

*Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa's Emerging Party Systems*

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**Abstract**

The paper analyses the parties and party systems that have begun to emerge in Sub Saharan Africa's fledgling multi-party systems. Using a data base of 87 legislative elections convened in the 1990s, the paper identifies three trends. The position of parties late in the decade is primarily tributary of its performance in the first multi-party election conducted in the early 1990s. Parties which won founding elections are almost invariably still in power. Secondly, the typical emerging party system has consisted of a dominant party surrounded by a large number of small, unstable parties. Thirdly, party cleavages have been overwhelmingly ethno-linguistic in nature while ideological and programmatic debates have been muted and rare. The second half of the paper provides tentative explanations for these striking patterns. It emphasizes the illiberal nature of most of the new African democracies, their characteristic centralization of power around the presidency and the pervasive clientelism that structures the relationship between the state and the citizenry. These characteristics shape the incentives faced by individual politicians and thus much of their behavior.

**Introduction**

A large literature analyses the development of parties and party systems in the Western democracies. This literature makes predictive statements about the number and nature of parties that are likely to prevail in democracies. Duverger's law on the impact of electoral rules is a generalization that is still passed on to every first-year grad student in political science. Almost as well known, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) have shown how the party systems of Western Europe emerged as a reflection of the socio-economic cleavages prevailing as democracies were extending the franchise to all segments of the population in these nation-states. Other analysts have used the Western experience to explain the nature of the relationship between parties and the citizenry. To explain why some parties use programmatic appeals to gain votes while others resort to promises of patronage, Martin Shefter (1994) has argued that parties with access to state resources (what he calls «internally mobilized») were more likely to eschew programmatic appeals in favor of clientelism, while outsider parties, that did not benefit from such access, were more likely to adopt programmatic appeals, as their only viable strategy to gain the support of significant segments of the population.

The Third Wave of democratization offers a fertile territory to reexamine some of these theories in light of new evidence. The early democratizers in the Third Wave, notably those in Latin America, have already been subject to this kind of analysis, with extremely thought-provoking results (e.g. Mainwaring and Scully, 1995). But there has so far been virtually no similar research on political parties in the emerging democracies of Africa. This is a pity. During the course of the 1990s, regular multi-party elections have become the norm for the states in Sub Saharan Africa. All but a handful of states in the region now conduct regular parliamentary elections that allow opposition parties to get represented in the national legislature. To be sure, few of the multi-party countries in the region can be considered to be even imperfect liberal democracies. With the exception of a small number of states, These systems can be characterized as semi-authoritarian regimes despite their regular multi-party elections, as erstwhile military and police states have learned to placate the western donors with the organization of regular elections that do not threaten ruling elites.

Nonetheless, with over forty relatively similar political systems conducting regular multi-party elections, Africa offers an ideal terrain for comparative analysis of the role of political parties in democratic consolidation. Parties are arguably the single most important organization in electoral politics, How they evolve can provide important clues about the nature of democratic practice in Africa and the evolving nature of the links between citizens and the political class. It can also provide new empirical puzzles with which to confront the classics of the political science literature on parties and party systems.

This essay starts by using a data base created by the author to identify several distinctive emerging patterns in African electoral politics. Section 1 shows that, first, success in the first multi-party election has proven to be the key to political dominance in the 1990s. Second, the emerging modal party system in the region consists of a dominant presidential party surrounded by a large number of small highly volatile states. Third, programmatic and ideological cleavages have not shaped political competition nearly as much as ethnic and regional factors. The second half of the paper provides tentative explanations for these striking patterns. I emphasize the illiberal nature of most of the new African democracies, their characteristic centralization of power around the presidency and the pervasive clientelism that structures the relationship between the state and the citizenry. The paper concludes with some implications of the findings.

## **1. Emerging Patterns in Africa's Multi-Party Systems**

Multi-party politics with more or less regular elections has become the norm in sub-Saharan Africa. Between the 1989 transition election in Namibia<sup>1</sup> and the end of 2000, some 87 legislative elections involving at least two parties were convened in 42 of the region's 48 countries, for an average of over seven elections a year in the region.<sup>2</sup> All but two of these elections resulted in the representation of multiple parties in the legislature. In addition, over 65 presidential elections involved more than one candidate during this same period. Only six states in the region (Eritrea, Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia, Swaziland, Uganda, Zaire) did not convene multi-party elections. In comparison, only nine African countries had held competitive, multi-party elections in the period 1985-1989. Moreover, a process of institutionalizing regular elections appears to have begun: 35 countries convened second elections, usually on schedule, i.e. at the end of the constitutionally fixed term of officeholders elected during the first elections. 10 countries have also convened a third

election and Niger conducted its fourth election in the 1990s in November 1999, having conducted its first post-colonial multi-party election in 1993. It can thus be said that we are witnessing the routinization of competitive elections. This too is in sharp contrast with previous periods, in which competitively elected legislatures more often than not were displaced by military coups before they finished their term.

### *The Nature of Political Parties*

An analysis of political parties since the return to multiparty politics in the 1990s reveals three distinct patterns.

***The Key Role of Founding Elections*** : First, the recent democratization period witnessed the emergence of a number of new parties. On one level, of course, all African parties are new. Even the region’s oldest political parties, dating from the time of the nationalist movements, are typically less than half a century old (Kuenzi and Lambright 1997). This contrasts sharply with many Latin American democracies where political parties have much deeper roots, e.g., in Columbia and Uruguay with party average ages of 144 years and 112 years, respectively (Mainwaring and Scully 1995, 15).

But, in the African cases, some parties emerged, virtually *sui generis*, during or right before the transition to compete for power.

These new parties often have origins in the civil society which was allowed to exist during the authoritarian era. Their organizational roots were in the labor unions, business associations, student groups, law societies, and church organizations, which had begun to emerge in the waning days of the single-party regimes in the 1980s. They were the quickest to take advantage of the political opening of the early 1990s and establish themselves as more overtly political organizations. There is some notable overlap between new parties and older opposition parties. Thus, many of the new parties included leaders who had a long history of opposition to the single party, but under the guise of ephemeral party structures. Thus, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, one of the current leaders of the opposition in Burkina Faso as head of the PDP (Parti Pour la Démocratie et le Progrès), first gained prominence as head of the MLN (Mouvement de Liberation Nationale), an opposition party in the early 1970s. In between, he belonged to at least two other parties.

Not all of these new parties enjoyed similar electoral success. A plethora of small parties has emerged throughout the continent. For instance, in Benin, eleven parties won 10 or fewer seats in the legislature and the largest party only won 12 following that country’s first election in 1991. Many of these parties lead an ephemeral existence. Following Benin’s second election in 1995, 14 new parties that were not in the previous legislature won at least one seat, and eight parties that had been represented in the legislature won no seats in the 1995 elections. Although at least some of their office holders may well have been elected under a different political banner, the transitory nature of the political parties competing in these elections is nonetheless striking.

In many respects, the region’s *ex-single parties* have adjusted quite well to the transition to multipartyism and continue to play a surprisingly active role in politics. The single party before 1989 remains in power in 20 of the region’s multi-party political systems.<sup>3</sup> In addition, ex-single parties emerged as the leading legislative opposition party in 8 of the 11 countries in which they had been ousted during the transition.<sup>4</sup> The ex-single parties have thus proven remarkably resilient, comparing favorably with many of the communist parties in Eastern Europe, for example (Geddes, 1995). This resilience suggests that they had been able to use the material and organizational benefits of

longstanding control of the state apparatus to achieve some significant institutionalization. The capital they built up may depreciate over time if they remain in the political wilderness much longer, but at least through the 1990s, they proved capable of adapting to the new realities.

What then explains party success in the new democracies? The party's performance in the first legislative and particularly the presidential elections was critical to its long term fortunes. Indeed, a striking pattern of African transitions has been the absence of alternation. Only in Benin and Madagascar, did a party subsequently lose the electoral majority it had gained in a first multi-party election. Over all, the winning party in the first election almost invariably won a more comfortable majority in the second elections, as suggested in Table 1.

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The outcome of the transition election also largely determined whether the new party or the old single party would emerge in power. Whichever was able to control the chief executive's office and attain a winning legislative majority following the first election, was then able to consolidate power.

If the ex-single party managed to survive the move to multi-party politics with its hold on power intact, it was able to use all its resources to marginalize the opposition and re-consolidate power in the second and third multi-party elections. This was the case notably in Gabon, Kenya, Cameroon and Togo, where leaders were almost toppled by international pressures and mass protests in the early 1990s, but have survived by skillful combinations of electoral fraud, effective campaigning, manipulation of the opposition and repression.

More surprising perhaps since they did not enjoy the benefit of longstanding organizational and patronage resources, even new parties appeared to be able to quickly consolidate power, if they won a founding election. Gaining control of the state apparatus provided the resources and motivations to strengthen the party's organization. Parties that did not gain control of the presidency in the founding election were soon at a disadvantage in terms of resources, even if they were well represented on the back benches of the opposition. They were much more likely to splinter into several distinct parties and suffer defections to the government party. Defections were both less likely and much less problematic for parties in government. Thus, as the historic leaders of the MMD in Zambia broke with President Chiluba following 1993, the MMD has increasingly been viewed as a Bemba and Northern Province party, if not Chiluba's personalistic machine. However, this narrower base has not weakened the MMD's hold on the legislature in subsequent elections, so important appears to be the appeal of state resources (Posner 1998; Ihonvbere, 1998).

**Dominant Party Systems:** A second emerging pattern relates to the party systems that appear to be consolidating. Legislatures in Africa have quickly developed a reputation for having an excessive number of parliamentary parties.<sup>5</sup> Of the 85 legislative elections for which information is available, 17 legislatures included 10 or more parties, while another 14 had between 7 and 9 parties. The average number of parties elected to the legislature actually increased between first and second elections, from 6.3 to 6.5 (See Table 1). This actually understates the degree of apparent fragmentation, given a large number of independent candidates winning office, a phenomenon on

which I comment below.

The large numbers of parties only rarely has brought about a crisis of governability, however. Despite the large number of small parties, few legislatures lacked a party with at least a substantial plurality of seats; of the 17 legislatures with 10 or more parties, the minimal winning coalition required more than three parties in only 4 cases. Indeed, in eight of these states, the biggest party held a simple majority of seats. On average for the region’s 41 founding elections, the largest party received a comfortable 63.1 percent of the seats, and this increased to 69.6 percent for the 35 second elections and to 64.3 percent for third elections, that had been held by the end of 2000. Thus, the large number of parties represented in the legislature did not prevent the emergence of a large number of dominant party systems. To get a better sense of the degree of fragmentation of these party systems, the standard measure, the «effective number of parties,» was calculated in order to adjust for differences in party size across political systems.<sup>6</sup> The calculations reveal that 65 of the 85 legislatures had an effective number of parties of 3 or less, while only four had one of more 6. These numbers appear to be broadly comparable to the party systems of Western Europe. Thus, the modal party system that is emerging across much of the region is a system with a large dominant party surrounded by a bevy of small, highly volatile parties. In 37 of the 85 elections, the second biggest party in the legislature had 15 percent of the seats or less.

How can this pattern be explained? Theories of political parties in consolidated democracies argue that parties are motivated by the objective of capturing political power either for power’s sake or for the nobler purpose of influencing policy (Laver and Schofield 1990). Neither ambition seems completely credible for parties that seem condemned to at most a handful of seats, a minor role in any future legislature, and which rarely express distinctive policy preferences. The large number of small parties is usually explained in two ways. A first explanation is that party fragmentation is an inevitable *transitional* phenomenon of emerging democracies, and that the number of parties will decline and consolidate into a smaller number of large parties over time, as the electoral system matures. Although the overall average number of parties went up in second elections, the effective number of parties actually declined. 23 second elections resulted in a lower effective number of parties while only seven second elections have resulted in a higher effective number of parties. The evidence thus suggests that a process of consolidation may be taking place. On the other hand, Senegal, with a long tradition of multi-party rule, continues to have a large number of parties in parliament. The effective number of parties in the 1993 and 1998 elections was 1.84 and 2.10, respectively. Senegal’s small parties in parliament, or those with less than 5 parliamentary seats, have risen from 4 in 1993 to 8 in 1998. The tendency for small parties may thus be more than transitory.

A second common explanation for the number of parliamentary parties is the electoral system in place. In particular, we would expect systems of proportional representation to increase the number of parties in the legislature. That indeed turns out to be the case, with an average 8.55 parties in the 20 elections that used a system of proportional representation (PR), compared to an average of 4.97 parties in the 30 that used a simple plurality or «first-past-the-post» (FPTP) system (See Table 2). The proponents of PR, it should be noted, argue that it tends to undermine the emergence of parties with large majorities and promotes, medium sized parties. In fact, however, the leading parties in PR systems still managed to corral 60.2 percent of the seats, not quite the 69.6 percent of the seats in FPTP systems, but still an impressive and fairly safe majority. In Africa, what is striking is the

combination of big parties with comfortable majorities, surrounded by multiple tiny parties.

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**Low Ideological Salience:** A third striking feature of the parties that are emerging is their programmatic homogeneity. Though it is admittedly difficult to measure precisely, the low salience of ideology for the majority of these parties is unmistakable. Many observers have noted that most parties have adopted a vague populism during elections and pitch their campaigns around their opposition to corruption, services for the population and general promises of a better future<sup>7</sup>. Ideological differences have been minor across parties, and debates about specific policy issues have been virtually nonexistent. Although opposition parties may criticize the government's management of the economy or the implementation of structural adjustment programs, party platforms diverge little and campaign speeches rarely discuss policy issues. A small number of parties have sought to make policy-based campaigns but with a striking lack of success. For instance, the National Lima Party (NLP) in Zambia was led by several prominent national politicians, supported by the Zambian Farmers' Association, and actively presented itself as the defender of rural interests in the 1996 elections, yet failed to get one seat in the legislature. Similarly, in Francophone Africa, several avowedly Marxist parties regularly fail to get more than symbolic support.

Part of the low salience of ideology may well be due to the absence of labor or church based parties. Though unions, professional associations and the Churches typically played a prominent role in the democratization of the early 1990s, they quickly retreated from politics, once multi-party rule had been put in place. There is today no example of a Christian democratic party anywhere in the region. Similarly, there is no labor party, though the opposition alliance that is emerging to contest the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe is avowedly labor-based. On the other hand, it has not staked out a policy position that is particularly to the left of the governing ZANU-PF or that puts forward labor issues. (Raftopoulos, 2001).

Instead, election campaigns have been conducted almost entirely on the basis of personal and ethno-regional appeals for support. Marina Ottaway has argued that, with the end of the Cold War, «the absence of ideological or programmatic differences left ethnicity as the major characteristic by which the various parties could differentiate themselves» (1998, 311). In most countries, the single most important factor explaining party loyalty is ethnicity or region, and ethnic identity provides a remarkably precise prediction of voting behavior (e.g on Zambia, see Posner, 1998). While all party politics in Africa appears to be intensely personalized, however, it is not necessarily ethnic. Thus, in Senegal, political parties are not divided according to ethnicity, but patronage politics are just as important to the functioning of the system. In Senegal, clans around religious leaders (Marabouts), often organized along lineage, appear to shape voting behavior. (Villalón, 1994; Coulon, 1988) In other cases, region plays the key role.

In some cases, of course, regional and/or ethnic identity overlaps with specific policy positions. Thus, for instance, in Nigeria, representatives of the Ogoni ethnic group in the oil-producing area of southeast Nigeria tend to be opponents of current federalist policies. In Kenya, Cameroon, Malawi,

and Ghana, one ethnic minority is typically viewed as more pro-business than other groups, because of its alleged prominence in the private sector. Interestingly, the parties representing these communities have typically not adopted policy positions that reflect the putative economic interests of the group. Thus, in Cameroon, the SDF is viewed as the party of the Bamileke ethnic group. Bamileke businessmen are among the country’s most prominent and one reason often given for the reticence of the government to move forward with privatization is the widespread view that it would provide an advantage to the Bamileke community. Yet SDF policy positions are not particularly distinct from the government’s, and certainly not noticeably in favor of economic liberalism or privatization.

Most observers have viewed the ethnic nature of African parties as a destabilizing factor. However, this depends on the extent to which electoral contests are reduced to winner-take-all exercises between polarized communities, rather than the arena for multi-ethnic negotiations that result in broad governing coalitions, either within or across parties.<sup>8</sup> Across the region, it is difficult to disagree with the view that electoral politics has enhanced ethnic identities (Glickman 1995). So far at least, the ethnic nature of parties in many countries does not appear to have resulted in a breakdown of the system, once the destabilizing effects of the actual transition itself had passed. The two notable exceptions are Congo-Brazzaville and particularly Burundi, where the move to multi-party politics dramatically exacerbated latent ethnic tensions and the democratization collapsed amidst murderous ethnic conflict. (On Congo, see Clark, 2001; On Burundi, Lemarchand, 1996; and Uvin, 1999).

## 2. Explanations

What factors help to explain both the modal patterns discerned in the first section of the paper, and deviations from them that can also be observed? I explain emerging trends by focusing on the illiberal tendencies of the democracies in the region, the centralization of power around the presidency and the clientelistic nature of these systems.

***Illiberal Democracies*** : First, the nature of the emerging party system is clearly conditioned by the quality of the democracy that has emerged in the 1990s. Most of the new multi-party systems fall well short of the ideals of liberal democracies. Instead, the exercise of democratic politics is often highly imperfect. Political freedoms and civil rights may be formally recognized but are imperfectly observed in practice, particularly in between electoral exercises when they are more likely to be flouted (Diamond 1996). Elections may be nominally free, but governments engage in extensive gerrymandering, manipulation of voter registration and harassment of opposition parties. Human rights abuses are not uncommon, even if the worst abuses are rarer than in the authoritarian past. A nominally free press is harassed in myriad ways, and the government retains a radio monopoly. Certain groups, notably key members of the executive branch and the military may, in effect, be above the law. The judiciary is officially independent, but it is poorly trained, overworked and easily compromised.

The Freedom House rankings on political and civil rights in Africa demonstrate the extent to which multi-party elections can be combined with an illiberal political environment. In the late 1990s, 30 of Africa’s multi-party systems are illiberal, if Freedom House’s definition of «partly free» and «Not

free» are accepted. Indeed, the 12 multi-party systems in the «Not Free» category may be more accurately termed «pseudo democracies» (Diamond 1996), so egregious is the gap between democratic ideals and current practice.

Nonetheless, if we are to believe Freedom's House's score of «free», perhaps as many as a quarter of these regimes are in the process of consolidating democratic practices and can be considered liberal democracies. Moreover, the gains of Africa's democratic transitions in the early 1990s are not being eroded, as is often argued. Examining Freedom House's annual indices for political rights and civil liberties from the period of initial democratization (1989-1994) to present (1999-2000) does not suggest a net worsening of the quality of governance in the region since the peak of the democratization wave. Between 1993 and 1998, political rights actually improved in 12 countries, stayed the same in 20 and worsened in 15. The «third wave» may be over (Diamond 1996) in Africa but there is no reason to believe that the recent gains are being eroded. Rather, the region's countries are engaged on a variety of distinct paths, only some of which include a marked decline in the quality of political and civic rights.

Although much of Africa has multi-party systems, those in which the incumbents were actually ousted are far fewer. Incumbents lost power as a result of the democratic transition and its founding election in 13 countries in the sample, in addition to the countries in which regular multi-party elections anteceded the 1990s. 7 of the 13 are to this day classified by Freedom House as «free».

This paints a somewhat more nuanced picture of the continent's situation, for it shows quite clearly that the majority of the «illiberal» democracies are countries in which the transition to multi-party rule proved to be seriously flawed. Most never really had a transition, and the turn to multi-party competition amounted to little more than an erstwhile authoritarian ruler donning the garb of democracy and tolerating regular elections as a successful strategy of holding onto power. Convening regular elections brings with it a modicum of international respectability and the resulting foreign aid, and does not threaten these leaders. The countries in which the democratic transition included the ouster of the incumbent, on the other hand, have on the whole performed better. Only two - Niger and Congo - of the thirteen are in the «Not Free» category, both as a result of military coups that overturned most of the gains of the transition. The other eleven countries which transited have seemingly been able to maintain most of the democratic gains made during the democratic transition.

The predominance of countries in the «Not Free» and «Partly Free» categories gives the impression that things have gotten worse and that the democratic transitions of the early 1990s have been betrayed. In fact, a majority of the countries which underwent real transitions have sustained the progress made, while even the most illiberal multi-party systems are most likely freer today than they were before the democratization wave.

Interestingly, in this respect, the patterns of competition fostered by the party system appear to have a powerful effect on both the stability of the emerging multi-party system and on the level of political freedoms that are sustained. Although the main pattern is that of the emergence of a dominant party, in a smaller number of countries a party system has emerged with no clear majority party. The data suggests that a fragmented party system may lead to a higher probability of political instability, but also of the emergence of a relatively high quality democracy. In other words, political competition between parties appears to be positively correlated with political and civic freedoms, as well as with a greater vulnerability to political instability. One-party dominant party systems are on the other hand characterized by greater stability but with a lower quality of democracy. The less



the competition (with the emergence of a dominant party), the greater the stability, but also the more the erosion of democracy and the emergence of illiberal democracy.

Observers have long noted that African political systems have not handled political competition well. Collier remarked two decades ago that regimes in which no clear party emerged victorious around independence often descended into instability (Collier 1978). I am not suggesting that greater democracy is necessarily related to a greater chance of instability, but rather that the nature of the party system conditions the quality of democracy that is likely to emerge.

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Data presented in Table 3 offer some tentative support for these patterns, by comparing countries in which no majority emerged in the transition elections to countries in which a party gained a clear and decisive victory. The first category of countries suggests that multi-party competition has brought with it the risk of instability in the 1990s. The military coups in Niger and Congo were a direct result of governmental paralysis due to the absence of an unambiguous majority. The elected government in CAR has now survived four military coups thanks in large part to French intervention. At the same time, however, competition does improve the quality of the democracy, as suggested by the steady political rights scores between the date of the founding election and 1998 for the countries that maintained multi-party electoral politics. In these regimes, the kind of erosion of rights associated with illiberal democracy does not appear to have taken place.

The second category of countries in Table 3, in which a built-in majority appears to have established itself in the early 1990s, is somewhat more heterogeneous, but suggests the opposite dynamics. In these countries, the level of political rights appears to have declined during this period, suggesting that dominant parties took advantage of their positions of strength following the first election to consolidate their hold on power at the expense of political and civil rights. Obviously, it is too early to tell whether these two sets of dynamics will be sustained in a larger set of countries over a longer time period, but the data in Table 3 is at least not incompatible with the hypothesis that party competition and democratic consolidation are linked.

**Presidentialism:** a second explanation for the patterns which are emerging is to be found in the presidentialism of these regimes. The term can be used in two ways. First, it is a fact that out of Africa’s 45 multi-party systems, all but Botswana, Mauritius and South Africa are fully presidential regimes. All the other states have presidential constitutions. It should be noted that as many as half of the states in the region started out as parliamentary regimes and changed soon after independence (Gonidec, 1978; Collier, 1978). Indeed, most are highly presidential, with various rules that weaken the hand of the legislature and allow the president to make the key decisions without legislative approval. The weakness of political parties is a phenomenon noted by a number of observers (e.g. Mainwaring and Scully, 1995), and tends to be confirmed by the African cases.

These regimes are also presidential in another, more profound, sense. Regardless of their constitutional arrangements, it is also a fact that power is deeply personalized around the figure of

the president. The centralization of power around the president is intense. Not only is the political elite typically an exceptionally narrow one, it is almost entirely based in the capital city. As Wunsch and Olowu (1990, pp. 4-5) have shown, African states after independence were highly centralized in administrative and juridical terms. Virtually all revenues were raised by the central government with local governments having few fiscal prerogatives. Total budgetary resources allocated to local governments were typically minuscule, while only 2 percent of public employees did not work for the central government, a quarter of the levels prevailing in Asia and half those in Latin America.

Throughout the region, power is highly centralized around the president. He is literally above the law, controls in many cases a large proportion of state finance with little accountability and delegates remarkably little of his authority on important matters. In most countries, the presidency emerges as the dominant arena for decision-making, and a state within the state. In Congo/Zaire, Callaghy (1984, p. 179) reports, the Presidency controlled between 15 and 20 percent of the national recurrent budget and 30 percent of capital outlays. In Kenya, the office of the President included a staff of 43,230 in 1990 (the World Bank, 1992, p. 51). This meant that one in six civil servants in Kenya worked for the Presidency! In these cases, the «Office of the President» became a parallel government, with considerably more executive power than the actual ministries. Middle level managers within the presidency might wield more effective powers than permanent secretaries in the ministries. Even ministers of government often found themselves with little discretion over policy. Cabinet meetings were typically rare and largely ceremonial in nature, with the president giving his directives and offering advice, often less for the benefit of the assembled ministers than for the press that had been invited.

A direct implication of this centralization is that clientelistic access to state resources in Africa tends to be highly centralized around the presidency. Local governments lack discretion over public resources, as do the executive and the legislative branch of government. Only the apex of the executive really matters.

What are the implications of this centralization of power for electoral politics? On one level, it means that in many respects, legislative elections are a sideshow. To focus on them is the analytical equivalent of telling the tragedy of Hamlet through the eyes of Rosencranz and Guildenstern.<sup>9</sup> The critical part of the drama is taking place off stage, and legislative elections constitute a subplot, even if they link to the key aspects of the drama in significant ways we need to identify (in the same way, Hamlet would end very differently if Rosencranz and Guildenstern managed to kill him at the end of Act III, preventing him from ever returning to the Danish court to avenge his father in Act 5...)

In Africa's illiberal and presidential regimes, the main drama is about control over the presidency. Legislative elections and party competition have to be understood in the context of that broader drama. The president has an incentive to ensure a friendly majority in the legislature, although he typically enjoys considerable decree powers and does not need a stable majority to rule effectively. Even in authoritarian regimes, legislative elections play several useful functions. First, competitive elections may serve to placate the western donors and make them more likely to accept the absence of real competition in the more important presidential contest. Secondly, legislative elections are useful to the president to discipline the presidential majority. In a wonderful analysis, Fauré (1985) showed how President Houphouët-Boigny used elections in Côte d'Ivoire when it was a single party regime, to weed out unpopular barons of his regime and assert his own power over the members of the single party. Such tactics almost certainly continue in the present multi-party regimes.

***Pervasive Clientelism:*** The third salient characteristic of these regimes is the more or less systematic resort to clientelism to gain and maintain political support. The absence of or narrowness of a public realm in the Western sense, the strength of clan, ethnicity and other sub-national identities, the predilection for dyadic exchange in primarily rural societies and the need for mechanisms of «social insurance» in the risky and uncertain environment of low income societies have all been used in the literature to explain the ubiquitous presence at every level of African life of the exchange of gifts, favors and services, of patronage and courtier practices (Ekeh, 1975; Olivier de Sardan, 1996; Cruise O’Brien, 1975; Price, 1975).

These practices have often been attributed as well to ethnic and clan politics, in which a position of power is valued for the resources it procures for one’s family and kin. Much clientelism and corruption is legitimated by the view that it serves a kind of community purpose rather than individual enrichment (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). Clearly, clientelism does reinforce loyalties to kith and kin. The redistribution that is achieved or at least perceived to be achieved by such practices serves to blunt class consciousness. Even when the exchange is largely symbolic, it links patron and client. As a result, societies with pervasive clientelism are marked by the low salience of social class identities, despite often glaring social inequalities (Clapham, 1986). This certainly helps to explain the absence of programmatic political parties that I noted above.

As Gavin Williams (1987) and others have noted, however, «what is striking about many African countries is how little trickles down to the worse off through the patronage network and how much sticks to a few hands at the top.» Indeed, it is ultimately more useful to think of the primary function of neopatrimonial politics in most African states as facilitating intra-elite accommodation in young, multi-ethnic and poorly integrated political systems. In what Rothchild (1985) called «hegemonial exchange» and Bayart (1989) the «reciprocal assimilation of elites», political stability in Africa has often been constructed by using state resources to forge alliances across different social elites, often in the form of overt power sharing arrangements. These arrangements facilitated consensus building across region and ethnicity; between the younger, more educated elites emerging from western universities and the usually older, less educated elites that were often linked to traditional authorities; and between the individuals that emerged to take leadership roles in the different institutions of the states, not only the politicians, but also the military brass and the church hierarchy.

Some observers (e.g. Chandra, 2001) ascribe a high degree of instrumentality to voting in clientelist regimes. They argue that voters expect to gain in material terms, typically through patronage, for their vote. The difficulties of the opposition to gain a sizeable share of the vote in some countries are certainly compatible with a claim of voting instrumentality, since they suggest that voters believe voting for a loser will not be rewarded with access to state resources. Several case studies of African elections (e.g. Banégas, 1999) have alleged examples of significant vote buying, in which significant segments of the population auction off their votes to the candidates who were willing to pay the most, also suggesting this instrumentality.

But it is important to distinguish the African cases from the situation apparently prevailing in other «patronage democracies». First, African state structures are woefully small, compared to those in other, richer states. The possibilities for patronage are extremely limited, although oil wealth provides certain countries like Nigeria or Gabon with relatively larger resources. Though public

employment may be a large proportion of formal sector employment, the entire civil service in Africa represents on average only 2 of the population, compared to 6.9 percent in Eastern Europe, for example, or 7.7 percent in the countries of the OECD (van de Walle, 2001). In some African countries, it is close to just one percent. Public expenditures also tend to be relatively modest, on average amounting to about half of the levels prevailing in the OECD countries relative to the size of the economy. Thus, the patronage possibilities available to politicians are in fact quite limited.

Second, rather than individually excludable goods such as jobs, there is much more of a potential to influence voting with promises of community goods, notably in the form of social services. Indeed, perhaps the most common electoral promise made by African politicians, particularly as they venture out of the capital, is that they will provide better roads and social services to populations that vote for them. In Cameroon, Zambia and Uganda, my own field work suggests that citizens fear they will be deprived of these services if they do not vote for the winning candidate.

In sum, it is more useful to think of clientelistic politics as constituting primarily a mechanism for accommodation and integration of a fairly narrow political elite rather than a logic of mass party patronage. Most of the material gains from clientelism are limited to this elite. The stronger link between political elites and the citizenry is through the less tangible bonds of ethnic identity. Even in the absence of tangible benefits, citizens will choose to vote for individuals of their own ethnic group, particularly in ethnically divided societies. Less than the expectation that they will benefit directly from the vote, citizens may feel that only a member of their own ethnic group may end up defending the interests of the ethnic group as a whole, and that voting for a member of another ethnic group will certainly not do so.

I can now bring the different strands of the argument together and focus on the incentives of individual politicians. The combination of presidentialism and clientelism helps to explain the peculiar type of party fragmentation described above. These systems create disincentives for opposition party consolidation and incentives for individual «big men» to maintain small, highly personalized parties or to join the winning party. The winning party tends to become dominant since individual politicians know that they are more likely to get access to state resources if they are in the president's party. At least some politicians believe that maintaining an independent power base will improve the deal they can strike with the president. In effect, having one's own party provides additional leverage to access state resources in negotiations with the president in power following the elections.

With a dominant party in power, the politicians in opposition parties have no incentive to coalesce with each other, since this would reduce the flexibility to strike deals with those in power and join the presidential majority. At least some ex-authoritarian leaders have encouraged this party fragmentation. Thus, in Gabon and Cameroon, the government provided finance for parties in order to enhance their fissiparous tendencies, and lessened the incentives to form anti government coalitions. In other countries, the government appears to have tacitly encouraged or even sponsored small independent parties or independents to compete in legislative elections, presumably to divide the opposition and increase the share of the vote under its control. In these cases, the number of parties probably exaggerates the effective fragmentation of the system.

Politicians have a strong incentive to maintain the support of their own lineage or ethnic group, as their ability to capture a community's vote is what makes them useful to the presidential majority. So politicians have an incentive to mobilize ethnic identities during elections. This logic helps

explain the large number of parties in countries like Burkina Faso, Madagascar (following the first election) or Benin. It also explains the volatility of the party system, with the rapid appearance and disappearance of new parties around each electoral cycle, as well as the high number of independents that emerge during the course of elections. In a logic that is driven by individual clientelist strategies rather than by institutional or legislative ambitions, politicians create parties to compete in a single election and leverage resources from the party in power, only to evaporate once the deal is struck. Clientelist politics are unstable enough that each election engenders another round of this process, in some cases with the same politicians. The consequence is that few if any parties other than the one in power undergo institutionalization over time.

### **3. Implications**

The characteristics of African parties identified in this brief survey suggest a need to rethink several of the classic functions attributed to political parties. In particular, the argument that African parties play an interest aggregation function is difficult to sustain. The interest aggregation function of parties has its origins in the patterns of political development in Europe, where political parties channeled and orchestrated the historical process of enfranchisement, as political participation was dramatically extended throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; LaPalombara and Weiner 1966).

In Africa, today, on the other hand, parties do not really serve to aggregate interests – rather they serve a representation function in a context of clientelistic politics that are dominated by a disproportionately powerful executive and are only imperfectly democratic. Parties gain respect and power within the party system when they can make a credible claim to represent a certain ethnic, regional or linguistic segment of the population. Members of an ethnic community do not always have distinct interests that can be related to distinct policy preferences. Instead, they vote to place ethnic representatives in the arenas where, they believe, the national pie is divided. That leaders represent communities well or not – and in many cases, clientelistic patronage networks do not spread across much of the community – matters less ultimately than that the political system conceives of elected office largely in terms of the access to the state resources that it confers.

The view of the state as the ultimate prize puts an enormous premium on competition for the presidency, control of which is most important for patronage and rent seeking. Relative to the executive branch, party competition in the legislative branch is a side show. The main ambition of parties is either to gain control of the state or to gain leverage over those that have it. The struggle for legislative seats is of course a struggle for majority status, but it is also a struggle for the attention of the executive. This is particularly true for small parties, often of ethnic minorities, which know that they cannot aspire to majority status. For them, legislative elections are a way of getting identified as a distinct community which needs to be accommodated.

In the early 1990s, Africa was full of hope and optimism as pro-democracy movements succeeded and dictators fell. Clearly, multi-party politics is now the norm in much of Africa. However, the end of the 1990s has brought with it the reality that the mere presence of multiple political parties does not ensure democracy. The old single parties have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to the new environment. Where they never conceded control of the executive, the multi-party system is being constructed in such a way that it does not threaten that control. Elsewhere, where there has

been a real alternation, the situation is more promising. Still, even there, the nature of clientelistic politics militates against party institutionalization.

If the analysis by Martin Shefter cited above is correct, at least some African opposition parties will come to realize they can not compete on the field of clientelistic politics, and will move instead to more programmatic discourse to mobilize the votes of citizens. They will adopt aggressive policy positions on economic issues, for example, and eschew the kind of ethnic driven clientelism that is their hallmark today. The fact that the experiments in this direction have been such dismal failures so far points to the difficulties involved. For one thing, the political salience of ethnicity undermines programmatic appeals. If other parties adopt to appeal to ethnic loyalties and clientelism, it is very hard for a programmatic party to win. Voters will seek to exchange their vote for the favors of a clientelist party because they know they would benefit from the programmatic party whether or not they voted for it, while they also know they will get no access to state favors if another ethnic-clientelist party they do not support wins.

In the absence of such an evolution towards programmatic party politics, however, the region will continue to be characterized by its weak parties, and this is cause for pessimism in even the most competitive systems in the region, undermining the process of democratic consolidation in which parties play such a critical role.

Nicolas VANDE WALLE  
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**Table 1: The Evolution of Election Dynamics**

	<u>First</u>	<u>Second</u>	<u>Third</u>
Number of Elections, (1989-2000)	41	35	10
# of Parties Competing	13.1	11.5	28.3
# of Parties winning seats	6.3	6.5	7.7
Effective # of parties	2.9	2.2	2.5
% of Seats to Winner	63.1	69.6	64.3
% of Votes to Winner	55.7	60.2	49.8

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Source: Author's data base

**Table 2: Electoral Rules and Party Systems**

	<u>FPTP</u>	<u>PR</u>	<u>TRS</u>
# of Cases	30	20	16
# of Parties in Legislature	4.97	8.55	8.40
Effective # of Parties	1.83	3.01	3.53
% of Seats to Winner	69.6	60.2	61.9

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 FPTP: First Past the Post

PR: Proportional Representation

TRS: Two Round Majority

Source: IDEA (1996) and author’s data base.

**Table 3: Type of Party System and Quality of Democracy<sup>1</sup>**

**1. Fragmented Party Systems<sup>2</sup>**

Country	% of seats to Largest Party	<u>Quality of Democracy<sup>3</sup></u>	
		Year of election	1998
Benin	18.8%	2	2
Congo	31.2%	3	Coup
Madagascar	34.1%	2	2
Niger	34.9%	3	Coup
Sierra Leone	39.7%	4	Coup
CAR	40.0%	3	3
Malawi	48.0%	2	2
	Mean <sup>4</sup>	2.25	2.25

<sup>1</sup> All of these countries had first elections which were deemed free and fair.

<sup>2</sup> Defined as those countries where the largest party has less than 50% of the legislative seats.

<sup>3</sup> These scores are from Freedom House.

<sup>4</sup> Since we are interested in the quality of the enduring democracy, we have excluded Niger, Congo, and Sierra Leone from the means, since the military intervened and democracy clearly no longer exists. All three of these states were rated 7 by Freedom House in 1998.

## 2. One Party-Dominant Systems<sup>5</sup>

Country	% of seats to Largest Party	<u>Quality of Democracy</u>	
		Year of election	1998
Lesotho	100.0%	3	4
Zambia	83.3%	2	4
Seychelles	81.8%	3	3
Burundi	80.2%	6	Coup
Cape Verde	70.9%	2	2
Guinea Bissau	64%	3	5
	Mean <sup>6</sup>	2.6	3.8

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<sup>5</sup> One party-dominant systems are defined as those countries where the largest party has more than 60 percent of the legislative seats.

<sup>6</sup> See Note 4. Burundi was excluded because of the military takeover shortly after the election.



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## Notes

1. That election is usually held to constitute the beginning of Africa’s democratization wave. See Bratton and van de Walle (1997) for a general analysis of democratization in Sub Saharan Africa.

2. I exclude the North African countries from the analysis and use the terms Africa and Sub Saharan Africa interchangeably.

3. Including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Cote d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Mauritania, Mozambique Nigeria, Seychelles, Tanzania, Togo and Zimbabwe. I have excluded countries in which civil war prevailed during this period, as well as Benin and Madagascar, where defeated incumbents regained power in a second multi-party election, but with a new political party, although it must be recognized that in both cases, the personnel of the new party overlapped considerably with the old one.

4. This category includes Cape Verde, C.A.R, Congo (until the 1997 civil war), Lesotho, Malawi, Niger (until 1996 Coup), Sao Tome, and Zambia. Note that successor parties to the old single party, effectively regained majorities in Benin and Madagascar, while in Mali a successor party to the UDPM, dissolved following the 1991 military coup, emerged in the 1990s as the dominant opposition to ADEMA.

5. Only parliamentary parties, or those parties winning at least one seat in the legislature, will be examined.

6. The standard formula, which is based on each party’s share of the seats, developed by Laakso and Taagepera (Lijphart 1994, p. 120) for the effective number of parties was used.

where  $s$  is the share of seats won by party  $i$ .

7. See for instance Nugent (2001) and Lindberg (2001) on Ghana; Burnell (2001) on Zambia; Kaspin (1995) on Malawi; or Buijtenhuijs (1994) on Chad.

8. A number of studies explore these issues. See Reynolds (1999) and Sisk and Reynolds (1998) for two recent examples.

9. I am referring of course to Tom Stoppard’s post-modern farce, «Rosencranz and Guildenstern are Dead».