foster the necessary development. There is one that sees democracy as a way of minimising the role of the state and maximising the role of the market. The other sees democracy as the mechanism for ensuring that the state will do what the market has hitherto failed to achieve. Here too, the debate is vitiated by the fact that both sides hold ideological positions since in practice there is to date in Africa too little evidence decisively to support either argument.

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What is at issue here is whether a focus on democratisation is the most appropriate, or even the most useful, starting point for understanding contemporary African politics. Judged by the number of publications, it would appear that the question of democracy is paramount. Furthermore, the present consensus on the causal importance of democracy for development in Africa reinforces the notion that political analysts as well as practitioners should concentrate their efforts on this issue.

The political realities of contemporary Africa and the conceptual and ideological pitfalls which we have identified above suggest to me, however, that a focus on democratisation does not necessarily serve the analytical cause well. Whatever the meaning(s) of the present moves towards greater political liberalisation, the limits of democratisation are such as to reduce the heuristic quality of an approach to politics which

[11] Claude Ake's tragic death in a plane crash was a great loss to African social science.

concentrates primarily on the so-called transition to democracy. In short, the debate about democratisation is all too often ideological, or normative.

My own approach is resolutely analytical. I have explained elsewhere why I think it more useful to focus on the question of political accountability rather than democracy when discussing contemporary African politics (Chabal 1992 & 1994). The point here is not just semantic. Democracy is a political system in which political accountability is primarily enforced through elections and parliamentary scrutiny. The reverse, however, does not necessarily apply. Elections and parliaments in and of themselves are no guarantees of a functioning system of political accountability.

If this is the case, then it is more important to ask whether there are, or are likely to be, sufficiently effective and legitimate forms of political accountability in post-colonial Africa rather than whether they are "democratic" or not. By which I mean, that it is ultimately more significant for Africans to know that their rulers are accountable to them in ways which they consider legitimate than to take part in the formal "rituals" of multi-party democracy.[12]

Let me be clear here. I am not saying that elections are unimportant; merely that they are no substitute for effective political accountability. Whether elections enhance political accountability or not is less a function of how truly "multi-party" they are than of the quality of representation they bring about in the post-electoral period. Where, as in Kenya, for example, multi-party elections were long seen by the majority of the population merely as a way for the old political elites of legitimating their continued dominance of a *de facto* one-party system, they were not likely to contribute much to greater and more sustained political accountability. It will be interesting to see whether the recent regime change in that country does contribute to a more meaningful democratisation. More generally, it will be imperative to see what happens in countries when, after the elections, political opposition continues to be suppressed - as is the case in many African countries.

However difficult it may be to assess political accountability in post-colonial Africa, unless we can devise a political analysis capable of doing

[12] As President Museveni of Uganda has argued with vigour.

so it will be well-nigh impossible to seriously gauge the prospects of democracy. The starting point for such an analysis must be a realistic understanding of what is actually happening politically on the continent. The conclusion of my most recent research is that a focus on multi-party political liberalisation is liable to distract us from enquiring into the deep causes of the political crisis in Africa. This is because identifying the reasons for the apparent disorder of Black Africa demands that we begin by making sense of the multifarious and complex ways in which political accountability operated in the neo-patrimonial political systems that developed everywhere in Africa after independence.[13]

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

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[13] Africa Works provides a new paradigm for the analysis of politics in post-colonial Africa which seeks to explain the three most intractable paradoxes of Black Africa's "modernity": that is, the informalisation of politics, the apparent "re-traditionalisation" of society, and the ways in which so many can profit from apparent economic "failure".

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