

DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL PROTEST AND TRANSITIONS

# How does Democracy in Africa look after 30 years?

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Photography: "Moving Shadows II, X", by [Girma Berta](#)

It is challenging to talk about democracy in Africa in just a few thousand words, because there is no such thing as “African democracy”. Indeed there is as much variation in the quality of democracy on the continent than any other region of the world. According to the most commonly used democracy ratings indices, Africa features a small number of high quality democracies and some highly authoritarian regimes, while most countries have political systems that fall somewhere in-between – combining elements of democracy with elements of autocracy.

Talking about democracy in Africa is also complicated by the fact that the picture is constantly evolving. Over the last few years, for example, the African political landscape has been dominated by high profile changes of leaders and governments. In Angola (2017), Ethiopia (2018), South Africa (2018), Sudan (2019) and Zimbabwe (2018), leadership change promised to bring about not only a new man at the top, but also a new political and economic direction. More recently, opposition parties have defeated established presidents in [Malawi](#) (2020) and [Zambia](#) (2021), providing a much needed shot in the arm for pro-

democracy activists.

These transitions might suggest that democracy in Africa is making progress. But do changes of leader and government actually lead to more democratic and responsive governments? Zambia's new President Hakainde Hichilema has hit the ground running, liberalizing the media, instructing the police to act against party cadres – including those of the new ruling party – and setting economic reform as an urgent priority. Yet the experience of other countries suggests that changes of leader do not always result in an improvement either in terms of the quality of democracy or greater development.

Instead the evidence of my [review of the progress of 44 African countries over the past few years](#) reveals that although leadership change typically results in an initial wave of optimism, ongoing political challenges and constraints mean that new leaders typically disappoint. Structure, it seems, is more important than agency. As a result, transfers of government are all too often a case of “the more things change the more they stay the same”.

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What does this mean for the state of democracy in Africa for years to come? The fact that we see more continuity than change means that we are unlikely to see convergence on a common “African experience”. Instead, the radically different trends set out in the first section below are likely to continue – and may even become more pronounced. In other words, by 2030 we are likely to see a small number of democracies that are really beginning to entrench political rights and civil liberties, and a group of authoritarian states that have made no more progress towards democratization than they have today.

## How democratic is Africa today?

The varied state of democracy in Africa today is perfectly illustrated by the ranking of the continent's countries by the various democracy ratings organizations – Freedom House, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the EIU Democracy Index, and the Varieties of Democracy project. These organizations measure the level of democracy in almost every country in the world according to their preferred criteria every year. Because some ratings organizations use tougher criteria than others, I will show all three to give a balanced picture.

As Table 1 demonstrates, only a small number of African states – a high of 17% if you look at Freedom House, a low of 3% if you use the EUI Democracy Index – are full democracies, meaning that they hold high quality elections while fully respecting political rights and civil liberties. Countries typically seen to fall in this category include Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius and sometimes South Africa.

There is also a very small number of classically authoritarian states, because almost all African states now hold elections of some kind. With the exception of Eritrea and eSwatini, monarchies and pure military regimes are a thing of the past. This means that the kind of authoritarian states we see are what Brian Klaas and I have called “counterfeit democracies” – systems with the outward appearance of democracy but the inner workings of a repressive and abusive state. According to Freedom House, this group comprise 38% of African governments – although BTI and V-DEM come to a lower figure. Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Gabon, Guinea, and Rwanda are all usually placed in this category.

All of the other countries on the continent – the majority for all three ratings organizations – fall in-between these two extremes. In these “mixed” systems, genuine elements of democracy and authoritarianism sit side by side. Governments in these political systems allow considerably more space for opposition parties and civil society groups to operate, but are nonetheless determined to retain power and willing to use authoritarian strategies in order to do so. Various described as “partly free” (Freedom House) and “defective democracies” (BTI), this category includes Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia.

*Table 1. Distribution of African political systems in 2019*

<b>Democracy Index</b>	<b>Freedom House</b>	<b>V-Dem*</b>	<b>BTI</b>
Full Democracies	17%	17%	4%
Mixed Systems	45%	79%	67%
Hard Autocracies	38%	4%	29%

\* Including high quality electoral democracies and liberal democracies.

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These very different democratic experiences mean that it is deeply misleading to speak of “African democracy”, or to imply that African democracies all suffer from the same problems. The key to understanding African politics is therefore to first appreciate the remarkable diversity at play on the continent.

## More continuity than change

The absence of a common story about the evolution of democracy in Africa is not the only common misconception that it is important to challenge. Contrary to media depictions that often focus on moments of instability or collapse, political change occurs gradually in the vast majority of countries.

Over the last five years, the general pattern has been for the continent’s more authoritarian

states – such as Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, and Rwanda – to make little progress towards democracy and in some cases to become incrementally more repressive. At the same time, many of the continent’s more democratic states – including Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius, Senegal, and South Africa – have remained “consolidating” or “defective” democracies, with very few dropping out of these categories to become “authoritarian” regimes.

A number of countries have seen significant changes, but in most cases this did not fundamentally alter the character of the underlying political system. For example, Cameroon, Chad, Kenya and Tanzania have moved further away from lasting political and economic transformation, but in reality none of these countries has enjoyed a sustained period of high quality democracy.

Similarly, Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe have at times appeared to be making progress towards a more democratic reform of politics, but these shifts have often proved to be illusory. One reason for this is that the structures that underpin political systems shape what is possible – and condition the kinds of leaders that can emerge. As a result, political moments that may appear to be revolutionary often turn out only to deliver incremental change.

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Because of this, and because some countries have moved towards democracy while others have moved away from it, there has been less change in the overall quality of democracy on the continent in recent years than one might think given [the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic on civil liberties](#). While there has been authoritarian drift in countries such as Cameroon and Uganda, Malawi and Zambia have moved in the opposite direction. Thus, while the [BTI data](#) documents a fall in the level of democracy on the continent between 2018 and 2020, it was not a large one. Instead, in line with the theme of this essay, there has been more continuity than change.

## Leadership-change promises much but often delivers little

The fact that the average democracy score for the continent masks very divergent experiences over the last few years is another reason that it is important to move beyond generalizations and pay careful attention to what is driving change in particular countries. Doing this for the last few years reveals some interesting patterns.

In almost all cases, the positive trends identified between 2017 and 2019 by organizations such as BTI and Freedom House were recorded in countries where leadership change generated hope for political renewal and economic reform. This included Angola, after President José Eduardo dos Santos stepped down in 2017, Ethiopia, following the rise to

power of the “reformist” Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and Zimbabwe, where the transfer of power from Robert Mugabe to Emmerson Mnangagwa was accompanied with promises that in future the ZANU-PF government would demonstrate greater respect democratic norms and values.

Sierra Leone also recorded a significant improvement in performance following the victory of opposition candidate Julius Maada Bio in the presidential election of 2018, and the scores for Malawi and Zambia will no doubt improve now that potentially divisive and controversial elections have translated into smooth transfers of power that have brought pro-reform governments to power.

The fact that leadership change was quickly followed by an improvement in these country’s ratings is an important reminder of the extent to which power has been personalized in many African states. But it is equally important to note that in very few of these countries were the improvements that were initially recorded sustained. Instead, the glow quickly faded once new leaders were faced with the difficult task of governing – and with the challenge of responding to the heavy demands of the allies, financiers, and supporters who had helped to put them into power.

This was particularly true of countries that saw a change of leader but not a change of ruling party. In Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, new leaders promised radical change but quickly reverted to type. Tanzanian President Magufuli was initially hailed as a “different type of leader”, for example, before Magufuli’s refusal to tolerate dissent or take appropriate measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 led him to abuse the rights of his citizens while putting their health at risk. Tellingly, a very similar process has characterized the time in office of Samia Suluhu Hassan, who succeeded Magufuli as president following his untimely death in March 2021. Having initially been hailed as a reformer who would allow new freedoms and adopt a more scientific health policy, she is now criticized for continuing with his authoritarian strategies after opposition leaders calling for the democratization of the constitution were arrested on trumped-up charges of treason.

A similar story can be told in Ethiopia, where Prime Minister Abiy initially struck all the right notes, releasing political prisoners, seeking to resolve tensions with Eritrea, and pledging to hold free and fair elections. So bright was Abiy’s star that he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Just two years later, there are growing calls for the Prize to be rescinded following evidence of widespread human rights abuses during the war between his government and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front in the Tigray region. The Prime Minister’s reputation was further undermined by flawed general elections and the failure to allow much needed aid and supplies to reach war-torn areas.

Sadly, a similar story also unfolded in Zimbabwe, where Mnangagwa’s promise of a new era failed to materialize. Instead, the 2018 general elections were followed by a series of brutal government crackdowns. Not only have journalists such as Hopewell Chin’ono been arrested on flimsy charges, but the rule of law has been manipulated to keep critics of the regime in jail. Following this sustained war on democracy, it is now clear that the Mnangagwa government has no more commitment to human rights and civil liberties than its

predecessor.

In many African states power has been personalized, thus requiring new leaders to challenge and transform the political systems they inherit

The more recent leadership changes in Malawi and Zambia have greater potential to deliver meaningful change because new leaders have come to power with new ruling parties, removing entrenched political elites. But even in these cases it is important to remember the vested interests that remain within the civil service, security forces, the judiciary and the business community. Securing sustainable democratic reform requires new leaders to challenge and transform the political systems that they inherit – and this struggle is not for the feint hearted.

## The future of democracy in Africa

So what does the future hold? During talks and media interviews I am often get asked what direction Africa is heading in. I have already argued that there is no “African experience” when it comes to democracy, and so it follows that there is not likely to be a common future.

The previous sections have already made this point one way, by comparing countries with different levels of democracy, and that are clearly on different trajectories. To conclude I will demonstrate this point in a different way, by considering how the distribution of democracy looks if we think about it through a spatial lens.

In addition to the well-known differences between leading lights like Botswana and entrenched laggards like Rwanda there is also a profound regional variation that is less well recognized and understood. From relatively similar starting points in the early 1990s, there has been a sharp divergence between West and Southern Africa, which have remained comparatively more open and democratic and Central and Eastern Africa, which remained more closed and authoritarian (figure 1). There is also some evidence that from 2007 onwards the average quality of democracy has declined in Eastern and Central Africa, it continues to increase in West Africa, leading to a greater divergence between the two sets of regions.

*Figure 1. Average Democracy scores for African regions, BTI 2006-2020\**



*\* To preserve the consistency of time-series, the following countries are not considered in this chart as they were added to the BTI country sample later than 2006: Equatorial Guinea, Republic of the Congo, Gabon (Central), Djibouti, South Sudan (Eastern), Eswatini, Lesotho (Southern), Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania (West).*

This reflects the historical process through which governments came to power, the kinds of states over which they govern, and the disposition and influence of regional organizations. In particular, East Africa features a number of countries ruled by former rebel armies (Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda), in which political control is underpinned by coercion and a long-standing suspicion of opposition. This is also a challenge in some Central African states, but with the added complication of long-running conflicts and political instability (Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo) that have undermined government performance on a number of dimensions.

A number of former military leaders have also governed West African states – including Ghana, Nigeria and Togo – but the proportion has been lower and some countries, such as Senegal, have a long tradition of plural politics and civilian leadership. In a similar vein, Southern Africa features a number of liberation movements, but in a number of cases these developed out of broad-based movements that placed a high value on political participation and civil liberties. Most obviously, the Freedom Charter adopted by the African National Congress in 1955 committed South Africa's future ruling party to promoting human rights and limiting the powers of the president and the police. Partly as a result, the impact of former military or rebel leaders taking power has been less damaging to democracy in Southern and West Africa.

It is important not to exaggerate these regional differences – there is great variation within each region as well as between them. But this caveat notwithstanding, the evidence presented in this essay makes it clear that we should not expect to see any convergence around a common African democratic experience in the next few years. If anything, the gap between the most democratic and authoritarian regions is likely to continue to grow, and measures of the “average” level of democracy on such a diverse continent will continue to obscure more than they reveal.



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