Dedicated Democrats against the Global Trend?

Attitudes towards Democracy in Africa

Simon Primus / Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi

Africa contains more transitional democracies than any other world region. Could the crisis of the liberal world order draw the continent towards authoritarianism? This article suggests that Africa's democratisation may continue despite the current global trend towards illiberalism. Survey responses from 36 societies on the continent reveal a widespread commitment to the practices and principles of liberal democracy.

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Africa's Democratisation and Citizen Attitudes

The global crisis of the liberal world order could become especially dangerous for Africa's historically unstable post-colonial states. Since the 1990s, most of the continent's 54 states experienced a democratic transition with the introduction of new constitutions and regular multi-party elections. The institutional change was rapid and the sustainability of Africa's democratisation is yet to be proven. Could the globally fading appeal of liberal democracy draw Africa towards a new era of authoritarianism and instability?

Indeed, recent developments on the continent hint at a democratic regression. Several democratically elected governments, including those of Zambia, Uganda, and Tanzania have started to curtail civil liberties and to systematically crack down on media houses, activists, and oppositional groups. Meanwhile, fast-growing autocratic states such as Rwanda have become more confident, openly justifying political repression by presenting a positive record in poverty alleviation and development. The negative trend observed, alongside the economic success of some authoritarian systems, has revived debates among policy makers and experts about whether liberal democracy is a viable and desirable mode of governance for African societies.[1]

A crucial factor to consider, when attempting to determine whether Africa will see a new rise of authoritarianism, is the attitudes of ordinary citizens. Citizens who support democracy and embrace democratic ideas will not only consider democratic procedures legitimate, but will also stand up against authoritarian regime change. Citizens with undemocratic attitudes may by contrast be indifferent, and even endorse the abolition of democratic liberties in situations of political or economic crises.[2]

Most experts are highly sceptical about whether Africa's citizens are dedicated democrats. Common theoretical arguments, narratives, and anecdotes suggest that African value systems rather favour strong authoritarian rule and, in some ways, contradict the principles and practices of liberal democracy. The global discussion on a crisis of liberal democracy may further fuel such tendencies and depress commitment to democracy, allowing political elites to curtail civil liberties and democratic competition without facing much resistance from citizens.

However, the traditionally negative image of democratic attitudes in Africa is not backed by new results from public opinion polls. This article summarises insights from recent Afrobarometer surveys in 36 African countries. Against theoretical expectations, we find widespread and firm commitment to the procedures and principles of liberal democracy. The figures nourish the hope that African citizens will continue to support the continent's democratisation process in spite of negative global trends.

Concerns about Anti-Democratic Attitudes in Africa

Concerns about popular attitudes in Africa are common among analysts and experts. Ethnic divisions, relatively low levels of human development, and strong communitarian values are thought to constrain the ability and willingness of people to practice democracy and to hold the powerful to account. Before turning to the actual attitudes of African citizens, we shall give a brief overview of the most common arguments.

The most widespread concern regards the role of ethnic identities.[3] The legacy of colonialism has left African states with arbitrary boundaries in which various language and identity groups are merged into single nations. The exploitative nature of the colonial state hindered the formation of national identities; colonial administrations often created or exacerbated interethnic tensions by relying on ethnic labels as a tool of political control, and favouring certain groups over others.[4] The consequences are most compellingly explained by Peter Ekeh's seminal essay on two publics,[5] which recounts that after independence, African citizens' moral values only applied to pre-colonial identity groups. In this manner, it was felt to be legitimate to rob the nation state and its offices to the advantage of one's own group. Such a primacy of ethnic over national identity constitutes a significant obstacle

Spoilt for choice: The majority of the young African population grew up in a state of law holding regular multi-party elections. Source: © Luc Gnago, Reuters.

for democratic consolidation. People who identify in ethnic instead of national terms and expect resource distribution to be driven by ethnic favouritism will find it hard to accept any but their own group in power, which implies a high risk of electoral violence and political instability.

Another common reservation regarding citizen attitudes is the low level of development of most African states. Advocates of modernisation theory argue that democratic attitudes are to a large extent a consequence of systematic socio-cultural changes brought about by human development.[6] Accordingly, better education and economic security induce people to think for themselves and to give priority to free choice, whereas low-income societies (which include most African countries) generally emphasise obedience and subordinate individual freedom to social conformity. Consequently, citizens in non-industrialised societies are expected to comply uncritically with authoritarian rule and sometimes even prefer authoritarian government and the abolition of their own civil liberties.

The modernisation view aligns well with narratives of strong communitarian values which suggest that Africans put the well-being of the community before that of the individual and that they hold extraordinarily strong social bonds with kinship groups defined by family and origin.[7] Such an emphasis on the community urges individuals to accept hierarchies and to align themselves with established structures of authority, which is why communitarian attitudes have been linked to an uncritical citizenry and a culture of silence towards dictatorship.[8] Communitarian values may, moreover, fuel personalised politics in which personal networks replace bureaucratic rules in determining who gets what.[9] Such informal distribution is not only at odds with liberal democracy's emphasis on individual rights, it also makes people dependent on the goodwill of officials, thereby further discouraging them to challenge political authority. These elements, if taken overall, suggest that populations on the continent would provide only weak support for government scrutiny or mechanisms of accountability.

Issues of ethnic identity and prejudice towards outgroups seem to clash with a positive attitude towards democracy.
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A final frequently discussed issue regarding Africa's political culture is a lack of tolerance towards outgroups, such as foreigners, people of different religions, and homosexuals. The image of low tolerance is partly a consequence of state-orchestrated campaigns and popular hostility against LGBT communities in Africa, which earned the continent the reputation of being one of the world's most homophobic regions.[10] Popular homophobia is often interpreted as an indicator of a larger syndrome of low tolerance towards outgroups, including foreigners and people of different religions and ethnicities.[11] A lack of tolerance would constitute another liability to democratisation. Tolerance is inextricably linked to citizen equality and the protection of minorities.[12] State-orchestrated discrimination against outgroups is, moreover, a well-established tool of authoritarian regimes to deflect pressures for more political freedom.[13]

Taken together, the points above draw a relatively grim picture regarding the willingness and ability of African citizens to practice and promote democracy. Strong ethnic identities might be a constant liability to peaceful elections. In addition, Africans may generally prefer authoritarian rule and subordinating themselves uncritically to political authority, as modernisation theory and narratives of communitarian values suggest. Finally, low tolerance towards outgroups could further weaken the basis for democratic cooperation, and provides a threat to minorities.

However, fortunately, there are reasons to question this worrisome assessment. Narratives such as ethnic divisions and communitarian values cite historical conditions, but African statehood has transformed in recent years. The majority of Africa's young population has been born

and raised in constitutional states with regular multi-party elections. Some scholars promote a learning hypothesis according to which the practice of democracy – even if it is flawed – gradually leads to pro-democratic attitudes.[14] If this is true, it is reasonable to expect a democratisation of Africa's political culture after 30 years of democratisation. An accurate assessment thus needs to adopt an empirical perspective.

The Views of African Citizens

For a long time, little has been known about the actual views of African citizens. Theoretical arguments hardly got tested empirically because there was simply no data to draw upon. This has changed in recent years, most of all due to the introduction of the Afrobarometer (AB). The AB is a pan-African, non-partisan research network conducting surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and other related issues. Since 1999, the AB has conducted 145 surveys in 36 countries and has changed how researchers conceive of African politics.

Democratic attitudes are a good example of how the emergence of African survey data challenges conventional wisdom. In fact, most concerns about undemocratic attitudes are not backed by the responses of ordinary people. This is illustrated below by recent results from the sixth Round of the AB, which interviewed 53,935 citizens from 36 countries between 2014 and 2015. The samples are nationally representative[15] and altogether summarise the views of more than three-fourths of the continent's population.[16]

The article presents summary statistics based on the weighted samples of all 36 countries. Such a general overview of 36 African societies is contentious. The continent's 54 states may have much in common regarding their historical trajectory of state formation but there is considerable diversity in many other respects, e. g. wealth, religion, ethnic composition. In the case of political attitudes, it is nonetheless reasonable to infer some aggregate statements because most of the results are relatively unambiguous and

coherent across countries. To keep the paper straightforward, we do not show country-level results but discuss deviant cases in the text.

Ethnic vs. National Identities

To start with, do public opinion data back the claim that Africans identify primarily as members of ethnic groups, and hardly at all with their respective nation states? The AB asks respondents to choose whether they identify more with their nation, or with their ethnic group. The results given by Figure 1 reveal remarkably strong ties with the national community. A clear majority (81 per cent) of respondents say they identify at least equally with the nation state, including 38 per cent who identify as nationals only. Just ten per cent rank ethnicity before nationality: four per cent of which identify only in ethnic terms and six per cent of which identify more with their ethnic group than with their nation. The figures indicate that African citizens have embraced the idea of a national community. Ethnic identities continue to play a role, at minimum for those 53 per cent who do not feel national only, yet the national identity is overwhelmingly acknowledged. Hence, there is little reason to doubt that Africans can overcome primordial group rivalries and cooperate in a democratic nation state. This holds true for all 32 countries where the question has been asked. The highest share of respondents who rank ethnicity before nationality was found in Uganda, and is still as small as 18 per cent.

Commitment to Democratic Institutions

Another assumption is that Africans may actually prefer strong, authoritarian leadership over democratic institutions. To verify this claim, Figure 2 presents AB's central indicators on demand for democracy.[17] The figures show strong support for democratic institutions: Two-thirds of the sample (67 per cent) say "democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government". Respondents, moreover, show little tolerance for alternative forms of government. 73 per cent reject military rule; 78 per cent, one party rule; and 78 per cent, presidential dictatorship without elections and parliament.
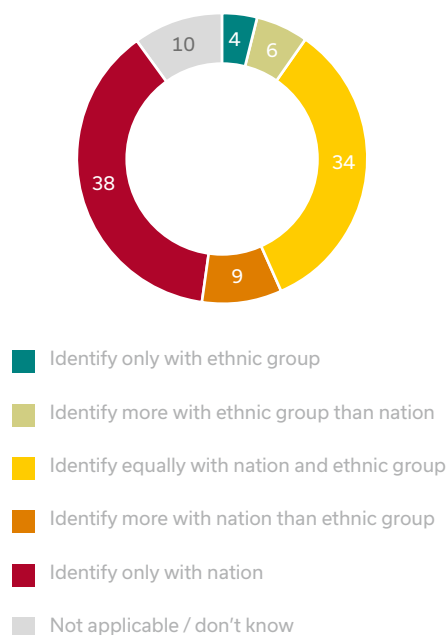
Dedicated democrats should simultaneously prefer democracy and disapprove of all three alternatives. If only those citizens are considered who express pro-democratic attitudes on all four items, the figure falls to 43 per cent. This seems relatively low, but there are significant cross-country differences. Especially the Arab countries in our sample (Egypt, Sudan, Algeria) but also some Sub-Saharan societies (Mozambique, eSwatini, and Madagascar) fall sharply below the average with less than 25 per cent dedicated democrats. This being said, many countries markedly surpass the continental average with clear majorities who prefer democracy and reject all forms of non-democratic governance.[18] In most countries, the number of people with a firm commitment to democracy is thus sufficiently high to expect that a considerable share of the citizenry will demand democracy and oppose any attempt at authoritarian regime change. Moreover, further research has illustrated that this popular demand for democracy does in fact indicate a desire for democratic procedures, and is not merely a reflection of economic expectations associated with the word "democracy".[19]

Demand for Accountability

Africans might prefer democratic institutions, but will they also call for accountability? Even within a democratic institutional framework, there is a worrisome trend of African rulers evading accountability through the restriction of civil liberties. The modernisation view suggests that African citizens may accept such processes apathetically because social values discourage challenging political authority. So, what are the views of Africans towards mechanisms of political accountability?

To gauge popular demand for accountability, the AB includes a number of questions asking respondents to choose one out of two statements. Both sound favourable, yet one puts the emphasis on accountability, whereas the other points to the efficiency of unaccountable governance. For instance, respondents choose between (1) "Too much reporting on negative events,

Fig. 1: Ethnic vs. National Identity in 32 African Countries 2014/2015 (in Per Cent)

- ■ Identify only with ethnic group
- ■ Identify more with ethnic group than nation
- ■ Identify equally with nation and ethnic group
- ■ Identify more with nation than ethnic group
- ■ Identify only with nation
- ■ Not applicable / don't know

Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer Round 6, in: http://afrobarometer.org [10 Dec 2018].

like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country" and (2) "The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption". Figure 3 presents the proportion of respondents who opt for the pro-accountability statement on four such items. In the first three cases, clear majorities favour strong accountability: 69 per cent declare the media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption, 67 per cent state that the President must always obey the laws and the courts, and 53 per cent say citizens should hold the government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions come about more slowly. However, only 28 per cent say the opposition should monitor and criticise the government, whereas a majority wants it to cooperate. The control function of the opposition is thus not well-acknowledged. Nonetheless, the overall image indicates a great deal of support for democratic accountability and does

Fig. 2: Demand for Democracy in 36 African Countries 2014 / 2015 (in Per Cent)
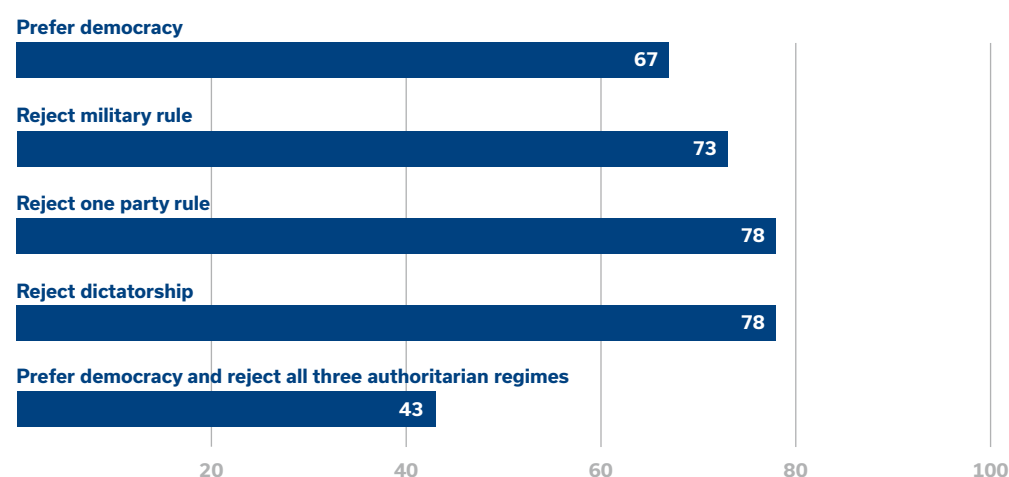
Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer 2016, in: https://bit.ly/2hmYhG7 [10 Dec 2018].

not back the view of a culture of political apathy. The results are relatively coherent across countries with few outliers who show a notably lower demand for accountability. Among them are the Arab countries Egypt, Sudan, and Algeria, but also some Sub-Saharan societies, such as Mozambique and Guinea.
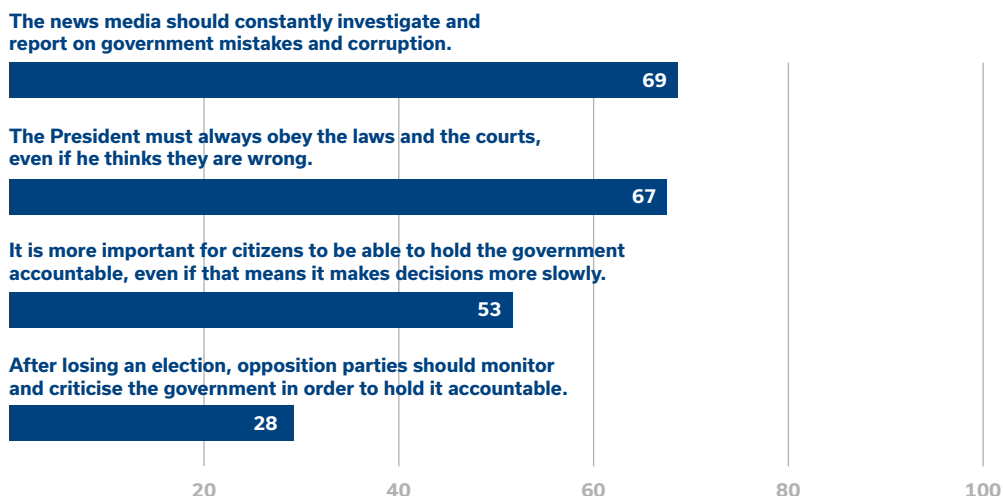
The lack of tolerance towards sexual minorities in Africa is still worrying.

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Social Tolerance

A final common concern about African value systems is a lack of tolerance towards outgroups, which would be in opposition to democratic citizen equality, and might be utilised by dictators so as to distract from autocratic and arbitrary governance. To investigate tolerance, the Afrobarometer asks respondents whether they would like, dislike, or be indifferent to have people belonging to certain potential outgroups as their neighbours. The reactions are displayed in Figure 4. Interestingly, we find fairly high levels of tolerance towards four out of five groups. Overwhelming majorities of more than 80 per cent would not mind living next door to people from a different ethnic group, people of a different religion, and immigrants. When it comes to people living with HIV/Aids, the number is slightly smaller – yet, on a positive note, those countries which have been worst affected by HIV crises show extremely high tolerance levels with vast majorities who would accept neighbours living with HIV. Examples include Botswana (96 per cent), Namibia (94 per cent), and Zimbabwe (94 per cent).[20] A deviating and worrisome result is, however, found regarding tolerance towards homosexuals. Across 33 countries (in Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan the question was deemed too sensitive by national survey partners), only 21 per cent would accept homosexual people as neighbours. The only positive outliers are some South African States and the islands of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, where about 50 per cent would not mind homosexual neighbours. In many societies, the number falls below ten per cent. Among them is Uganda, for which it is very well documented how President Museveni sought to evade accountability pressures through a state-orchestrated campaign against sexual minorities.[21]

Fig. 3: Demand for Accountability in 36 African Countries 2014 / 2015 (in Per Cent)

The news media should constantly investigate and
report on government mistakes and corruption.

69

The President must always obey the laws and the courts,
even if he thinks they are wrong.

67

It is more important for citizens to be able to hold the government
accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

53

After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor
and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable.

28

20   40   60   80   100

Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer Round 6, in: http://afrobarometer.org [10 Dec 2018].

Concern about homophobia is thus certainly justified, especially if it is misused as a tool to deflect pressures for a more open political space by authoritarian leaders. This last point notwithstanding, the prior claim of generalised low social tolerance levels in Africa is clearly unfounded. Most outgroups are, on the contrary, well accepted.

To summarise, we find little support for common narratives of undemocratic political attitudes in Africa in our survey data. Ethnic identities may continue to play a role in African politics, but they are by no means the primary category of identification nowadays. Similarly, the modernisation view that low-income societies generally fail to develop democratic mass attitudes is not backed by the data. Although people in more developed settings (educated, urban) exhibit somewhat more democratic attitudes,[22] macro-level low-development does not seem to prevent the emergence of critical, autonomous, and tolerant citizens. The cross-country distribution of democratic attitudes rather lends support to a learning process, evident in the fact that societies with a more democratic recent history also tend to show stronger democratic attitudes.[23]

All in all, the views of ordinary citizens reveal a remarkably democratic African political culture. Identification with the nation state is widespread, national majorities prefer democracy, endorse strong accountability, and show high tolerance towards outgroups. Theories of political culture generally regard it as sufficient when a critical proportion of the citizenry are dedicated democrats.[24] The share of pro-democratic citizens in most African states is certainly above the threshold to ensure that societies accept democratic procedures and exert effective accountability.

The findings from the Afrobarometer give hope that new African democracies will resist the crisis of the liberal world order and continue on their way towards democratisation. Although political elites may feel encouraged by the global trend to curtail liberal democracy, the strong democratic commitment of citizens constitutes a hurdle for authoritarian-minded elites, which are likely to face protests and popular disapproval if they try to roll back democratic freedoms.

Africa's Political Culture: Pro-Democratic Attitudes and Civic Action

The crisis of the liberal world order is particularly dangerous for Africa's nascent democracies. An emerging democracy needs dedicated democrats in order to survive. Citizens need to accept the rules of the game, hold the government to account, and – if necessary – defend civil liberties.

Common narratives suggest that the value systems of African societies fail to promote such virtues, and, consequently, that the crisis of the liberal world order might further depress popular commitment to democracy on the continent.

Yet, the public opinion data presented in this paper draw a different picture. Responses by ordinary Africans to Afrobarometer surveys from 36 countries reveal widespread commitment to democratic core principles. This includes identification with the nation state and a preference for democracy over other systems of governance. Most encouragingly, the surveys indicate that people endorse mechanisms of accountability: Majorities support government scrutiny by journalists, courts, and citizens, even if it means less

efficient governance. Finally, tolerance towards most outgroups is high.

Only a few details tarnish the overall pro-democratic pattern. The control function of opposition parties is not well-acknowledged; most citizens rather want the opposition to cooperate than to challenge the government. A second concern is widespread hostility towards homosexuals, which may be further emotionalised by authoritarian leaders. It should also not remain unmentioned that, although the results are generally fairly coherent across the 36 states, some countries systematically deviate. Countries repeatedly found amongst those with least democratic attitudes are, in particular, Arab countries (Egypt, Sudan, and Algeria), and some Sub-Saharan states (Madagascar, Mozambique, eSwatini).

However, most societies show a pro-democratic political culture. Moreover, recent events illustrate that these attitudes also lead to political action. In Uganda, journalists, bloggers, and citizens withstand increasing repression by long-term leader Museveni and continue to voice their opinions.[25] In Tanzania, civil society organisations stand up against the detainment

Fig. 4: Tolerance in 33 African Countries 2014 / 2015
Number of Respondents Accepting Neighbours Unconditionally (in Per Cent)
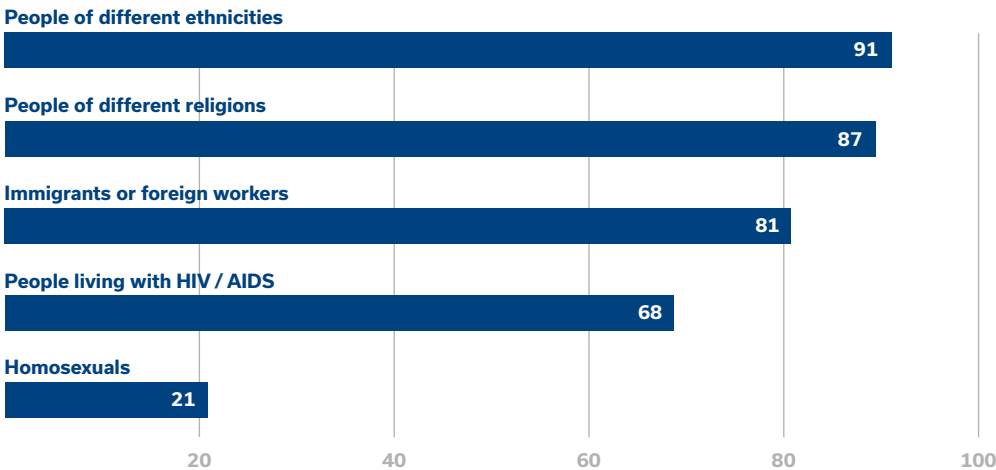
Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer 2016, in: https://bit.ly/2d5fRZW [10 Dec 2018].

Election ink: A substantial part of African populations calls for democratic forms of government and rejects an authoritarian shift in politics. Source: © Finbarr O'Reilly, Reuters.

of, and threats made towards, opposition groups, journalists, and social media activists under President Magufuli.[26] In Burkina Faso, where a popular uprising in 2014 toppled the 27-year dictatorship of Blaise Compaoré, citizens have cultivated a culture of protest and regularly take to the streets to demonstrate for various issues.[27] Meanwhile, in Africa's more established democracies, peaceful turnovers via the ballot are becoming more common. Gambians unexpectedly voted out long-term ruler Yahya Jammeh in 2016, despite a tightly restricted public sphere. Weeks later, Ghanaian voters dismissed President John Mahama due to an exceptionally poor developmental record. Most recently, in April 2018, Sierra Leoneans, for the first time in their history, recalled the ruling party. The tightly contested election remained peaceful despite relatively

strong ethnic linkages of the two major parties and a history of ethnic conflict.

Overall, the results nourish hope that Africa's democratisation will continue even if liberal democracy's universal appeal diminishes. Africa's political culture seems quite favourable for future democratic gains and it can be expected that opposition leaders, social activists, and ordinary citizens continue to press for democratic reform. The prevalence of a democratic political culture does not, however, guarantee democratic consolidation. In some countries, for instance Cameroon, Rwanda, and Togo, political elites are still highly reluctant to relinquish authoritarian control.[28] Generally, the short supply of democratic politics fails to satisfy the expectations of citizens in many African

states.[29] Hence, most societies still have a long way to go before they become full democracies. A crucial factor on this road could be the solidarity of international donors and policy makers, who should be reminded by the figures presented here that the acceptance of authoritarian rule is against the preferences of most African citizens.

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16 The demographic statistics of the 36-country sample reflect Africa's transformation processes, as well as the continent's developmental challenges. More than 50 % of respondents are younger than 35. Males and females are equally represented. 40 % live in urban settings. About 20 % have no formal education, whereas another 20 % received post-secondary education (university, vocational training). 30 % report frequent food shortages, whereas 70 % say they never or rarely went without enough food. 38 % say they have a regular cash income. 20 % use the internet regularly, about 70 % listen to radio news on a daily basis.

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23 Bratton, Michael / Mattes, Robert 2001, n.19

24 Almond and Verba (1962), for instance, acknowledged that a democracy can flourish with a mix of passive and active citizens. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) focus on societal mean values which imply that considerable minorities may deviate in an overall pro-democratic political culture. See: Almond / Verba 1963, n.2; Inglehart / Welzel 2005, n.2.

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