



[Political Parties – Challenges and Perspectives](#)

Parties in Africa

The Case for Increased Engagement with a Neglected Issue

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Thirty years ago, the vast majority of sub-Saharan countries chose the path of parliamentary democracy. What is the state of the multi-party systems today? At first glance, the verdict is: defective. However, this generalisation is dangerous and overlooks important differences and new tendencies. Below are six arguments for further research.

If the number of parties were an indicator of the state of democracy, the Democratic Republic of the Congo – with its 599 registered parties,¹ 34 of which are currently represented in parliament – would be one of the most democratic countries in the world. The 2011 Parliament had 98 parties; in 2006, there were 67.²

Experience shows that the mere existence of several parties, or the holding of elections, does not make a democracy. Particular caution also appears advisable for all states that include terms such as “democratic” or “people’s republic” in their name. Indeed, German history provides a reminder of this.

The annual Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) puts the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the opposite end of the list – at the second-to-last place out of 167 countries. Only the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is less democratic.³

African Parties: Not Enough Data

Democratic systems require parties if they are to function. Thirty years after a majority of the 49 sub-Saharan African states⁴ chose multi-party democracy, the state of their parties is in serious doubt. Prevailing opinion considers them to be fragmented, unstructured, undemocratic, marked by patronage, tribalism, and indistinguishable in terms of ideology. This view is, moreover, hardly unjustifiable. Yet this generalisation is dangerous and overlooks individual differences and important tendencies. Further analysis and observation is needed – it would provide important insights for international

party research, for the work of external funding agencies, and would generally contribute to an improved understanding of these countries as the importance of Africa grows.

Fundamentals: Why Parties?

Although there is no uniform definition in the scientific community of what a party is, there is a consensus that parties are indispensable to the functioning of a democratic system.⁵ Despite all the criticism they face, efforts to improve upon parties have so far failed. Parties function “like no other organisation” – as an interface between political citizenry, extra-parliamentary organisations, and government, at the federal, state, and municipal levels.⁶ Their five basic functions are generally recognised to be: the articulation, representation, and aggregation of interests; the determination of political content; the recruitment of voters and political personnel; government and opposition work; and the mobilisation and integration of members and the electorate.⁷ Research has identified that the primary types of party are the mass party, the catch-all party, and the dignitary party.

Broken Party Systems in Africa: Seven Deficits

Parties in Africa appear to deviate greatly from these ideal types. Multiple research papers⁸ have pointed out their weaknesses, which can be reduced to seven fundamental problems.

1. The majority of party systems in the 49 countries of sub-Saharan Africa are greatly fragmented. An overview of the current composition of the national assemblies as directly

elected chambers shows that more than half of them have five or more parties represented. Sixteen of them have ten or more – South Africa, for instance, has 14. In several cases, it cannot be conclusively determined how many parties actually exist in the national assembly, because in many countries, parties join forces before elections to form alliances since they are incapable of achieving majorities alone. The proliferation of parties weakens the power of the opposition.

2. Parties frequently cannot be assigned to any political tendency and appear indistinguishable from one another. It is not rare for party manifestos to be absent altogether. Selected categories such as liberal, conservative, and social democratic are not translated into political content.
3. The parties are severely under-financed. There is little or no government financing of parties. Members can contribute little to party finances because most of the population is poor. Many parties are therefore dependent on a single chairman with financial clout.
4. In greatly fragmented systems, parties, especially small and micro-parties, are scarcely active outside of elections, be it externally (articulating interests) or internally (mobilising and integrating the electorate).⁹ The “voter association” accusation is common.
5. Only a few parties are socially anchored, both broadly and locally through party-affiliated organisations, such as youth, women’s, business, or social associations.
6. Membership figures are extremely difficult to verify, and statistics are rarely kept.
7. There is scarcely, if at all, any democratic decision-making. Party leadership has no accountability to membership after the founding convention. The democratic selection of candidates for elections and party offices is similarly questionable.

The Dominance of Party Leaders with Financial Clout

In an autocratic system, these deficits can be explained by the fact that parties are founded to give the appearance of democracy. In general, however, the central basic problem for political parties in African states – states which continue to suffer from weak economies and unevenly distributed resources – seems to be financial dependence on a chairman. Such figures frequently have little interest in internal change, which means that conditions for the long-term establishment of democratic parties are neglected.

Parties are often founded to gain access to state resources, which are then distributed to the parties’ supporters.

The American scholar Catherine Lena Kelly describes this phenomenon more fully in one of her most recent papers on the issue, using the example of Senegal. At the time of her research (mid-2018), the country had around 300 registered parties. Kelly writes that the primary function of parties is to negotiate access to the state and its resources, not to win elections.¹⁰ It is not uncommon for parties to be founded in order to gain a stake in the state, as well as contracts, and offices, in return for mobilising voters and securing parliamentary seats in a regional area. After access to state resources has been secured, those resources are then distributed among the party’s supporters (patronage). The more capable the party leader appears, the better the chances that he can find supporters. Kelly noted an overwhelming tendency for parties to form coalitions with those in government instead of taking up opposition. Opposition is not attractive because of the risks involved, including financial ones. Opposition is attractive primarily to strong former members of the government who are familiar with the system from inside, and whose resources and knowledge increase

Armed conflicts, coups d'état, attacks: Many young African democracies continue to suffer from insecurity.

Source: © Joe Penney, Reuters.

their chances of producing a switch that places them in the highest positions of power.¹¹

Patronage and the proliferation of parties do long-term damage to trust in the political system. Conversely, dependency on a single party leader also often means that the party is faced with financial collapse when that person leaves without a process in place for choosing a successor. A current example is Forces Cauris pour un Bénin Émergent (FCBE), which dominated Benin's politics for a decade under former President Thomas Boni Yayi. The FCBE lost power in 2016. After a quarrel, Yayi recently announced his intention of founding a new party.¹²

The general suspicion of patronage and the accusation that politics is run primarily as a business, overlooks all the players that engage in politics because of their convictions.

Limited Democratic Leeway

Apart from internal difficulties, African parties are also challenged by external influences. Many young African democracies continue to suffer from insecurity due to armed conflict, state repression, or general restrictions on democratic latitude imposed by the governing party. There are many examples of this:

- The coup d'état in Mali, Boko Haram terror in Nigeria, or civil war in South Sudan make the political work of parties impossible.
- In country after country, the opposition is the target of repression. A drastic example was the presumably politically motivated 2017



attack on Tanzanian opposition leader Tundu Lissu, in which he was shot 16 times and barely survived.

- Elections in many countries continue to exhibit great deficiencies that distort the results and cause long-term damage to the political landscape. Deficiencies include exclusion and suppression of parties during



campaigns, discrimination against them, manipulation of results, and election boycotts by opposition parties.

Six Arguments for Further Research

These deficits and the generally widespread discouragement regarding sub-Saharan Africa's democratic development in the last 30 years

raise the question as to why greater research into African parties would in fact be beneficial. The question is a reasonable one. But there are six arguments in favour of further study.

1. Academically sound knowledge about African parties is greatly deficient. Overall, there have been few papers which have dealt with parties in Africa. The majority of papers

available are from English-speaking countries. The results cited above require further assessment. Few parties can be considered well-researched (South Africa's African National Congress, ANC, is an exception).

2. The picture in Africa varies from place to place. The party landscape is as multifaceted as the continent itself. While DR Congo's fragmented party system represents one extreme, Ghana's represents the other. Since Ghana's first multi-party parliamentary elections in 1992, a competition has arisen among four parties that will likely result in a binary choice: The current Parliament includes only the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Ghana is considered to be one of the most stable democratic systems on the continent. Since 1992, a total of just six parties have reached Parliament – despite increased competition. In 2016, nine parties stood for election. In 2012, there were 16.
3. Generalisations are dangerous. The general suspicion of patronage and the accusation that politics is run primarily as a business that allows private individuals to enrich themselves from the state and its resources, overlooks all the players that engage in politics because of their convictions. Such players are present in every African country, not just a few.
4. Democracy needs time. Few recall that the first German Bundestag in 1949 contained eleven parties. The Weimar Republic remains a cautionary tale. There were 15 parties in the Reichstag in 1928.
5. Further analysis of the party landscape would generally provide more knowledge about politics and society in the individual countries. Given the increased interest in Africa, this would be a good time for such an effort.
6. The most important argument, however, is that by instituting multi-party systems 30 years ago, states de facto introduced the element of competition. No matter how autocratic a given

country is, its ruler is in danger of losing power, or at least new forces have a chance of gaining it. American author Catherine Lena Kelly is therefore correct when she refers to “competitive authoritarianism”.¹³ A superficial examination generally misses this fact.

There Is Competition in Africa

A closer examination of individual countries quickly confirms that there is competition – both within the governing faction and within the opposition. Nobody's position of power is secure. This means that, among parties and their personnel, there is interest and demand for securing and expanding power. In today's globally networked world, this puts African parties under increased pressure. This situation has increased competition and presents political players with the growing challenges of pursuing politics in a more modern, citizen- and member-oriented manner.

Given a young, better-educated population, all parties must consider how to reach people in the long term.

Many parties are outdated and must consider how to reach people in the long term if they wish to remain relevant. This is particularly true in the face of the ever growing opportunities for criticism and participation presented by social media on the one hand, and by a young, better-educated population on the other. Platforms, agenda setting, greater participation of younger voters and women, improved political communication, and better party financing models are all becoming more important. As in Europe, the ability of parties to absorb scientific insights and trends and communicate this content to members and voters will also become more decisive in Africa. If African party leaders fail to translate complex content, or to understand that content in the first place, they are in danger of appearing obsolete.

The Case of Kenya

Kenya is a good example of the dynamics prevailing in various African countries, and of the challenges parties are facing in their roles as societal interfaces. Since the end of the single-party system in 1994, Kenya has developed a multifaceted party landscape. There is a democratic culture within the parties, but it has some shortcomings.¹⁴

Within the country's patriarchal structures, politics is dominated by "strong men". This makes it difficult for young people and women to get a hearing for their political concerns. Nevertheless, party formation and party work is mostly free from restrictions in Kenya. An important indicator of this is the fact that the current Kenyan National Assembly includes 20 parties, but eleven of them have only one or two representatives. The process of establishing a party is legally secure but politically volatile, and this affects not only micro and regional parties, but also affects government formation:

Each of the three presidents since 1994 has formed his government with a different party or coalition. After the end of each two-term period, the parties and coalitions disappeared into political irrelevance. The currently governing Jubilee party, which was formed in 2016 as the result of a merger of several of the president's supporting parties, may well fall apart into their former camps when President Kenyatta leaves office in 2022. This could be a comeback opportunity for an old governing party.

If the parties fail to integrate young people into democratic processes, the patriarchal system threatens to establish itself for this generation.

The Kenya African National Union (KANU), the party of Kenya's independence movement that

governed by itself for decades, lost in 2002 with Uhuru Kenyatta – whom Daniel arap Moi had selected as his successor – to the opposition coalition led by former Finance Minister Mwai Kibaki. This resulted in reduced KANU electoral success – since 2017, the party has had ten of the 350 seats in the National Assembly, and three of 68 in the Senate.¹⁵ The fact that KANU might, after all these years of irrelevance, once again play a role at the national level is partly due to the fact that the party has worked on correcting its deficits in the past few years. Women and young people have been integrated more explicitly into its political work.¹⁶

Young People and Women Will Do More than Tip the Scales

Kenyan demographics eminently favour the integration of young people. More than half of Kenya's population is under 35 years of age. Of those, 24.2 million live in rural Kenya and 10.8 million in urban areas. If the parties fail to integrate young people throughout the country into democratic processes, the patriarchal system threatens to establish itself for this generation as well. This is because urban, politically active youth are increasingly expressing frustration with the elites' nepotism.¹⁷

Another problem is the participation of women. While young men can make careers within the system, things are much more difficult for committed young women. The Kenyan constitution therefore provides for a gender quota in the Parliaments.

In Kenyan electoral law – whose original model was formed according to the British first-past-the-post system – so-called nominated seats in both houses have been allocated to representatives of women, young people, and people with disabilities, since 2013. Parties can provide recommendations for these seats according to their share of votes. Nevertheless, neither of Kenya's houses fulfil the one-third quota. Since well-networked dignitaries are especially likely to be elected, particularly as representatives of local ethnic groups, young female candidates



Politically active and involved? To date, it is still much more difficult for committed young women to build a career within in the political system. [Source: © Thomas Mukoya, Reuters.](#)

suffer from a disproportionate lack of organised support. This is where broad-based parties can contribute to delivering more diversity to Parliaments.

In its 2010 constitutional reform, Kenya decentralised its political structures. But parties paid little heed to these tendencies toward decentralisation. For instance, there are still regional parties in Nairobi whose purpose is to represent the interests of specific ethnic groups. Decentralised party structures can serve as a vehicle

for political decision-making. When a party succeeds in drafting a manifesto, such decentralised structures are especially useful for anchoring it in society. To achieve this, however, parties must let go of their “strong men”, who would no longer need to serve as advocates for their communities, but instead would have to justify their actions based on the party’s programme. So far, however, parties have focussed on mobilising their constituencies and representing their interests, rather than engaging in political work within or outside Parliaments.



Money Determines Campaigns

If parties with manifesto-based agendas are to be noticed at all, there will first need to be a joint political effort to counter voter bribery, which is widespread in Kenya.¹⁸ This practice relegates political content to the background, and strengthens candidates who can best provide their constituents with gifts, often in the form of money. No single party will be able to dismantle this system by itself. The support of a party with a political agenda will help politicians be viewed as politicians instead of as patrons.

While the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission sets spending limits a year ahead of elections, the limits in 2017 were 4.3 million for senators and governors, and 330,000 US dollars for National Assembly candidates.¹⁹ For the purposes of comparison, the budgets for large parties in Germany were between 30,000 and 40,000 euros per voting district in 2017.²⁰

In established parties, the awareness is growing that young politicians expect a stronger political orientation.

The major role financial resources play in campaigns frustrates politically active young candidates in particular. Kenya's Ukweli party was founded as an initiative of young activists and stood for election for the first time in 2017, but had no chance against established parties despite the popularity of its agenda. But while parties with a clear political agenda, such as the Ukweli party, are attempting to adapt their structures to the political establishment, awareness is growing in other parties, such as KANU, that young politicians also expect a stronger political orientation.

The 2022 elections may determine whether these developments will make Kenya a blueprint for other African countries. The legal conditions

for free elections have long been established in Kenya. The other deficits described above can, however, also be clearly identified in the country. The fact that a new political generation may change even the meaning of parties could be an indicator. It must now be determined whether parties are serious about their programmes, and can thereby mobilise voters, or whether the lead up to the elections will be dominated by alliances of ruling elites and parties that will once again degenerate into "voter associations". The latter would certainly not help the country in its development.

Recommendations for and Approaches to Further Research

Understanding the politics and society of African countries must be the objective and the basis of intensified cooperation with sub-Saharan African countries. Party research – at the interface between constituencies, supporters, members, society, party apparatuses, elections, the state, government, and opposition – can make a major contribution to this effort.²¹

The field is fascinating and goes back to 1990 and earlier. In a 1978 Dolf Sternberger, Bernhard Vogel, Dieter Nohlen, and Klaus Landfried series paper that is still worth reading today, a number of authors²² presented the beginnings and previous developments of African parties, which had their roots in the twilight of the colonial age, when the powers that were trying to organise the transition to independence.

SLPP, UNIR, PNDI Tarayya, PAICV, PDCI, AFDC-A, UDP, MPS, DP, JP, PP, PF, RPF, MDC, CCM, APC, FCBE, Mouvement Cœurs Unis – the thicket of party systems, some of them greatly fragmented, may be easier to navigate when one realises that, in most countries, several parties have established themselves at the front of the pack. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which is freely accessible online, provides basic information on the election results for the National Parliament of each country for the past few decades. A database could be created for African parties much like the one the

Berlin Social Science Centre (WZB) created in the Manifesto Project for European and North and South American parties. It could be maintained with the internet's modern capabilities and continuously expanded.

In addition to basic questions, such as the constitutional anchoring of parties, party financing, electoral legislation, party structure, party programmes, and the history of the most important parties, such a political science project should address issues that vary by country. These include the discussion of electoral thresholds as a means of preventing fragmentation, campaign strategies, agenda setting, party alliance formation in national and regional elections, the importance of ethnic and regional lines in African parties,²³ and the nature and function of the pre-political sphere in Africa – none of which have so far been extensively researched.

No Reservations about Democracy

Finally, in view of the global system competition with China, external actors wishful of promoting democracy must become more active in their efforts; expand dialogue with African players; and more strongly and broadly support the further democratisation of these countries. Calls for more autocracy are becoming louder, both among African governing parties and citizens, who are understandably dissatisfied with their governments' performance. External supporters of democracy must not shy away from this debate. African governments regularly spin the question, saying that democracy was introduced against the will of African countries. This allows them to avoid discussion of their own faults. They also point to China and Singapore as examples of the supposed development advantages of autocracy.

Demagogues and self-styled prophets should therefore be regularly reminded that it was the African countries themselves that chose, after the Cold War, in the vast majority of cases, to introduce multi-party democracy, and so they are themselves responsible for its subsequent neglect – not any external power. Moreover, a

great majority of African countries already have a long history of autocracy – with no successes in economic development to show for it. While enthusiasm for democracy was great after the independence wave of the 1960s, all but five African countries had one-party systems by the 1980s. The continent's younger generation, which is interested in politics, is especially in need of this reminder. More than 60 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is under 25 years of age.

–translated from German–

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