CHAPTER 1

Fragments of Democracy: Participation and Control in Authoritarian Africa

The dominant story of the first decade of independence was the collapse of Africa’s democratic experiment. Having experienced a wave of euphoria following the overthrow of colonial rule, the continent rapidly descended into a political and economic depression characterized by the emergence of repressive and corrupt regimes. If we exclude the cases of white minority rule in southern Africa, by the end of the 1970s only Botswana, Gambia, Mauritius, and – to a lesser degree – Senegal continued to practice multipartyism. As a result, for most Africans independence did not mean freedom from authoritarian rule. In many countries, the foundations of this process were laid in the colonial period. As we saw in the Introduction, the emergence of Big Men, the problematic legacy of African nationalism, and the creation of undeveloped economies directly under state control did not represent a strong foundation on which to build a stable and successful democracy.

Against this most unpromising of backdrops, it was the catastrophic failure of the continent’s new political systems to manage competition over power and resources that put the final nails in the coffin of representative government. Bloody civil wars in what is now the DRC and Nigeria persuaded many commentators that ethnic diversity, multipartyism, and political stability were not compatible in the African context. The Cold War also undermined international

The title of this chapter draws on many conversations with Gavin Williams as well as his *Fragments of Democracy*. Cape Town: HSRC Publishers, 2003.
support for democratization, as both the United States and the Soviet Union proved willing to sacrifice democracy on the altar of their own national security. Together, these two trends made it easier for incumbent leaders to centralize power and to downgrade representative institutions. But even during the dark days of the 1970s a democratic light continued to shine, because the limited coercive capacity of state structures meant that governments were rarely in a position to rule through force alone. Instead, authoritarian leaders experimented with different combinations of participation and control in order to confer legitimacy on their regimes and so stave off the threat of popular uprising or military coup. Thus, while democracy was relegated to the backbenches after independence, it remained an important reference point for even the most authoritarian regimes.

The First Crisis of Democracy

Perhaps the most notorious crisis of African democracy occurred in Congo-Kinshasa (previously known as the Belgian Congo, later renamed Zaire, and now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo). A particularly poisonous colonial legacy ensured that the Congo was a singularly difficult environment in which to experiment with multiparty politics. Under the brutal rule of King Leopold II of Belgium, millions died as the territory was turned into a personal fiefdom dedicated to the exploitation of rubber. The callous brutality of Leopold’s tyranny, famously depicted in Joseph Conrad’s novella, Heart of Darkness, was shocking even by the standards of the colonial era. However, even after Leopold’s excesses had been exposed and the Congo had been annexed by the Belgian state in 1908, little was done to develop an effective national infrastructure or to prepare the country for independence, and there was no attempt to introduce representative government until the late 1950s. Africans were not allowed to vote until 1957, and even then municipal elections were limited to the urban centres of Léopoldville, Elisabethville, and Jadotville. As a result, the Congo’s small and fragmented political elite – of, at most, 5,000 high school graduates – entered independence with virtually no experience of running one of the largest and most diverse countries in the world.

Into this most unpromising of contexts stepped Patrice Lumumba. Now remembered as the most tragic of Africa’s independence leaders, Lumumba was born into a Catholic family and received a religious
education before moving on to the government post office training school. A bright and hard-working student, he quickly joined the ranks of the Congolese elite as a postal clerk, and by 1955 had begun to show the leadership qualities that would make him famous, joining the Liberal Party of Belgium and editing party literature. Just six years later he was dead, killed by Congolese soldiers after a tumultuous period as his country’s first prime minister. Lumumba’s legend is one of the most revealing and controversial stories of African independence. It remains relevant today because his rise and fall have much to tell us about the way in which ethnic and regional divisions, manipulated by domestic and international actors, can undermine the prospects for democratization.

Having been promoted as the regional head of a Congolese trade union in 1955, Lumumba was subsequently arrested on charges of embezzling post office funds, but released a year later. His time in prison, combined with the rise of African nationalism across the continent, inspired him to adopt a more radical stance, and he subsequently developed a fierce critique of the inequalities of colonial rule that won him a new set of supporters. In turn, Lumumba’s newfound political prominence brought him into contact with pan-Africanist leaders such as Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, with whom he discussed the need for African unity and rapid independence, consolidating his commitment to the creation of a united nationalist movement in the Congo. Less than two years later he became one of the founding members – and ultimately the president – of the Congolese National Movement (MNC), which he intended to be a “non-tribal” party. The MNC subsequently became the platform through which Lumumba communicated his vision of a socially just Congolese state. Tall and thin, with engaging eyes, he spoke with authority and passion. His rhetorical ability, forthright tone, and concern for equality led his opponents to accuse him of being a communist. With typical force and candour, he replied: “I am not a Communist. The colonialists have campaigned against me throughout the country because I am a revolutionary and demand the abolition of the colonial regime, which ignored our human dignity. They look upon me as a Communist because I refused to be bribed by the imperialists.”

The main barrier to Lumumba’s dream of a united and radical nationalist movement was the deeply fragmented political landscape within which he operated. The late introduction of multiparty politics led to chronic infrastructural weaknesses within the government and
individual political parties, and a political elite that lacked the experience of holding and sharing power. In turn, the lack of established political organizations in the Congo, combined with the difficulty of mobilizing colony-wide support in such a diverse polity, encouraged political leaders to focus on strengthening their own ethno-regional base rather than building effective national organizations. Not only did Lumumba fail to integrate other parties such as the Alliance of Bakongo (ABAKO) led by Joseph Kasa-Vubu; he struggled to maintain the unity of his own party, which split into two groups: Lumumba’s MNC-L, and the MNC-K led by Albert Kalonji. Elections on the eve of independence in 1960 confirmed just how fractured the political system had become. Of the 13 parties that won legislative seats, many failed to stand candidates outside of their own province, and although the MNC-L emerged as the largest party, it won just 33 of 137 parliamentary seats. This left Lumumba in a weak bargaining position, and he was only able to secure the position of prime minister after agreeing to share executive power with his more conservative rival, Kasa-Vubu, who became the Congo’s first president.

As prime minister, Lumumba faced a new set of challenges in his mission to unite the Congolese people. The likes of Kasa-Vubu and Moise Tshombe of the Confederation of Tribal Associations of Katanga (CONAKAT) sought to undermine his vision because they had a very different understanding of how independent Congo should be structured. Most significantly, they hoped to keep the central government weak in order to protect their own provincial bases of power, safe in the knowledge that their regions were sufficiently resource rich to survive without support from the centre. The rising tension between Lumumba, Kasa-Vubu, and Tshombe also reflected a wider desire for self-government that was keenly felt by many Congolese communities, which feared that leaders from rival groups would not govern in the interests of all. Just months after winning power, Lumumba found that his authority was being undermined by the combination of strong sectional interests and the absence of an effective state through which to exert control. As political stalemate quickly gave rise to an oppressive atmosphere of unease, Lumumba began to lose his grip on power.

Amidst rising instability, a military mutiny in July 1960 provided the excuse that the Belgian government had been looking for to deploy troops in the country against Lumumba’s wishes. Although Belgium officially justified the operation on the basis of the need to protect Belgian citizens that had been caught up in the turmoil, Lumumba
feared that its real purpose was to replace him with a leader who would make the Congo’s vast natural resources more readily available. His fears were subsequently confirmed when Moise Tshombe declared Katangan secession, backed by more than 6,000 Belgian troops. Tshombe had brokered a deal in which Belgian companies were given privileged access to Katanga’s reserves of mining copper, gold, and uranium in return for assistance in the creation of a viable Katangan military force.

Tshombe’s declaration and Lumumba’s determination to prevent Katangan secession led to outright conflict and the disintegration of what was left of the Congolese state. As clashes on a smaller scale broke out in the east and central parts of the country, the Congo descended into a brutal civil war in which more than 100,000 people lost their lives. In desperation, Lumumba requested the assistance of the United Nations (UN) to reassert his authority. But although the UN established the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC), the limited mandate of the mission and the subsequent refusal of UN troops to restore central control over Katanga left him frustrated. Lumumba subsequently approached the Soviet Union in the hope that it would be a more effective international ally. But this decision proved fateful, for it confirmed U.S. fears regarding his “radical” politics, and encouraged the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which had already been cultivating relationships with some of Lumumba’s main rivals including Kasa-Vubu and the chief of staff to the army, Joseph Mobutu, to move against him.

Emboldened by U.S. support, Mobutu took advantage of the political paralysis to launch a military coup, placing Lumumba under house arrest. In a final bid to regain control, Lumumba attempted to escape and reach his supporters in Stanleyville, but was captured by Mobutu’s troops on 1 December 1960 and transported to Katanga. According to a Belgian inquiry in 2001, he was tortured and killed by Katangan gendarmes in the presence of Belgian officers, most likely with the full knowledge of the CIA, on 17 January 1961 – just six months after he was sworn in as prime minister.

**Participation and Control**

The “Congo crisis” had two major consequences for the development of African democracy. First, the disastrous impact of international
engagement demonstrated the limited ability of international actors to keep the peace and broker political settlements in complex African states that they poorly understood. As a result, UN officials and foreign ministries became more hesitant to engage in peacekeeping work or the active defence of democracy in Africa. Instead, foreign governments increasingly found ways to work with authoritarian leaders, prioritizing stability and access to resources over the democratic rights of ordinary Africans. In turn, African leaders manipulated Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union for their own ends. Following Lumumba’s death, Mobutu played on U.S. fears that communism would spread across the continent to secure almost continuous access to American funds and military support. This, and his willingness to act as a conduit for U.S. policy, enabled him to maintain one of the world’s most violent and corrupt authoritarian regimes for more than thirty-five years. In this way, the international community played its own part in the rise of authoritarian Africa.

The second key legacy of the Congo crisis was that it raised deep concerns about the feasibility of democracy in Africa. These anxieties were soon reinforced by events in Nigeria, where the breakdown of civilian government also culminated in a secession attempt – in this case by the eastern part of the country that sought to gain independence as the Republic of Biafra – and civil war. Images of the hardships that the people of Biafra suffered as a result of a siege and subsequent military defeat were carried throughout the world, leaving an indelible impression of the high costs of democratic failure. Of course, by the mid-1960s, authoritarian regimes were already well established in some African countries. But in the wake of events in the Congo and Nigeria it became increasingly feasible for leaders to justify democratic backsliding on the grounds that their countries were too large, or too diverse, for multipartyism to work effectively. If Nigeria, why not Kenya? If Congo, why not Uganda, or Ethiopia, or Zambia? Despite considerable domestic resistance, African governments also had ways of legitimating the return to authoritarian rule to their own people. In many countries, leaders were able to sell the idea that political control should trump competition by arguing that this approach was little more than a continuation of the call to unity and consensus that had underpinned the anti-colonial struggle (see the Introduction).

It quickly became apparent that not all authoritarian regimes were the same. The two most common types of regime that emerged in postcolonial Africa were military rule and the one-party state.
the Congo, the failure of multiparty politics typically generated a power vacuum that facilitated the entrance of the military onto the political stage. In the first decade of independence, military coups in Benin (1963), Congo-Brazzaville (1963), Togo (1963), Central African Republic (1966), and Ghana (1966) showed the capacity of even a relatively small group of coup plotters to gain and retain control of the state. By 1980, more than two-thirds of sub-Saharan African states had experienced some form of military rule. Although supporting undemocratic governments was at times embarrassing for international actors, this did not prevent such regimes from securing arms and resources from abroad.

One-party states were easier to justify than military regimes because it was less obvious that these political systems relied on coercion to maintain control, and there were already numerous examples of (seemingly) stable and effective single-party systems outside the continent, including Cuba, Mexico, and the Soviet Union. This was particularly true of countries in which one-party rule was introduced by the same nationalist parties that had secured vast majorities at the ballot box toward the end of colonial rule. In the immediate post-independence period, leaders such as Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d’Ivoire and Ahmed Sékou Touré in Guinea were well placed to argue that in their countries the one-party state represented not authoritarian demagoguery, but the will of the people. Over the next thirty years, one-party states proved to be one of the most common and stable forms of government in Africa. At one point or another Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, the Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Togo all claimed single-party status.

But despite the curtailment of competition across the continent, the limited coercive capacity enjoyed by many African states meant that governments typically struggled to fully control political activity. Nationalist leaders also came under considerable pressure to maintain some element of representative government from their own supporters. Ordinary people did not forget that they had been promised freedom as well as unity, and many communities retained a strong desire to be able to have a say in the decisions that affected their lives. Consequently, most of Africa’s presidents and prime ministers
faced strong incentives to buttress coercive control with other mechanisms that enabled ordinary people to feel that they had a stake in government.

In addition to the distribution of patronage (discussed in Chapter 2), it was common for postcolonial governments to maintain some form of political participation, however superficial. This was most obvious in the continent’s single-party systems. Although some authoritarian leaders created parties simply to try and legitimate brutal military dictatorships, this was not always true of the civilian regimes that had initially come to power through competitive elections. For example, in countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Senegal, and Tanzania, one-party governments continued to hold localized elections that allowed for a degree of accountability between local communities and their representatives.

Perhaps more surprisingly, many military leaders also sought to tap into forms of democratic legitimacy, despite the authoritarian foundations of their rule. In some countries, the invocation of elections or party structures was nothing more than mendacious political theatre – a sleight of hand designed to conceal the true nature of the regime. But in others, such as Benin and Ghana, the parties that military leaders created developed real roots. Thus, while power was progressively centralized across the continent, elements of representative government lived on, albeit in varying degrees. This point is of both historical and contemporary importance, because the balance between participation and control in a given country shaped the political landscape within which the transition to multiparty politics in the 1990s took place, and the prospects for democratic consolidation thereafter. In general, it was the states that maintained more inclusive and accountable political structures in the 1980s that emerged as Africa’s most open and stable democracies in the 1990s (see Chapter 3).

**Semi-Competitive Elections in the One-Party State**

Perhaps the most eloquent and effective advocate of the one-party state was Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, whose influence helped to promote the proliferation of single-party systems across the continent. When President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia was informed that his former friend and right-hand man, Simon Kapwepwe, had decided to quit the ruling party – dividing the government and empowering the opposition – he flew to Tanzania to ask Nyerere how to go
about establishing a one-party government. Nyerere was glad to help, because in his eyes multiparty politics was not just politically dangerous; it was unnecessary, and “un-African”.

One of twenty-six children born to Nyerere Burito, one of several chiefs of the Zanaki, Nyerere was highly educated, first at government schools and later at Makerere University in Kampala and the University of Edinburgh. Like Lumumba, he was motivated by concerns of equality and unity, and it was in Edinburgh that he encountered the Fabian Society – a British organization that sought to advance the principle of socialism by gradual means – and began to think seriously about how he could integrate socialist principles with African political and economic realities.

Upon returning from his studies, Nyerere taught history, English, and Swahili at St. Francis’s College, and subsequently became known as Mwalimu (“teacher”). Having been elected president of the Tanganyika African Association (TAA) in 1953, he set about transforming what had been a mainly civic organization dominated by civil servants into a more dynamic political movement. In 1954, the Tanganyika African National Unity (TANU) was born, and rapidly propelled Nyerere to political prominence. He was elected chief minister in 1960, and subsequently became the country’s first prime minister upon independence in 1961. After Tanganyika became a republic in 1962, Nyerere was elected president with 98 per cent of the vote. Less than a year later, he moved to complete the first part of his political project, proposing legal changes to turn the country into a one-party state – although it had effectively been a single-party system since independence because TANU (or TANU-aligned) candidates had won all of the seats in the 1960 legislative council elections. Following the merger of Tanganyika and the island of Zanzibar in 1964 to form what would become the United Republic of Tanzania, this restriction was relaxed in order to allow the Afro Shirazi Party (ASP) to represent the island. However, after TANU and the ASP agreed to merge to form the Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) in 1977, the “Party of the Revolution” was proclaimed to be the only legal party.

Nyerere chose to limit the rights of his people to choose their own government because of his intellectual heritage and the challenges that he faced after independence. Given the lack of organized opposition to TANU, the main threat to Nyerere’s authority came from within his party, not from without. TANU, like most nationalist
governments, was a coalition of diverse interests that began to unravel once the unifying struggle against colonial rule was over. Shortly after independence, rival leaders challenged both Nyerere’s policies and his political authority. A shrewd political operator, Nyerere understood that by banning opposition parties and so making it impossible for his rivals within TANU to establish rival political movements, he could undermine their ability to blackmail him into meeting their demands.

But Mwalimu’s decision to rule through a one-party state was not simply motivated by self-preservation – Nyerere also believed that a single-party system was the best way to rapidly develop his country, which had entered independence with little infrastructure and a low skills base. As a leading anti-colonial figure in charge of a predominantly rural economy, Nyerere was reluctant to look west in his search for economic or political models. Instead he looked east to the Soviet Union, which had criticized British and U.S. imperialism in Africa and appeared to have achieved exactly what Tanzania needed to do: develop a self-sustainable economy from an agricultural base. In particular, Nyerere’s vision reflected the communist preoccupation with equality and belief that the party – in this case TANU – was the vehicle through which development could be achieved. As Nyerere put it in the Arusha Declaration of 1967, “A committed member of TANU will be a socialist. … The first duty of a TANU member, and especially of a TANU leader, is to accept these socialist principles, and to live his own life in accordance with them.” But Nyerere understood that this would not be possible if TANU leaders were diverted from their task as a result of ethnic or political divisions. Recognizing that such distractions would be more likely under multipartyism, he concluded that a one-party state was essential to preserve the unity that nation-building and development demanded.

While the model of the Soviet Union was an important touchstone for many African leaders, a closer look at the period suggests that Nyerere’s efforts to restructure society into an egalitarian system of large cooperative villages owed less to Soviet-style communism than to the more cautious socialist ideals that he had engaged with in the United Kingdom and his own interpretation of Tanzanian history and culture. Nyerere did not immediately move towards collectivization and nationalization. In fact, he initially presided over a relatively mixed economy that featured elements of capitalism and socialism, and only moved towards more extensive government intervention once this had begun to fail. His motivations for establishing a one-party state
were similarly complex. Nyerere did not unthinkingly copy the model employed in the Soviet Union; rather, he came to the conclusion that an inclusive single-party system was perfectly suited to African norms and values. His views in this regard were profoundly shaped by his childhood experience of watching his father arbitrate disputes in rural Tanganyika, which imbued in him a somewhat idealized understanding of African traditional life in which decision-making was characterized not by competition between different leaders and ideas but by the slow evolution of consensus – literally talking out an issue under a tree until an agreement had been forged. On this basis, Nyerere argued that the one-party state could be seen as a manifestation of African democracy: it was simply a modern vehicle through which to bring about the consensus that elders had always sought. This part of his justification was later appropriated by other leaders, such as Kaunda, who claimed that while Western democracy only allowed citizens to participate in government every four years the one-party state would allow for constant participation.

Although their governments failed to live up to this promise, this was not just empty talk. Civilian one-party states proved to be the most stable form of government in Africa after independence precisely because they combined tight control with political participation. In Tanzania, Nyerere instituted regular one-party elections in which voters could choose between a set of TANU candidates. Although it is impossible to be certain, the outcomes of these elections appear to have largely reflected the will of the voters, at least in the first decade of independence. This meant that the electorate in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia were able to use the polls to register their discontent with their local representatives – and they did, with around 50 per cent of Members of Parliament (MPs) losing their seats in every election. This kept legislators on their toes and facilitated elite rotation, enabling younger leaders with new ideas to enter parliament. It also encouraged ordinary people to feel that they had a say in the decisions that affected their lives, which in turn helped Nyerere to legitimate a political system that in many ways was actually failing his people: although Tanzania achieved remarkably high literacy levels in the 1970s, per capita GDP fell in the early 1980s, so that on average people were poorer in 1986 than they had been in 1981.

Unsurprisingly, single-party elections developed their own distinctive dynamics. Because voters rejected candidates who paid them insufficient attention, legislators were forced to focus on constituency
service and to raise locally sensitive issues on the floor of the house. Moreover, because all of the candidates belonged to the same party, and elections focused were held at constituency level, they became obsessively local. This reduced the potential for divisive open competition between larger ethnic and regional communities, aiding Nyerere’s efforts to construct a coherent Tanzanian identity (for more on which, see the Conclusion to this book). And because many rural constituencies were fairly ethnically homogenous in countries like Kenya, voters had to choose between individuals on a different basis, and so a candidate’s record and personal qualities became of central importance (see Chapter 2). Where they worked best, one-party elections empowered communities to hold their leaders accountable on the issues closest to their hearts.

While participation was an important source of legitimacy, Nyerere’s authority was also underpinned by the extension of political control. Power was centralized under the presidency, representative institutions such as the legislature were downgraded, and, following the example of the Soviet Union, trade union leaders and youth leaders were co-opted into the party hierarchy through the creation of a party-sponsored youth league and trade union congress. Centralization was buttressed by overt coercion when required. When it transpired that many Tanzanians did not share Nyerere’s understanding of their culture and traditions, and were reluctant to uproot their families in order to move into the large villages that were a central element of his Ujamaa (“unity”/”familyhood”) project, force was used to ensure compliance. Coercion was also deployed to deter political opposition. In 1962, Nyerere introduced the Preventative Detention Act, which was subsequently used to imprison opposition leaders who could not otherwise be contained. It is thought that by 1979 there were more political prisoners in Tanzania than in apartheid South Africa, and Amnesty International identified (and supported) almost 150 “prisoners of conscience” in the 1970s alone.

Ironically, most civilian one-party states were ultimately undermined not by external opposition but by the atrophy of the ruling party itself. Nyerere found that the absence of multiparty competition blunted the enthusiasm of party members, while a chronic lack of resources had resulted in the deterioration of the party’s organizational capacity shortly after independence. His response was to extend the party’s life by fusing it with the state, so that state resources could be used to fund the ruling party, and party activists could be used to
radicalize the bureaucracy to socialist ends. But while the conflation of party and state structures kept the CCM from collapse it was not without costs. What Nyerere had not anticipated was that the fusion of party and state would create bloated committees, unclear authority structures, and institutional blockages, as technocrats and party officials competed for supremacy. Although in principle his new system generated more avenues through which people could engage with their rulers, in reality the labyrinthine world of committee systems was so unresponsive that ordinary Tanzanians began to lose faith in the party-state and in many cases chose to disengage from the formal political system.

For all of the economic and political limitations of the one-party state, Nyerere is still regarded by many as a hero, and for good reasons. By promoting a shared set of cultural values and symbols he defused inter-communal tensions and built a Tanzanian national identity that has stood the test of time. By emphasizing equality and discipline he prevented – or at least postponed – the emergence of the venal corruption that proved so destructive in nearby Kenya. And by ultimately recognizing the limitations of the policies that he introduced, he also facilitated change, first when he resigned his office in 1985 in order to let others introduce desperately needed economic reforms – becoming one of the only African leaders to leave power voluntarily in the 1980s – and later, when he intervened to persuade his successors within the CCM to abandon the one-party state and reintroduce multiparty politics in the early 1990s (see Chapter 3).

Military Rule and Politics Without Politicians

Like the creation of one-party states, military rule came about through a variety of different pathways. In many cases, coups were driven by the desire of military personnel to improve, or at least maintain, their position. The infamous Idi Amin claimed that he had overthrown Milton Obote’s government in Uganda in order to defend freedom of speech and the right to free and fair elections. In reality, he was more concerned with self-protection: Amin most likely knew that Obote planned to replace him as commander of the army, which would have left him vulnerable to prosecution for the murder of one of his main rivals within the military, Brigadier P.Y. Okoya. But while self-advancement motivated many coup plotters, military intervention was often facilitated by the political instability generated by the failure
of civilian regimes themselves. This was the case with the coup that brought Yakubu Gowon to power in Nigeria, which occurred amidst a period of chronic instability in the mid 1960s.

Gowon had joined the army in 1954 and attended the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in England, but although he was promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1963 he remained largely unknown. It was a series of unpredictable events, and his particular ethnic and religious identity, that thrust Gowon into the political limelight and conferred on him one of the most important roles in Nigeria’s postcolonial history: holding the country together during the civil war, and stabilizing it thereafter.

The way Gowon undertook this most difficult of tasks owed much to the lessons that he drew from the Congo crisis, where he served as part of a Nigerian peacekeeping force in the early 1960s. What he gained from this experience was a keen awareness of the capacity of political competition to destabilize fragile societies, and the potential for federal political systems to exacerbate demands for secession. Both points were pertinent to the political situation in Nigeria. Long before Gowon came on the scene, the civilian regime of Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa had begun to fragment under the weight of its own internal contradictions. The federal system bequeathed by the British served to encourage tension between the country’s three regions, each of which was dominated by a different ethnic group: the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. On the one hand, leaders from each community sought to monopolize the regional governments as their personal fiefdoms, rigging elections and attacking their rivals in the process. On the other, they fought bitterly over national power and how it should be distributed. Taken together, these two trends made for a violent, volatile, and dangerous political atmosphere. As ethnic tensions escalated, a group of mostly Igbo military officers overthrew the civilian government on 15 January 1966, killing the prime minister and the premier of the Northern Region, Samuel Akintola, in the process. Rightly or wrongly, Northern military leaders interpreted the coup as an Igbo power grab, and responded with a counter-coup on 29 July.

The second coup was led by Murtula Mohammed, who desired the position of supreme commander for himself. However, he ultimately lost out to Gowon, even though his rival had not played a significant role in the coup itself. Gowon owed his ascendancy more to luck than judgment. Despite being just thirty-two years of age, he outranked
Mohammed. Moreover, while Mohammed was a Hausa-Fulani Muslim from the North, Gowon was unusual in being a Northerner who was neither Hausa-Fulani, nor a Muslim. Given this, a government led by Gowon appeared to be less likely to exacerbate ethnic and religious tension with the mostly Christian south. However, despite this small advantage Gowon failed to reconcile the Igbo east to the new political arrangement, and his plan to redraw the country’s federal system to reduce the power of the largest ethnic groups further antagonized Eastern leaders. Combined with a number of attacks on Igbo communities living in the north of the country, this hastened the attempted secession of the Eastern region as the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra and the subsequent onset of civil war. As a result, Gowon spent three of his first four years in power fighting a conflict that cost the lives of an estimated 100,000 military personnel and between 500,000 and 2 million civilians.

Despite the recent discovery of oil, which was predominantly located in the east of the country, Biafra lacked the resources or technical capacity to defeat the Nigerian army and was ultimately forced to announce an unconditional ceasefire, bringing the war to an end on 13 January 1970. Gowon now faced his second major challenge: how to unify and rebuild the country. He began in a spirit of reconciliation, stating that there had been “no victor, no vanquished”, and initiating a reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation program to rebuild the Eastern Region – although the latter policy met with limited success. But this left the question of how to actually govern Nigeria in peacetime. Like his civilian counterparts who established one-party states, Gowon associated multiparty competition with inter-communal tension. But unlike single-party states in which the ruling party lived on as a vehicle of popular participation – at least in theory – Gowon was distrustful of the political class and so restricted their presence in his government. He was also reluctant to allow for any kind of elections to be held because competition, even at the local level, was unpredictable and had the potential to exacerbate pre-existing tensions.

In particular, Gowon feared that reengaging with political leaders even at the regional level might intensify the existing divisions within the military that had initially pushed the country towards civil war. But practicing politics without politicians brought its own problems; most notably, it made it harder for the military government to legitimate itself and to anticipate shifts in public opinion. Gowon therefore
faced a difficult choice between banning politicians and elections at the risk of not being able to anticipate the public mood on the one hand, and endangering the unity of the armed forces by engaging in representative government on the other.

As Henry Bienen’s research in Western State reveals, the need to maintain the legitimacy of the regime in the wake of the civil war ultimately encouraged Gowon to give a greater role to civilian leaders within the government than he had at first envisaged. To this end, he announced that a civilian Federal Executive Council (FEC) would be established to share executive authority with the Supreme Military Council (SMC) in June 1967. Civilian appointees were called commissioners because Gowon believed that his countrymen “were not anxious to see those who in recent years participated in politics back in ministerial seats”. Similar reforms were introduced with some variations at the state level. However, this technocratic hybrid failed to resolve the main problems facing Gowon. For one thing, the attempt to generate a more responsive political system without engaging with politicians was largely unsuccessful because many of the “civilians” appointed to the FEC (and its regional equivalents) had previously been political leaders. They therefore saw themselves as representing specific parties and interests, whether these officially existed or not. Consequently, civilian commissioners began to engage in a disorganized form of party politics that undermined the ability of the government to claim political neutrality and so threatened to introduce broader social tensions into the very heart of the military.

But although the civilian representatives operated very much as political animals, they failed to effectively connect the government to local communities. The small number of commissioners and their lack of an effective party machine rendered it almost impossible to reach out to the grassroots. This failure had significant consequences in Western State, where the lack of information on public opinion meant that the government failed to anticipate a widespread wave of riots in 1968 and 1969 in which farmers refused to pay taxes. Once the riots had started, the absence of effective political structures further hampered attempts to identify the source of the dispute and broker a resolution. Consequently, the military was forced to

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utilize increasingly coercive strategies. Subsequent Nigerian military regimes struggled with the same conundrum, and it was in part the need to compensate for inadequate mechanisms of representation, along with the paranoia of military leaders – which increased with each and every coup attempt – that resulted in a series of increasingly repressive regimes (Figure 1.1).

Gowon’s time in power was short lived. In 1975, he was overthrown in a coup that briefly saw Murtula Mohammed installed as president. The limitations that Gowon had recognized subsequently troubled other leaders, both within Nigeria and without. Many military presidents responded by trying to have their cake and eat it, erecting shell parties that they could entirely control in order to confer a veneer of democratic respectability on what remained authoritarian regimes. Even Mobutu, one of Africa’s least democratically inclined leaders, sought to build popular acceptance of his rule by forming the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR), which became the sole legal party in the Congo under the 1967 constitution. He also attempted to tap into the legitimacy of the ballot box, putting the 1967 constitution to a referendum and standing for election in 1970 and 1977, demonstrating that even the most capricious of leaders is susceptible to the

**FIGURE 1.1** Respect for civil liberties in Nigeria (1972–1998).

Freedom House Index 1–7, lower scores = more respect for civil liberties. MR = military rule, CR = civilian regime. (Name) = president.

*Note: *Murtala Mohammed came to power after Gowon was overthrown in 1975, but was assassinated in 1976.

*Source: Freedom House.*
lure of democratic respectability (although, of course, not democratic uncertainty: Mobutu never won less than 98 per cent of the vote).

In other cases reforms were less superficial, as leaders attempted a kind of political alchemy, transforming weak military regimes into coercive one-party states. Take Benin, for example. The capture of power by Major Mathieu Kérékou in 1972 ended a destabilizing cycle of coup and counter-coup that had threatened to tear the country apart. Kérékou immediately set about consolidating his position, creating the People’s Revolutionary Party of Benin (PRPB) in 1975, complete with a central committee, party congress, and, at the grassroots, Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). Although some key decisions continued to be made by the military, under the PRPB government Benin developed a political system that was similar in some respects to the one-party states of Tanzania and Zambia. As in those systems, a left-leaning government presided over a political structure that offered party activists little opportunity to shape national policy, but held regular elections. However, the system established in Benin did not engage the local population to the extent that one-party polls did in countries such as Kenya (chapter 2), because the input of citizens was restricted to voting “yes” or “no” to a list of candidates put forward by the ruling party, and so voters were not able to select their own representatives. Yet despite the clear constraints that this system placed on the political engagement or ordinary people, the balance between participation and control struck by Kérékou proved to be remarkably stable, surviving for nineteen years in a county in which the life expectancy of previous military regimes had been counted in months.

**Botswana: The Diamond in the Rough?**

Not all of Africa’s independent states gave up on multipartyism. Mauritius, Gambia, and Botswana ploughed a lonely furrow as examples of more democratic governments on a largely authoritarian continent. Botswana’s success is particularly notable because of the country’s vast diamond wealth. In developing an open and stable political economy, Botswana therefore avoided two major continental trends: the collapse of multipartyism and the resource curse (see Introduction). But on closer inspection it becomes clear that Botswana’s political stability depended less on the institutionalization of competitive party politics, and more on a combination of deference to traditional leaders,
ethnic homogeneity, and a self-restraining political elite. Indeed, the formula for Botswana’s success deployed by the first president, Seretse Khama, relied on a combination of participation and control reminiscent of the continent’s civilian one-party states.

Khama was a British-trained lawyer who had been born into one of the royal families of the Bechuanaland Protectorate (as it was then known), and later ruled the country from 1965 until his death in 1980. Botswana’s status as one of Africa’s most open and well-managed states owes much to his vision of how the country could best navigate the challenges of independence. Despite his very public role as a traditional leader, Khama entered the national political scene relatively late, founding the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) in 1962, in opposition to the more radical Botswana People’s Party (BPP). The BDP brought together a broadly conservative coalition that included chiefs and rural commoners, as well as civil servants and teachers who had used their salary to become respectable cattle owners, and it was this powerful and well-resourced alliance that powered Khama to a landslide election victory in 1965. Motivated by his distrust of radical politics and his high regard for the rule of law, Khama set about building a conservative government in which the rights of citizens – and opposition parties – would be respected.

First and foremost, Khama recognized that BDP hegemony would be strongest if it was constructed on the basis of the social and economic dominance of the party leadership and their allies. The close relationship between chiefs and the BDP, and the ability of traditional leaders to use their control over land and labour to maintain their political and cultural relevance, empowered Khama to dominate political life, especially in rural areas. Moreover, Botswana’s hierarchical social structure and the deference of Tswana communities towards royal or traditional leaders meant that many ordinary Batswana were unwilling to criticize Khama, at least in public.

The BDP’s ability to use the social standing of its leaders to ensure the compliance of citizens was facilitated by the country’s tiny and relatively homogenous population. Just over 500,000 people lived in Botswana at the point of independence, and the eight main Tswana-speaking communities comprised more than three-quarters of the population. The existence of a common set of cultural symbols and a common language made it easier for Khama to construct a viable national identity and ensured that the political system never fragmented in the way that it did in the Congo.
that was often hamstrung by internal power struggles and personal disputes, Botswana’s more homogenous and deferential political culture enabled the BDP to secure its hold on power: to date, the party has never won less than a two-thirds majority of the seats in a parliamentary election.

But to leave the story here would be unfair to Khama, because popular support for the BDP also owed much to the party’s remarkable track record in office. In stark contrast to Africa’s neo-patrimonial states (see Introduction), in which those in public office treated the states resources as their own, Khama maintained a professional bureaucracy and a clear division between the public and private sphere. As a result, Botswana has consistently ranked as the least corrupt country in Africa. In turn, this allowed the government and its bureaucracy to focus on effectively investing the $3 billion a year the country received in diamond revenues in a way that would sustain long-term economic growth. It did so with considerable success: having been one of the world’s poorest countries at the point of independence, Botswana achieved an average economic growth rate of 7.7 per cent for the next thirty years and is now classified by the World Bank as an upper middle income country.

For the most part, Botswana has also maintained a remarkably open political landscape. Although BDP dominance meant that the government faced little formal resistance to its policies, Khama promoted dialogue between his regime and the people. Most significantly, he harnessed mechanisms of political participation that had been used to facilitate debate and consultation in the pre-colonial era. The roots of popular participation in Botswana run deep. To understand why, it is important to appreciate that before and during colonial rule the country developed one of Africa’s most unequal societies. “Chiefs” controlled land, labour, and cattle, and enjoyed considerable leeway to direct and control the lives of “commoners”. The need to build a broader sense of political community and to legitimate the unequal distribution of wealth encouraged chiefs to sustain and promote an indigenous mechanism of public consultation known as kgotlas. These meetings could be attended by both men and women and were intended to allow ordinary people to say whether or not they agreed with the chiefs decisions. Maintaining kgotlas into the independence era enabled the BDP to get a feel for the popularity, or otherwise, of its proposals. And just as in Kenya and Tanzania, the ability of people to participate in the decisions that affected their lives conferred legitimacy on the regime.
But although many of Khama’s achievements sparkle, and the successful adoption of kgotlas is a powerful demonstration of the value of allowing African democracies to draw upon socially embedded norms and customs, Botswana is a misleading poster boy for multipartyism in Africa. Not only has party politics been largely uncompetitive, but many of Botswana’s democratic gains have yet to be institutionalized in ways that place tight constraints on those in power. In the absence of a strong opposition, postcolonial leaders were understandably reluctant to place constraints on their own activities: Khama was a good leader, but not a saint.

Given the lack of a vigilant, active, and robust civil society, the continued existence of an open political system rests on the voluntary compliance of the political elite. For this reason, Kenneth Good has referred to Botswana as an “elite democracy”.

Allegations of democratic backsliding under the government of third president Ian Khama – Seretse Khama’s son – demonstrate the weaknesses of such a system. According to his critics, Ian Khama, previously commander of the Botswana Defence Force, has militarized the government, favouring hierarchy over discussion and prioritizing order at the expense of human rights – a tendency epitomised by his support of legislation such as the Security and Intelligence Bill of 2006, which consolidated the growing influence of the security forces while making no provisions for parliamentary oversight.

Moreover, although kgotlas helped to legitimate the regime, they did not represent a system of direct or discursive democracy. Leaders were not bound by the verdict of the people and although in principle women could speak, they rarely did. Instead, discussions tended to be dominated by a small, wealthy, male elite. Moreover, because it was the government that controlled kgotla meetings and determined their content, the BDP was gifted a monopoly over one of the primary mechanisms of mass communication. This is important, because there is evidence that for all Seretse Khama’s qualities, the party’s elite, perhaps too accustomed to deference from the masses, has taken its poorest supporters for granted.

Despite all of the positive headlines, over the last thirty years Botswana’s score on the Human Development Index (HDI) – a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, and standard

of living – has shown little improvement (0.155 on a 0 to 1 scale). While the lack of movement on key development indicators is partly related to the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS, which is carried by almost one-quarter of the population, it also reflects the failure of the government to fully share the benefits of economic growth. As a result, Botswana remains one of the world’s most unequal societies: around half of the population survive on less than $1 a day, and urban areas face an acute housing problem with overcrowded squatter settlements. This means that if, like Alexis de Tocqueville, we value democracy because it improves the lot of the worse off, Botswana still has some way to go.

The Past of the Present

The political systems and ideas developed in the immediate post-independence period continue to reverberate in Africa today. Most notably, the perception that multiparty competition represents a grave danger to social harmony, and that inter-communal conflict is best managed by curtailing political competition, is still popular among political elites and some donors. Indeed, recent attempts to end political crises in countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe through the creation of power-sharing “unity” governments all but reintroduced the one-party state into a number of African countries, if only temporarily (see the Conclusion to this volume).

Variations in the institutional structure of authoritarian rule in the 1970s and 1980s also shaped the different pathways that countries took to multipartyism in the 1990s. Bratton and van de Walle have argued that the more participation and competition there was in the ancien régime, the better the prospects for democratic consolidation. The logic underpinning their argument is that participatory forms of authoritarian rule were more likely to have fostered strong civil society groups, inculcated norms of electoral representation, and to have produced active and democratically conscious societies. Moreover, competitive forms of authoritarian rule were more likely to have developed norms in favour of representative government and institutions capable of maintaining their independence from the executive.

Given this, Bratton and van de Walle predicted that former one-party states would enjoy a smoother transition to multipartyism than cases of military rule and personal dictatorship.

The experience of the 1990s provides some support for this intuition. In countries such as Benin, Senegal, Tanzania, and Zambia, the existence of norms of accountability, electoral systems, and judiciaries with at least some capacity for independent action had an important double effect. On the one hand, more effective checks and balances made it more costly for presidents to engage in repression. On the other, stronger institutions and higher levels of political trust made it less threatening for presidents to introduce democratic reforms. As a result, when the leaders of one-party states came under pressure to democratize in the late 1980s they were more likely to respond positively than their counterparts who were operating under military rule.

The legacy bequeathed by less participatory and more coercive military regimes was more problematic. Take the example of Colonel Bokassa’s military government in the Central African Republic (CAR). After seizing power in 1965 Bokassa dismantled the state, eviscerated the bureaucracy, and progressively undermined the space for dissenting voices to be heard. Fearful of losing power following a series of coup attempts between 1974 and 1976, he systematically purged his administration of talented individuals and factions that he feared could pose a potential threat to his own position. By the time he was overthrown in 1979, Bokassa had effectively destroyed the country’s representative institutions and civil society, and had laid the foundations of a political landscape in which power was understood not to derive from the popular will, but from the barrel of a gun. Ever since, the CAR has struggled to overcome the twin challenge of establishing representative government and sending the military back to the barracks. Despite relatively open elections in 1993 and 1998/9, attempted transitions to multipartyism have ultimately been curtailed by coups.

The experience of the CAR reflects the struggles of many military regimes to re-civilianize politics. Indeed, even where civilian rule has been established, the armed forces have typically remained close to power, with the past lives of military leaders thinly disguised by democratic titles and civilian clothes (Table 1.1). Of the ninety-one presidents and prime ministers that have held office on the continent in civilian regimes since 1989, fully 45 per cent had considerable experience either in the state military or in rebel groups prior to holding political office.
But although the institutional legacy of a country plays an important role in shaping its future, the categories of one-party state and military-rule are not coherent or distinct enough to represent a hard and fast guide to the process of democratic consolidation. For example, the impact of military rule on future developments depended on the way in which leaders went about consolidating their authority. Regimes that opted for more coercive governments, such as Cameroon and the Congo, or who cloaked themselves in the imagery of democracy but had no interest in constructing more representative political structures, as in the CAR, generated significant barriers to democratization. But in countries where the government was progressively

### TABLE 1.1 Civilian African presidents with prior military/rebel experience (as of July 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country*</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Rebel/ non-state army</th>
<th>State military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>José dos Santos</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Ian Khama</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>Blaise Compaoré</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>Pierre Nkurunziza</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>Joseph Kabilal</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>Teodoro Obiang</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Mulatu Teshome**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea-Bissau</td>
<td>Manuel Serifo Nhamadjo</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Armando Emílio Guebuza</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>Hifikepunye Pohamba</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Goodluck Jonathan</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. of Congo</td>
<td>Denis Sassou-Nguesso</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>Paul Kagame</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Jacob Zuma</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Jakaya Kikwete</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Sudan</td>
<td>Salva Kiir Mayardit</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td>Sudan</td>
<td>Omar al-Bashir</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Yoweri Museveni</td>
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<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Robert Mugabe</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only civilian regimes holding multiparty elections are included in this table. Only rebel/military experience accrued before securing the presidency is included.

** Mulatu Teshome is the president of Ethiopia, but under the Ethiopian political system power resides with the prime minister. Following the death of Meles Zenawi in August 2012, he was succeeded as prime minister by Hailemariam Desalegn, who has no prior military or rebel experience.
civilianized and power was at least partly transferred to new party structures, as in Benin and Ghana, the legacy of military rule was not that dissimilar to that of the one-party state.

At the same time, the long and contingent nature of processes of democratization, in which political trajectories may be radically altered by unanticipated crises and the idiosyncratic decisions of individual leaders, means that the hold of institutional legacies fades over time. It is therefore not surprising that while former one-party states such as Senegal, Tanzania, and Zambia have remained stable under multiparty rule, some have also witnessed the emergence of civil strife and political disorder, as in Côte d’Ivoire and Kenya (see Chapter 5). Moreover, while military regimes in the CAR and the DRC have made little progress towards democracy, in Liberia and Sierra Leone periods of civil conflict and military rule subsequently gave way to relatively free and fair elections. These varied pathways can only be understood if we consider the full range of factors that shaped whether leaders responded to the winds of change that blew across the continent in the late 1980s and early 1990s with repression or reform, a question that is taken up in chapter three Chapter 3.

Select Bibliography


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