Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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Sub-Saharan Africa is a vast region of incredible diversity, not only in terms of ethnicity, language and culture, but of political systems and state structures as well. Accordingly, it is a significant challenge to provide a cohesive summary of the issues, debates, and factors promoting, inhibiting, and shaping democracy south of the Sahara. This article will attempt to do just that. It will start by examining the extant literature surrounding the trajectory of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) – the lingering influence of colonialism, democracy’s rise starting in the 1980s, the era of “Big Man” politics, and seemingly conflicting trends in contemporary SSA in which populations increasingly prefer and demand democratic institutions, while governments back away from further reform. The article will consider long-held assumptions about the barriers to democratization, including colonial legacies, ethnic conflict, institutional weakness and corruption, before reviewing more contemporary arguments such as the ‘resource curse.’ However, each of these supposed hurdles has been overcome in some way by a handful of African states. One country in particular is emblematic of a wide range of democratic hurdles, yet it continues to pursue effective democracy. This case, Kenya, will be examined through the lens of potential Western policy measures that might encourage further democratic reform. Finally, the article will review a body of literature that claims democratic commitment in Africa is actually in decline due to a number of factors.

1 The views expressed in this article are personal and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the United States Government.
Before delving into these issues however, it is useful to discuss what exactly is meant by the term “democracy.” Even among scholars, definitions vary. For example, Robert Dahl defines democracy in terms of free and fair elections, freedom of expression, access to information, associational autonomy, and inclusive citizenship. Alternatively, Przeworski et al. add a dimension of contestation to their definition, summarized in “Przeworski’s dictum that ‘democracy is a system in which parties lose elections.’” This definition places particular importance on the alternation of power among multiple political parties as a means of distinguishing democracy from dictatorship. A third definition, from Mainwaring, Brinks and Pérez-Liñán, adds yet another dimension: “elected governments really govern and the military is under civilian control.” As a critique of Przeworski’s definition, this standard allows for a third classification: semi-democracies.

The literature on democracy in Africa shares this problem of the absence of a common standard for democracy. For example, some experts classify five categories of political regimes in Africa: liberal democracies, electoral democracies, ambiguous, liberalized autocracy and unreformed autocracy. In this model, only five African states classify as ‘liberal’ democracies because, in addition to multiparty elections, they “embody respect for civil and political liberties, the existence of relatively effective legislature and judicial institutions, and tolerance for press criticism and dissenting opinions.” The five “liberal” democracies are Cape Verde, Mauritius, South Africa, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Botswana. In contrast, some other analysts divide

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African governments into only three groups: modern monarchies including Swaziland, Morocco, and Libya (before the death of Gaddafi); “full democracies;” and “pretend democracies.” In this classification, the same five “liberal” democracies are classified as “full” democracies, while all other non-monarchic states are labeled “pretend” democracies. This is not an exhaustive analysis of the various classifications of African democracy, but merely a sampling of the diversity of thinking within the field.

Colonial Legacies, Ethnic Conflict, and Corruption

The legacy of colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa is certainly one of the drivers of the trajectory of democracy in the region. Before the industrial revolution, most European contact with Africa was limited to a few coastal enclaves. However, the industrial revolution and Europe’s shift toward manufacturing greatly increased demand for raw materials, which in turn precipitated a ‘scramble for Africa.’ Colonial powers divided the continent into zones of administrative control with little regard for natural boundaries between ethnic groups.7 Worse, rising prosperity in Europe increased demand for goods that had previously been considered luxuries, such as coffee, tea, cocoa, and sugar. This demand was manifested in Africa by policies designed to force the native population into production of these crops, transforming the productive base of society to serve the demands of European markets.8

Starting in the 1950s, African nations began to gain independence from the colonial powers. The majority did so in the 1960s, with Namibia finally gaining its independence in 1990. Colonialism left its mark in many ways, but three legacies hold particular importance to

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8 Ibid., 477.
the study of democracy. First, the ethnic divisions that arose from the somewhat arbitrary
borders devised by the colonial powers have contributed to ethnic conflict in the intervening
years. Second, a system of weak and conflict-prone states with weak political institutions has
remained following the withdrawal of the colonial powers. Finally, as states gained
independence, most held elections to establish an indigenous government, which led to the
election of “Big Men” in a number of states. In many cases, these Big Men hastened to establish
one-party governments, consolidate power in the executive, and gain support through political
patronage.

These newly independent countries emerged during the early decades of the Cold War. Further complicating the development of democracy in SSA, African conflicts over the now-
legitimized borders created by the colonial powers “became proxy for superpower antagonism.
The United States and the Soviet Union…used African conflicts through covert, and sometimes
direct, military intervention to promote their Cold War ideological, political, and economic
interests in Africa.” Cold War great power proxies became conduits for U.S. and Soviet
weapons, military hardware, funding, and military training. At times, the great powers supported
corrupt and repressive regimes, such as U.S. support for the brutal and corrupt Joseph-Désiré
Mobutu in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) as a foil against Soviet influence.
Similarly, the Soviet Union supported the genocidal Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia,
including during his “Red Terror” campaign in the late 1970s.

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10 Ibid., 39.
12 Ibid., 27-28.
Economic Factors and the “Resource Curse”

Upon gaining independence, many African states seized greater control of their economies by nationalizing major industries and establishing control of companies, while heavily regulating those companies that remained under private ownership. Often, these policies resulted in governments developing budget deficits, high inflation, and debt.13 After the Cold War, funding from the Warsaw Pact ended and state-led economic policies resulted in poor development and growth. Help came in the form of loans from international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, aid was often contingent on policy changes to restructure state economies, under the assumption that liberalization, or reducing the state’s role in the economy, would lead to better economic outcomes.14 These conditional policies of economic liberalization became known as the Washington Consensus, and eventually were derided as failures, especially as they were applied to states in a one-size-fits-all fashion, ignoring the diversity of economic problems among states in SSA. However, some tenets of the Washington Consensus have produced success such as helping most African states tame inflation.15 Current donor policies are more flexible and customized to the particular problems faced by the recipient state. However, the influx of foreign aid creates a source of non-tax revenue that may contravene the intent of the conditionality in subtle ways.

Natural resources often provide another form of non-tax revenue to states in SSA. It seems, quite counter-intuitively, that this natural resource wealth can also inhibit growth, development, and even democracy under certain conditions. Many states in SSA are rich in natural resources such as gemstones, oil, and precious metals, and are thus susceptible to this

14 Ibid., 106.
15 Ibid., 112.
‘resource curse.’ Within a decade, trillions of dollars in oil revenue are projected to “descend on a dozen African countries that have never before experienced such influxes. In East Africa, that list will likely include Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Tanzania, and Uganda; in West Africa, it will probably include Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.” Glaringly, there are no democracies among the developing countries that derive the bulk of their export earnings from oil and gas. Nor has any African oil exporter been able to rise out of the bottom half of the UN’s Human Development Index.

The resource curse can have a negative effect on democracy in several ways. Resource wealth may insulate non-democratic states from pressure to democratize. For example, oil-rich authoritarian governments are not reliant on taxes for revenue, so they have fewer incentives to respond to popular demands for reform. Additionally, such governments have the resources to invest in patronage networks and “buy off” potential dissidents. If this fails, these states can afford to employ the military to repress citizens who demand democracy.

Modernization theory provides another insight into possible mechanisms by which the resource curse can affect democratization. Industrial development tends to lead to urbanization, education, occupational specialization, and a “large, articulate middle classes that can pressure the government for a greater say in the policymaking process.” On the other hand, resource export-led development does not, as it employs smaller amounts of (often imported) labor. Thus, resource exports do not produce the kind of growth that leads to democratic pressures.

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16 Larry Diamond and Jack Mosbacher, "Petroleum to the People: Africa's Coming Resource Curse--and how to Avoid It," *Foreign Affairs*, Sep 1, 2013, 86.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
The resource curse is neither universal nor inevitable. Policy recommendations range from supporting the development of effective democratic institutions to oil-to-cash programs. Such schemes would distribute a portion of oil revenues directly to the population as taxable income, which (in theory) would restore the social contract between governments and the governed, increasing accountability of governments and allowing space for democratic pressures. Even Nigeria, long recognized as a victim of the resource curse, experienced a democratic transfer of power in 2015 from a defeated ruling party to the opposition despite its history of oil conflict. Botswana, a major diamond exporter, is often hailed as a state that has overcome the resource curse.

Kenya: A Case Study

Although the problems that stem from Africa’s colonial history pervade the entire region, one country is particularly emblematic of the forces shaping democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. Since its independence, Kenya has suffered ethnic conflict, “Big Man” politics, and weak political institutions. Further complicating Kenya’s trajectory of democratization is the recent discovery of massive oil reserves in Kenya and neighboring Uganda.

Kenya is “East Africa’s economic powerhouse” with great geopolitical and economic importance in the region. However, since its 1963 independence, Kenya has also become one of the most corrupt states in the world. Despite a democratic government, Kenya’s executive has deliberately undermined other government institutions to the point that the government is largely ineffective at providing public services. This has resulted in a concentration of nearly all power

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in the executive, leading to numerous forms of corruption and an absence of accountability. Ultimately, these factors contributed to a loss of state capacity and legitimacy. A self-perpetuating system of corruption in Kenya thus became so entrenched that subsequent governments were unable to restore good governance.22

The primary cause of corruption in Kenya is the deliberate weakening of political institutions by post-colonial leaders, to the point that the government can no longer uphold the rule of law or act in the best interests of the nation.23 Designed to regulate the relationships between citizens and the State, institutions were so weakened that they became “puppets” of the executive branch.24 This process began under Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta, who was Kenya’s leader from 1963 until his death in 1978. Kenyatta successfully consolidated power into the office of the president through constitutional amendments, such as awarding himself the power to dissolve the legislature, control its agenda, and control judicial tenure, among many other powers.25 This effectively eliminated checks and balances on executive power, to the point that the legislature and judiciary eventually acted as “rubber stamp” approval authorities for presidential decisions, regardless of deleterious social or economic effects.26

Conceptually, the dispersal of powers between the executive and legislative branches of government should enable “friction” between them, encouraging greater accountability of the

23 Ibid., 494.
26 Ibid., 265.
executive. This weakening of political institutions outside the executive discouraged accountability and fostered an environment of clientelism and patronage, where material goods were offered in exchange for political and electoral support, often on the grounds of ethnic or tribal identity. Thus, institutions became platforms for the personal enrichment of political elites, especially Kenyatta loyalists, rather than effective engines of governance.

Kenyatta’s successor, Daniel arap Moi, further weakened institutions and created a de jure one-party rule that further reduced political competition and accountability, two cornerstones of democratization. One could argue, in fact, that despite a democratic transition from colonial rule, the policies of Kenyatta and Moi essentially reversed the democratization process by weakening the accountability of the ruling elite by reducing the ability of voters to punish rulers’ misuse of power. Indeed, corruption often increases after a democratic transition due to institutional weakness, and continues unless anti-corruption efforts “gain the upper hand.” Eventually, “Kenyatta (and Moi after him) controlled the armed forces, the police, the civil service, (and) the provincial administration…Over time, the state occupied the entire public sphere, crowding out both political actors and the civil society.”

Although multi-party democracy emerged after the 2002 elections, the legacy of corruption continued to affect Kenyan politics. The resulting “culture of impunity” hampered development and led to widespread violence after the 2008 elections, after which over 1,100 were killed and more than half a million displaced. This period of violence was ended, after

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27 Ibid., 268.
weeks of negotiation, by a power-sharing deal known as the National Accord agreements, brokered by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Some analysts blame the bloody 2008 post-election violence in Kenya directly on the institutional weakness of the old constitution. In fact, “Kenyans felt they had to resort to violence due to their lack of confidence in such institutions as the Electoral Commission and the Kenya Police.”

Other experts point to the pervasiveness of ethnic divisions following the colonial ‘scramble for Africa’ and the haphazard borders that were drawn as a result. However, some point out that “ethnicity is typically not the driving force of African conflicts but a lever used by politicians to mobilize supporters in pursuit of power, wealth, and resources.” In the Kenyan case, while Daniel arap Moi’s ethnicity-based patronage network did contribute to ethnic divisions in the country, intermarriage remained common, as did inter-group cooperation. Instead, it was the “politicization of ethnicity and not ethnicity per se” that led to the bloody violence in Kenya, and in other ethnic conflicts throughout SSA. Rather than ethnic hatred, it was likely the inequitable access to resources and political power created by decades of clientelism that led to the 2008 crisis.

In 2010, a new Kenyan constitution was ratified, containing provisions to curb systematic corruption by limiting the power of the Presidency. The new constitution divides the powers among the branches of government, reduces the control of the President over appointment and dismissal of government officials, and creates commissions to ensure that checks and balances remain in place. The efficacy of this new constitution under the newly elected (2013) government is yet to be determined. Initial estimates are positive, however. The constitution is

32 Hope, Bringing in the Future in Kenya: Beyond the 2010 Constitution, 94.
34 Ibid., 2.
often claimed to be the most important political development in Kenya since its independence in 1963, and it is lauded as “one of the most progressive constitutions in Africa.”35

One additional obstacle to democracy was introduced in 2012, when oil reserves were discovered in Kenya. In 2014, additional reserves were discovered amounting to over 1 billion barrels.36 This discovery prompted widespread speculation about whether or not Kenya’s government can enact policies that will allow it to escape the resource curse. Will Kenya experience the curse as a result of its newly acquired oil wealth? Or will its newly reformed institutions prove strong enough to prevent democratic backsliding and poor development outcomes? There may be hope, as some scholars suggest, for several reasons. First, democratic institutions predated the discovery of oil in Kenya. Second, the resource curse is most likely to engage when oil prices are high. However, in recent years global oil markets have experienced a prolonged slump due to the U.S. shale boom. “If…institutions are strong and the size of the mineral sector does not dwarf the rest of the economy, resource wealth provides additional capital for productive investment…Under these circumstances, resource income is growth promoting, and the ‘curse’ becomes more of a blessing.”37 Thus, the strength of Kenya’s institutions may indeed be sufficient to ensure the success of democracy.

Conclusion

Kenya’s status as a bellwether state in East Africa make it an ideal case for the examination of democratic progress in sub-Saharan Africa writ large. The challenges it has faced are common to most transitioning democracies in the region, from colonial legacies to

35 Hope, Bringing in the Future in Kenya: Beyond the 2010 Constitution, 93.
37 Hendrix and Noland, Confronting the Curse, 36-37
ethnic conflict, from institutional weakness to the resource curse. Clearly, a number of questions remain. Will Kenya be able to overcome decades of political violence? Will Kenya’s government enact policies that will help overcome the potential resource curse, or exacerbate it? Most importantly, what should those policies look like?

Many of the issues Kenya faces also apply to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa as well. Additionally, the influence of other powerful states such as China and India will influence the trajectory of democracy in SSA. For example, China is a significant investor in SSA. Flush with cash and increasingly integrated in the global economy, China’s demand for oil imports has skyrocketed as its economy has grown.38 In its efforts to secure natural resources, China has become a prominent source of foreign direct investment and aid in SSA. However, “rather than emphasizing open markets, private ownership, and retrenchment of the government’s role in the economy” as Western development initiatives purported to do under the Washington Consensus, Chinese development initiatives either ignore democratic principles or actively pursue illiberal, antidemocratic policies.39 Furthermore, decades of growth in China have demonstrated that a state does not need to liberalize in order to generate prosperity. According to some scholars, this contributes to a declining commitment to democracy among African states.

Worse, in recent years Western policy has focused on countering the influence of nontraditional partners such as China and India in a “new ‘scramble for Africa.’”40 In efforts to fight against terrorism while maintaining their access to African resources, “Western powers are readjusting their established governance benchmarks in order to stay competitive in the contest

38 Ibid., 73.
39 Ibid., 73-74.
for African energy, markets, and other geostrategic advantages, even where incumbent African
governments are autocratic and nonreforming."41

Despite some positive indicators such as a rise in the number of electoral democracies and
democratic constitutions in Africa, some scholars see these trends as “the harvest of African
democratization’s ‘low-hanging fruit.’”42 Reasons for the apparent decline in democratic
commitment include the failure of emerging democracies to meet their citizens’ hopes for
freedom, accountable governance, and prosperity, in addition to the violence that often
accompanied the electoral process. For example, Cote d’Ivoire’s 2010 presidential election
sparked a civil war that lasted over a year. Furthermore, perhaps as a relic of their colonial past,
even democratically elected political elites are often unwilling to relinquish authoritarian control
once in office.43 This leads often leads to poor development outcomes, inequality, and a culture
of patronage in which citizens don’t enjoy the purported benefits of democracy. At the same
time, U.S. spending on democracy, human rights, and governance programs through the U.S.
Agency for International Development (USAID) fell by almost $400 million from 2009 to 2016.44

In particular, this has led to the return of the World Bank and IMF as the principal
sources of development resources in Africa. However, these institutions deal exclusively with
governments, rather than civil society organizations or national legislatures. Since entrenched

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 105-106.
44 Larry Diamond, "Democracy in Decline: How Washington can Reverse the Tide," *Foreign Affairs*, Jul 1, 2016, , 152.
elites in government are often barriers to democratization efforts, development assistance often fails to promote democracy.\textsuperscript{45}

Questions about the U.S. role in the region remain salient. What U.S. policies might help enable effective democratic reforms throughout SSA? How might the U.S. or other states counter the influence of non-democratic foreign aid? Does the U.S. have a role in promoting Western-style liberal democracy in SSA? Can the U.S. influence the pervasive “resource curse,” or should it leave intervention to the World Bank and IMF? Most importantly, can Western nations reverse the apparent decline of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa?

\textsuperscript{45} Gyimah-Boadi, \textit{Africa's Waning Democratic Commitment}, 109.
Bibliography


