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Political Parties and Party Systems in Africa: Themes and Research Perspectives

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Political Parties and Party Systems in Africa: Themes and Research Perspectives

Giovanni M. Carbone

Abstract

The last decade of the twentieth century was characterised by a resurgence of multipartism in Africa. The return of political parties produced a discontinuity not only in the continent's political life, but also in the study of African politics. A number of new researches were carried out that were largely based on existing theories and concepts in political science. These new works thus contributed to an increased integration of the study of politics south of the Sahara with mainstream political science. The present article provides an overview of the insights and advances that these studies have produced, focusing on the key issues raised by the return of party pluralism in Africa and on the utility of existing models, theories and approaches for its understanding. There is little doubt that recent research efforts have advanced our knowledge of the changing politics of the continent. However, neither the elaboration of theoretical frameworks nor the detail of empirical knowledge has achieved adequate levels of development as yet.

KEYWORDS: Africa, politics, government

Party pluralism had first emerged in sub-Saharan Africa during the final stages of the colonial period, on the eve of independence, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The transplant of this Western arrangement, however, was quickly rejected by virtually all African societies, much like what happened to other political dispensations originating from Europe, such as the modern state, liberal constitutionalism or representative government.

It was only in the early 1990s that a new attempt at establishing multiparty systems began to take place in a continent historically inclined to refuse or distort democratic rules and practices. As more and more countries became involved in the process, the resurgence of multipartism in Africa sparked a number of new analyses of parties and party systems. Such analyses were largely based on established political science theories and concepts, and thus promoted a better integration of the study of politics South of the Sahara with that of politics in other regions of the world. This article inquires into the insights and advances produced by these recent studies, focussing on the key issues raised by the return of party pluralism in Africa and on the utility of existing models, theories and approaches for its understanding.

1. The Origins of Political Parties in Africa

The history of African political parties may appear to be a relatively “long” (Mozaffar 2005a: 395) one if we look at the origins of the first party on the continent (the True Whig Party, set up in Liberia in 1860). By 1945, however, in a region that was still largely under colonial rule, less than a dozen parties had been “established by small groups of African elites as the organized expression of their political demands for reforming the colonial system, gaining access to colonial governments and influencing colonial policy” (Mozaffar 2005a: 395). It was only with the independence of African states, and during the period that immediately preceded it, that parties began to proliferate in the Sub-Saharan context. Between 1945 and 1968, as many as 143 new political parties emerged on the continent, the essential vehicles for the mobilization of national electorates that were eventually being given the suffrage and for the formation of the first independent governments (Mozaffar 2005a: 395).

Multipartism soon proved to be poorly rooted on the continent. It was not long before party pluralism was abandoned. In different ways, most African countries opted for replacing it with one-party states or military regimes. In the space of a few years, authoritarian forms of government came to prevail virtually on the entire continent. Multiparty politics was only retained in Botswana, Gambia and Mauritius, while it was introduced in Senegal and Zimbabwe during

the 1970s and 1980s, but this was most often under the auspices of hardly-challenged dominant parties (See Table 1 below).

It was only with the emergence of an African version of the global “third wave” of democratisation processes, between the late 1980s and the early 1990s that the situation began to change. During the early 1990s, virtually all sub-Saharan countries shifted from army-dominated or single-party-dominated regimes to formally democratic systems. Unsurprisingly, structural limitations (such as widespread and extreme poverty, low literacy levels, or state weakness), established political practices (notably, authoritarian rule and corruption) and the freshness of political reforms in these countries raised legitimate doubts about the depth of ‘democratic’ change. The latter, in many cases, was in fact limited to make up exercises. Overall, however, reforms undoubtedly brought about a significant return of multipartism in sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Studying African Parties

The modern analysis of politics in African countries began as part of the studies on “political development” that flourished during the 1950s and, especially, the 1960s. Despite the fact that such studies often downplayed the role of political institutions, political parties were rapidly acknowledged an important role, both as manifestations and instruments of political development. Thus, several collective and individual works were produced on the subject. In an inquiry into processes of political change in developing countries, for instance, Huntington emphasised the role political parties could play in integrating the diverse and newly-mobilised sectors of society: “in a modernising society ‘building the state’ means in part the creation of an effective bureaucracy, but, more importantly, the establishment of an effective party system capable of structuring the participation of new groups in politics” (Huntington 1968:401). La Palombara and Weiner (1966) devised a typology of party systems starting from the distinction between “non-competitive party systems” and “competitive party systems”. The latter were in turn classified depending on whether alternation in power took place or, on the contrary, evidence of party hegemony emerged (La Palombara and Weiner 1966). The trend towards the establishment of one-party and one-party dominated African states was also observed by Coleman and Rosberg, who distinguished systems controlled by parties displaying a “revolutionary-centralizing” tendency from those with a more “pragmatic-pluralist” attitude (Coleman and Rosberg 1966:6). To further deepen the understanding of one-party politics, scholars such as Zolberg (1966) decided to focus on specific sub-regions of the continent.

What the studies of parties conducted between the 1960s and the early 1980s shared was a common concern not so much with the democratic progress of

the countries involved, but rather with their “political development”. The concept of “political development” is quite controversial and no longer as fashionable as it once was. What is relevant here, however, is that it never entirely overlapped with the notion of democratisation. Certainly, elements such as “equality” or “participation” were occasionally included among the defining features of political development. Most often, however, it was a different kind of changes that were seen as the essence of political development, including the “differentiation” of political structures, the construction of state “capacities” that would make authority more effective, and the “institutionalisation” of organizations and procedures¹. Democracy was not the top priority. As a matter of fact, the single-party and military states that were taking root in Africa were seen by some as legitimate options, since they appeared to be the safest way to promote rapid economic development and national integration. Given the weakness of existing knowledge on developing countries, in addition, scholars were primarily concerned with gathering new information about sub-Saharan political systems, rather than spending too much energy on the theoretical foundations of their own researches (See Geddes 2002). Altogether, early studies of African politics and parties were not driven by theories of democracy.

The new, recent wave of studies of African parties clearly marks a break. The reforms of the 1990s postulate the centrality of democracy as a value and a goal in itself, something whose achievement cannot be negotiated – at least not in principle – nor ‘traded’ for economic progress or national unity. In this sense, multiparty reforms denote a significant (if far from clear-cut) discontinuity not only in the political life of the continent, but also in the study of this reality. They contributed to a growing integration of the study of politics in Africa within mainstream political science. This increased integration was first prompted by studies of the continent’s democratic transitions, and then fostered by a series of further steps, such as the analyses of electoral systems and results, the inquiries into the democratic consolidation of reformed countries, the study of the public opinions of African voters, the examination of the policy outcomes of the new regimes, etc.². The increasingly frequent use of political science tools (e.g. the notions of “effective number of parties” or “electoral volatility”) and theories (e.g. relating to party dominance, to the effects of electoral laws, to the institutionalization of party systems, etc.) testifies to the fact that analyses of Africa’s emerging parties and party systems are part of this broader trend.

¹ See, for instance, Coleman (1971:74), Huntington (1968:12) and Sartori (1968:262-263).

² Comparative works of this kind include, for example, Bratton – van de Walle (1997), Afrobarometer (2004), Nohlen *et al.* (1999), Lindberg (2005), Bratton (2001), Kuenzi – Lambright (2005), Randall – Svåsand (2002), van de Walle (2001), Stavasage (2005).

TABLE 1. *African political regimes in 1989.*

REGIME TYPE			
AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES		PLURALIST REGIMES	
MILITARY REGIMES	ONE-PARTY REGIMES	INCLUSIVE MULTIPARTISM	RACIAL OLIGARCHIES
Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Ghana, Guinea, Lesotho, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda	Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, Djibuti, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, São Tomé, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Zaire, Zambia	Botswana, Senegal, Mauritius, The Gambia, Zimbabwe	South Africa
N = 11	N = 29	N = 5	N = 1

Source: Adapted from Bratton – van de Walle (1997:77)

3. The Applicability of Existing Party Models

The reforms of the 1990s literally brought to life hundreds of new “political parties”. As diverse as their stories are, it was largely through one of four main paths that individual parties entered the new political scene.

To begin with, a number of parties were already in existence. These were largely the former single parties that had dominated the political life of many countries during the Cold War. Many of them succeeded in maintaining power by making sure that reforms were kept to a minimum and thus preventing any real changes (as did the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, the Parti Démocratique Gabonais or the Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais) (See Ercolessi 2006; Zamponi 2006). Alternatively, former ruling parties managed to adapt and survive by moving, at least temporarily, to the opposition, as was the case of the United National Independence Party in Zambia or the Parti Démocratique de la Côte d’Ivoire.

New political forces, by contrast, came to light in three different ways. In countries such as Uganda, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, or Kenya, new parties were set up by politicians who were already relevant figures in public life. These organisations include Kizza Besigye's Forum for Democratic Change, Olusegun Obasanjo's People's Democratic Party, Laurent Gbagbo's Front Populaire Ivoirien or Mwai Kibaki's Democratic Party. Elsewhere, parties were forged by civil society organisations or networks, as for the New Patriotic Party in Ghana, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy in Zambia or the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe. Since the 1980s, finally, in a number of countries guerrilla movements either reached power or, short of it, were integrated in a new constitutional framework. The Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front or the Burundian Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie–Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie, for instance, came to govern their countries as a result of armed insurrections, whereas the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana took on the role of legitimate opposition in Mozambique after fighting a Marxist regime for some 15 years.

Following the proliferation of African parties, scholars have been increasingly inclined to look at them through models originally elaborated for the study of Western political parties, thus running the risk of overstressing the meaning of these models in the process of transferring them to emerging democracies. Gunther and Diamond (2003) tried to avoid this "concept stretching" by extending classic typologies and producing a comprehensive classification of political parties that would properly accommodate parties belonging to non-European areas (Table 2). The proposed typology builds upon three criteria (formal organisation, programmatic commitments, tolerant-pluralist *versus* proto-hegemonic strategy) and includes fifteen 'species' of political parties: elite-based parties (consisting of *traditional local notable parties* as well as *clientelistic parties*), mass-based parties (divided in socialist: *class-mass parties* and *Leninist parties*; nationalist: *pluralist-nationalist parties* and *ultranationalist parties*; religious: *denominational parties* and *fundamentalist parties*), ethnicity-based parties (*ethnic parties* and *Congress parties*), electoral parties (*personalistic parties*, *catch-all parties* and *programmatic parties*), and, finally, movement parties (*left-libertarian parties* and *post-industrial extreme-right parties*).

TABLE 2. *Species of political parties*

<i>Parties</i>	<i>pluralist</i>	<i>proto-hegemonic</i>
Elite-based	traditional local notable clientelistic	
Mass-based		
<i>ideological/socialist</i>	class-mass	Leninist
<i>ideological/nationalist</i>	pluralist-nationalist	ultranationalist
<i>religious</i>	denominational	fundamentalist
Ethnicity-based	ethnic congress	
Electoral	catch-all programmatic personalistic	
Movement	left-libertarian post-industrial extreme- right	

Source Gunther and Diamond (2003:173).

The notion of “party of notables” was used in Europe to emphasise the key role that prominent political figures individually performed, notably up to the early XX century. In a sense, the term rings a bell for students of African politics, as the latter are frequently described through the very notion of *big men*, i.e. influential individuals with large personal followings that are mostly maintained through broad clientelist distributions. But Africa’s *big men* are the exact opposite of European ‘notables’. The latter were individuals who possessed autonomous personal resources – whether material or symbolic – that they could ‘spend’ in the political arena, thus translating their social ‘superiority’ into political influence. African political dynamics often work the other way round. Political-bureaucratic classes have emerged in many countries whose power – including their economic power – hinges on their control and use of public structures and resources (Sklar 1979). While European parties of notables were *elite-based parties*, for African

countries one should rather talk of *party-based elites*, except that this would lend too much credit to party structures that often performed very poorly.

Between the end of WWII and the 1960s, the “mass party” label was adopted for emerging African parties, again extending a term that was still widely used to depict Western political organisations. Many of the continent’s new parties had initially appeared as liberation movements that aimed at mobilising the population in an effort to set themselves free of colonialism. If popular mobilisation was the goal, the instruments were formally complex and diversified party organisations. In Guinea, for instance, Sekou Touré and his Parti Démocratique de Guinée promoted the formation of 7,000 local committees, the demotion of traditional chiefs and the creation of special organisations for women, youth or workers. The objective was to rapidly overcome the tribal and religious differences that hindered the country’s modernisation (Emerson 1966:276). In the two decades following independence, however, nationalist movements-turned-mass parties, rather than consolidating and developing their organs, exhibited a progressive atrophy of party structures (Kasfir 1976:244). The material and human resources required to make mass organisations work were simply not available. The birth of independent governments, in addition, involved the transfer of large numbers of party cadres that were necessary to staff state institutions and administrations. This turned out to be a net loss for party organs, which were deprived of their most skilled personnel. Finally, as competitive multiparty elections were abandoned in favour of one-party or military regimes, efforts to build effective party organisations became less urgent. In this context, only a few parties developed significant organisational apparatuses, such as the Tanganyika African National Union (which later merged with the Afro-Shirazi Party of Zanzibar giving life to the Chama Cha Mapinduzi) or the Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement in Rwanda (Kasfir 1976:25ff; Prunier 1997:76).

During the 1970s, following anti-colonial wars in Mozambique or Angola and coups d’état in Ethiopia or Somalia, a number of regimes came to light which adopted stricter versions of Marx-Leninism. A return to “scientific socialism” was advocated to make up for the unsatisfactory achievements of the “African socialism” solutions practiced by parties like the Parti Démocratique de Guinée or the Tanganyika African National Union. The idea that the single-party ought to become the ‘vanguard’ of revolutionary change implied that it should no longer aim at mass membership, but rather at selecting and including highly motivated militants only. In Mozambique, Frelimo declared itself a revolutionary vanguard party in 1977. This had practical implications, including the adoption of stricter criteria for party enrolment, the primacy of the party over the state and the suppression of the oppositions (Carbone 2005:424).

Besides anti-colonial liberation movements and early post-independence governments, 'nationalism' in Africa largely equates with the politicisation of demands put forward by sub-national or ethnic communities. Populist overtones characterised these demands in the same way as they often do in other world regions. At times, ethnic requests include regional communal autonomy or independence, which Gunther and Diamond (2001; 2003) consider the dividing line between ethnic parties (discussed below) and full-fledged pluralist-nationalist parties. During the long and troubled years of South Africa's transition, for example, the Inkatha Freedom Party threatened to secede in case anything short of a federal constitution granting autonomy to the Zulu people was enacted. "Ultranationalist mass parties" have hardly ever appeared on the African continent. "Religious mass parties", whether in their denominational or fundamentalist versions, were also conspicuously absent from Africa's post-colonial politics, notably when compared with the relevance acquired by similar parties in Western Europe. Yet again, exceptions were not entirely missing. In Uganda, electoral competition during the early 1960s and 1980s was largely shaped by the antagonism between Catholics and Protestants, each group having its own privileged political vehicle (the Democratic Party and the Uganda People's Congress, respectively) (Carbone 2003). The concept of "movement party" also appears to be of little use for African scenarios, except that, with some adaptations, the image may be employed for the transformation of former guerrilla organisations into hegemonic or dominant parties, formally competing for parliamentary seats, in countries like Uganda or Rwanda during the late 1980s and the 1990s.

The appearance of "electoral parties" of various kinds in Western countries was largely ascribed to the vast socio-economic and technological transformations that took place during the second half of the XX century. Works such as Kirchheimer's (1966) or Panebianco's (1982) allege that such changes induced crucial organisational and strategic adaptations on the part of political parties. African societies also went through important changes over the same period, but economic, social and technological innovations were not as profound and diffuse as they were in the West. Accordingly, they did not encourage any radical transformation of party organisations and strategies. Yet, African parties do occasionally exhibit some of the features of electoral party models. In 1990s Madagascar, for example, Albert Zafy was backed by such a broad electoral cartel, called Hery Velona, that observers depicted it as a "catch-all party", while Marc Ravalomanana's Tiako i Madagasikara was rightly labelled an electoral "personalistic party" (Marcus and Ratsimbaharison 2005:497).

In media coverage as much as in academic analyses, African parties have often conveyed the image of patronage and tribal politics. Accordingly, the two types of parties included in Gunther and Diamond's classification that have been

most widely employed are the ethnic (or ethnically-based) party and the clientelistic (or neopatrimonial) party.

The presence of parties that are based on ethnic identities in Africa is not surprising, given that ethnic heterogeneity is a feature that virtually all of the region's societies share, some of them combining it with profound religious divisions. In a number of sub-Saharan states, party politics appears to mirror communal diversity. Examples range from the Parti du Mouvement de l'Émancipation Hutu and its opponent, the Union National Rwandaise, in the early years of Rwanda's "First Republic", to the Luo-backed National Development Party (re-Christened Liberal Democratic Party in 2002, after the failed merger with Kenya's ruling party), or the already mentioned Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa. In theory, if ethnic parties establish themselves and crystallise their communal bases, elections risk becoming mere exercises at gauging the demographic dimensions of groups of ethnic voters, like censuses. As communal segments remain somewhat compartmentalized, this may preclude any real competition and make mutual acceptance and democratic consolidation difficult (Horowitz 1991; Randall and Svåsand 2002c:6ff.).

The perception that African parties are systematically linked to communal groups, however, is misleading. Erdmann (2004:71) claims that full-fledged ethnic parties, far from being the rule in Africa, are actually exceptions. Several African parties, in fact, were formed and backed by people of different cultural backgrounds, somehow cross-cutting ethnic divides. These parties may take the form of a full-fledged trans-ethnic party (what Gunther and Diamond call "congress party"), characterised by the goal of promoting the integration and coalition of voters or parties that refer to different communities. The best known case is that of the African National Congress, where the 'liberation factor' contributed to preserving the unity of the different social components of its electorate (except, in part, for the Zulu that support the IFP). The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front allegedly pursued a similar goal, albeit the predominant role of the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front over its allies is quite evident. In Kenya, the Kenya African National Union – with a transethnic following, though the Kalenjin were privileged under Daniel Arap Moi – and the National Rainbow Coalition, which won office in 2002 by coalescing a 15 parties, many of them ethno-regional parties, offer an interesting contrast (Ndegwa 2003:147).

Some scholars put more emphasis on "clientelistic" networks as the key to understand political parties, rather than on communal cleavages. In modernising countries, clientelistic parties are based on the capacity that a patron has to exploit his intermediate position in a chain of relations that link the centre to individuals of the periphery (the clients) who can no longer afford to ignore the centre but have few resources to access it (Dogan 1990:87,90). In this context, a political

party can be the vehicle that connects different levels of the political system through a series of patron-client networks. This is the way Didier Ratsiraka's Antoky ny Revolisiona Malagasy/Avant-garde de la Révolution Malgache worked between 1975 and 1992, and then again between 1997-2001: a personal instrument for managing clientelist networks built upon family linkages (Marcus and Ratsimbaharison 2005:497,503).

Whether old or new, most of the above parties share a pervasive organisational weakness. While there is widespread consensus on this point, there are actually relatively few empirical studies of individual organisations. The major exception is South Africa. A large amount of work exists on the country's political parties, not only because scholarship on South Africa is much stronger than for the rest of the continent, but, more specifically, because party politics are perceived as a crucial reflection of the country's historically problematic race relations, themselves a topic of huge academic and political interest³. A second, but only partial exception is that of former guerrilla movements that were transformed into political parties over the past ten or fifteen years. Here, pre-existing analyses of armed conflicts and rebel movements provided a useful basis upon which inquiries into subsequent organisational transformations could build (Clapham 1998; Vines 1996; Cahen 1998). Aside from these two exceptions, as pointed out, in-depth analyses of individual parties have been hardly attempted. Party organisations are often so weak that, in a sense, there appears to be little to observe. Party organs are frequently on paper, but not a reality. They are extremely centralised and respond to personalist and informal practices that are difficult to pin down. Internal behaviours are in most cases poorly coordinated, undisciplined and incoherent. Thus, systematic or theoretically-driven explorations of political parties as non-unitary actors – i.e. inquiries into their inner workings and into the relations between different organs – have been barely conducted. Individual parties are also rarely analysed in terms of their ideologies, programmes and policy platforms. At most, election manifestos or similar sources are occasionally examined by scholars whose interest lies in national party systems at large (Rakner and Svåsand 2004:56; Morrison 2004:431). Enough to generate a consensus on the fact that policy proposals normally show limited variations. This is not only for the dearth of resources for articulating public action programmes, but also for the fact that any political force governing a sub-Saharan country is subject to strong pressures on the part of external actors as to the available policy options.

³ Among recent works see, for instance, Lodge (2004), Butler (2005), Thiven (2005).

4. African Party Systems: Themes and Approaches

Examinations of Africa's party systems follow different analytical routes, mostly based on theoretical and conceptual tools derived from Western political science. In particular, three approaches – which may be called sociological, electoral and morphological approaches – are directly derived from studies of party systems in advanced countries. By contrast, rational choice theory, which is widely employed for industrial democracies, remains virtually unexplored for studying Africa's parties (thus, rational choice theory is not considered hereafter)⁴. Standing on its own, finally, is a line of inquiry elaborated for understanding recent Latin American democratisation processes with a focus on party system institutionalisation.

4.1 The Sociological Approach

Studies on the origins of political parties in European democracies assign great relevance to the presence of socio-political cleavages produced by key historical ruptures (Rokkan 1999). Processes such as the secularisation of the state or the industrialisation of economic activities contributed to the creation of deep social divisions and to the consequent emergence of political parties representing national minorities, religious identities, agrarian sectors, working class interests and the likes. The lasting consequences of historical and socio-political cleavages over party systems are emphasised: once a certain form of party antagonism emerges, it becomes quite likely that it will crystallise and it will structure political competition over a long period of time (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

In its original version, cleavage theory was based on the unique historical experience of Western European countries and certainly cannot directly be extended to other geographical or cultural areas. At the same time, the theory may prove helpful in understanding sub-Saharan politics in two ways: either by searching for traces of Rokkan's cleavages in Africa or, alternatively, by looking for similar cleavages that are specific to African countries.

While state formation processes in sub-Saharan Africa bear little resemblance to what took place in Europe, many African countries also show an evident tension between the political centre and peripheral areas, a tension that often takes the form of ethnic rivalries. Embodiments of similar antagonisms are, for example, parties such as the Uganda People's Congress or South Africa's

⁴ Partial exceptions are Mozzafar - Scarritt (2005) and Block, Ferree and Singh (2003).

Inkatha Freedom Party. Likewise, while the issue of secularising the state has not been as prominent and problematic in Africa as it was in Europe, the growing relevance of Islam in countries such as Sudan or Nigeria (where the opposition All Nigerian Peoples Party has its electoral strongholds in the Islamic north) and the way Muslims look at state-religion relations are important clues in understanding inter-party divisions. Finally, the cleavage separating towns and countryside also emerged in several African polities, with some parties rooted in urban areas (such as the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe) while others are based in rural zones (the case of Renamo in Mozambique). The absence of a real industrial revolution in Africa, by contrast, makes the fourth cleavage identified by Rokkan – that between capitalist owners and working class – least useful for African studies. The very relevance of ethnic identity in political Africa is in part linked to the weakness of socio-economic and class stratification on the continent.

A second way of using Rokkan's theory, as pointed out, is by looking at parties in the region as the result and the expression of historical cleavages that are specifically African. At the time of independence, politics in many African states began to be structured in terms of opposition to colonial authorities (an "anti-colonial cleavage"), and the main liberation movements and parties often enjoyed huge electoral support for a long time. But important fractures also developed in the following decades. The antagonism between Frelimo and Renamo, for example, was the legacy of a 15-year long civil war that split Mozambican society in two. In Ghana, a two-party system has emerged since the early 1990s. The New Patriotic Party relates back to one of the country's historical 'political traditions', while the National Democratic Congress refers back to Jerry Rawlings' 1981 'revolution' and the military populist regime he established during the 1980s (Nugent 1995).

4.2 The Electoral Approach

The study of electoral systems and of their effects over party systems is one of the better developed fields in contemporary political science. The analytical basis for works addressing this subject is the distinction between majoritarian and proportional election systems.

The effects of electoral systems in Africa, according to van de Walle (2003), are not different from those revealed by analyses of advanced democracies. The so-called "effective number of parties", for example, moves down from an average 3.0 for countries adopting proportional formulas to 1.8 for states employing plurality rules (van de Walle 2003:303-304). Mozaffar and Scarritt (2005:413; cf. 405) also agree that proportional systems generally

produce party systems that are more fragmented and competitive. They contend, however, that the difference with majority systems is not substantial: regardless of the electoral formula, parties winning large majorities tend to emerge and disproportionality remains relatively high for proportional countries as well (albeit half as high as under majoritarian systems).

A more nuanced analysis is provided by Lindberg (2005). The results of his inquiry into the validity for sub-Saharan Africa of the best known hypotheses regarding the effects of electoral rules, however, raise a few doubts. The “effective number of parties” for plurality countries, for instance, appears to be 1.98, superior to the 1.85 recorded by states adopting proportional formulas with medium-large districts (like Namibia, South Africa and Mozambique), which, contrary to what the author claims, is not in line with the hypothesis (Lindberg 2005:54). More convincing are the investigation of ‘manufactured majorities’ (i.e. majorities of seats emerged out of less-than-majorities of votes), that appear to be more common under majoritarian systems, and of alternation in power, which, contrary to expectations, occurs more frequently under proportional systems than under majoritarian rules (Lindberg 2005:56, 59).

The effects of electoral rules in Africa are linked to the specific behaviour of voters belonging to predominantly agrarian societies with deeply-rooted ethno-regional identities. In similar contexts, multipartism may result in a mere aggregation of parties, each one individually able to win majorities of up to 70%, 80% or 90% in its own regional strongholds, but only to gather a few votes anywhere else. The prevalence of extremely high vote concentrations implies that ‘wasted’ votes and disproportionality – typical features of majoritarian systems – are minimised. According to Barkan (1995:114), this is a good reason why plurality systems should be preferred, as they can promote a clearer linkage between a single-member constituency and its elected representative, avoiding the emergence of a gap between state and citizens. Lindberg (2005:61), however, claims that constituency systems favour the development of personal and communal networks which become an incentive for clientelist practices.

But the distinction between majoritarian and proportional systems, according to an original work, may not be the key issue: “in Africa, *plurality* systems do not produce significant institutionalized opposition and proportional representation does not lead to a multiplication of parties and fragmentation of the opposition” (Bogaards 2000:168,170). Regardless of the electoral system in use, African party systems almost systematically tend towards the stable dominance of one party able to win ‘natural’ majorities (as opposed to “manufactured” majorities), with fragmented minorities often remaining too small and incapable of challenging it. To increase the chances of alternation in government, Bogaards (2000) proposes to craft party systems through instruments that go beyond the plurality-PR distinction. The combined introduction of a majority ceiling and of a

minority premium (e.g. giving 55% of seats to the largest party and 35% to the second largest party, with remaining seats distributed to minor groups), for instance, would help contain dominance on the part of the major party as well as the weakness and divisions among opposition groups, thus promoting the formation of two-party systems (Bogaards 2000:177ff.).

4.3 The Morphological Approach

The subject concerning Africa's party systems that is most often analysed is by far the question of party dominance. The issue is part of a broader perspective that does not look at relations between the party system and some external variable (say, electoral norms or social cleavages), but rather focuses on the forms and dynamics internal to the system itself. Key questions concern, therefore, the number of parties the system consists of, their relative size and weight, the dynamics of alternation in power or the lack of it.

In industrial countries, political parties staying long in power have been relatively infrequent and the political science literature depicts them as a kind of democratic anomaly⁵. In spite of political reforms adopted in the early 1990s, by contrast, many of Africa's regimes are dominated by parties that won large majorities in two, three or even four successive elections (see Table 3 in the Appendix). Africa's oddity, in this sense, lies in the very frequency of this kind of phenomenon: it was often the same party that won "transition" or "founding" elections – whether a former single-party (as in Mozambique and Tanzania) or a new formation emerged from the opposition (like in Zambia or Malawi) – that managed to preserve power in subsequent elections.

Long stays in power have prompted analyses of what is generally called party dominance. The demands driving these inquiries include the following: when does a party become dominant? is there a distinction between dominance and hegemony? what are the roots and causes of dominance? and, finally, what are its consequences⁶?

A problem with the way 'dominance' is used with reference to party politics in Africa is that the notion embraces cases that are significantly different: some may be properly referred to as "dominant parties", but others are in reality full-fledged "hegemonic parties" (that is, "*authoritarian* dominant parties") (Cf. Sartori 1976:230, table 30). While the former notion relates to a situation that is fundamentally (if minimally) competitive, the latter is about non-competitive systems (Sartori 1976). A dominant party, in other words, is a party winning a

⁵ Tellingly, '*Uncommon democracies*' was the title adopted by Pempel (1990) in his study of dominant party systems.

⁶ See, for example, Giliomee (1999), Bogaards (2004), Basedau (2005), Ishiyama (2006).

series of consecutive popular mandates – three, at a minimum, according to Sartori – through genuine elections. Opposition parties simply fail to modify voters' preferences and to unseat it. All of Africa's multiparty systems prior to the reforms of the 1990s (in Botswana, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Gambia) at least partly benefited from party dominance, which granted some kind of stability to the regime. By contrast, under a hegemonic party, elections are organised and "other parties are permitted to exist, but as second class, licensed parties; for they are not permitted to compete with the hegemonic party in antagonistic terms and on an equal basis. Not only does alternation not occur in fact; it *cannot* occur, since the possibility of a rotation in power is not even envisaged" (Sartori 1976:230-231).

Dominant parties and hegemonic parties (or "authoritarian dominant parties") normally emerge following different causal paths. As Basedau (2005:26) puts it: "authoritarian dominant parties play foul and are typically characterized by a coercive historical origin [armed conflicts, military coup or single partism], a strongly presidential system of government and poor socio-economic and political governance. On the other hand non authoritarian dominant parties show less violent and coercive historical origins and tend to benefit from a favourable performance and/or a combination of socio-political cleavages and electoral institutions", i.e. the disproportionality of the electoral formula favours dominance on the part of parties that cannot count on an ethnic majority. Basedau's brilliant analysis, however, is biased by the choice of relaxing the criterion for counting "dominant-party states". Contrary to Sartori's three-election threshold, the author also includes countries where the party in government won a majority of seats in two consecutive elections only. Lowering the requirement for inclusion waters down the notion of 'dominance'. Two elections are too short a period. Basedau (2005) ends up counting as dominant party states Tanzania or Nigeria, as well as Kenya or Mali during the 1990s. Yet, either because no third election had been held as yet (Tanzania and Nigeria) or because a third election resulted in alternation in power (Kenya and Mali), in none of these countries a proper dominant party system was ever established.

The effects of party dominance on an emerging democracy are quite controversial. On the one hand, there is a strong concern that "in poor countries the trend is for the dominant party to establish ... bridgeheads to an authoritarian order with a hegemonic party system" (Giliomee and Simkins 1999:2). Kuenzi and Lambright (2005), for instance, stress the upsides of having a highly fragmented party system. They claim evidence of a positive relationship between the latter and the level of democracy. "Contrary to received wisdom", as Bogaards (2000:184; cf. 173) notes, "not fragmentation but concentration has always been the major challenge to the development of Africa's party systems". He claims that, to understand the diffusion of party dominance in Africa, "the effective

number of parties is misleading because different party constellations can hide behind the same effective number of parties ... this index fails to capture party dominance”, and in fact “in Africa it is safe to say that all countries with an effective number of parties below 3.2 [that is, a large majority] have a dominant party system” (Bogaards 2000:165). In a different passage, the author states that “for the moment, there is only a *tendency* in Africa towards dominant party systems” (Bogaards 2000:166, italics in the original). Maybe, however, he hastened too quickly towards prescribing solutions, as in countries such as Ghana, Senegal, Kenya, Mali, Cape Verde and São Tomé e Príncipe – which he classified as dominant party states – opposition victories actually took place and alternation in power occurred in the following couple of years, between 2000 and 2002. In all of these cases, dominance by one party was limited to no more than ten years and was far from unchallengeable and unchangeable.

The case for limited party fragmentation, however, is also advocated. Countries such as Botswana or Senegal benefited from the role that the Botswana Democratic Party and the Parti Socialiste performed since the late 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, chances are that the supremacy of a party might be eroded in favour of an increasingly competitive system. In Mozambique or Zambia, for example, the temporary presence of a dominant party may produce positive gains (Rakner and Svåsand 2004:52). Observers stress that “out of 20 cases 14 countries with dominant parties score better in the most recent rating [i.e. degree of democracy scores by the Freedom House] than in the election year when dominance in multiparty elections was established ... there is no evidence that suggests that one-party dominance generally puts democracy at risk. ... the other way around seems even more plausible. ... one-party dominance comes with favourable features ...[such as] political stability and government efficiency” (Basedau 2005:22-23). Dominant parties, in other words, may produce a broad range of positive effects, including political moderation, clarity of choices, executive durability or policy coherence.

4.4 The Institutionalisation Approach

Since Rokkan emphasised the tendency for Western party systems to gain and retain stability over decades – i.e. to become ‘frozen’ – a most relevant topic for scholars dealing with European party systems became that of party system *change*⁷. In the presence of largely stable party systems, the key concern was how stability could come to an end. For new democracies that often feature precarious forms of multipartism and highly personalised politics, an opposite concern has

⁷ See, for example, Mair (1997).

gained ground based on the need that party systems become *institutionalised*. Analysts of Latin American party politics and democratic consolidation processes thus elaborated a theoretical framework that has subsequently influenced several analyses of Africa's party systems (Cf. Mainwaring 1993; Mainwaring and Scully 1995).

The institutionalisation of a party system is defined by Mainwaring as a four-dimensional process based on: "stability in interparty competition, the existence of parties that have fairly stable roots in society, acceptance of parties and elections as the legitimate institutions that determine who governs, and party organisations with reasonably stable rules and structures" (Mainwaring and Scully 1995:1, emphasis added). It is when political parties develop as organizations that are durable, socially rooted, legitimate and effective in their presence on the ground that the chances of them contributing positively to democratic consolidation become stronger. An 'institutionalised party system', thus, is a system in which "there is stability in who the main parties are and in how they behave. Change, while not completely precluded, is limited" (Mainwaring 1998:68). The upshot is that the major problems associated with non-institutionalised (inchoate) party systems are also contained, including the development of personalistic power, populist appeals and politics, neopatrimonial trends and the marginalisation of parliament in executive-centred politics. This approach guided a number of theoretical reflections on the institutionalisation of African parties and party systems (including the possible tensions between the two) (Randall and Svåsand 2002c), as well as comparative analyses (Kuenzi and Lambright 2001, 2005; Randall and Svåsand (2002b) and case-studies (Rakner and Svåsand 2004; Marcus and Ratsimbaharison 2005; Carbone 2005).

In two quantitative comparative studies, Kuenzi e Lambright, for instance, focus on two of the dimensions indicated by Mainwaring, that is, the stability of interparty competition and the extent to which individual parties are socially rooted. They discuss and modify Mainwaring's own framework, however, by changing the assumption that lower volatility helps stability with its opposite, namely that new democracies benefit from higher levels of volatility, as the latter favour competition and alternation in power. Mozaffar and Scarritt (2005) also carried out a cross-country investigation based on quantitative measures of volatility and party system fragmentation. They claim that Africa's peculiarity lies in a combination of high levels of electoral volatility - 20 to 30% on average, according to different estimates (Bogaards 2005:7,10; Kuenzi and Lambright 2001;2005) - with a low degree of party system fragmentation (in Latin America and Eastern Europe's new democracies, by contrast, higher volatility tends to go hand in hand with higher fragmentation) (van de Walle 2003:300ff.; Mozaffar and Scarritt (2005). Bogaards (2005:11), however, questioned the idea that the two phenomena actually co-exist in the same countries, noting that it is normally one

or the other that is present. In other words, dominant party systems do not co-exist with high volatility levels, but, on the contrary, they show lower volatility than non-dominant party systems.

Few of Africa's party systems appear to be consolidating, those that do include some of the older multiparty systems (Botswana and Senegal) as well as some newly reformed ones (such as Ghana, South Africa or Namibia). In Ghana, for example, all elections have been fought out between the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress, two large and stable parties. Besides these cases, party systems in the region generally exhibit a low level of institutionalisation, i.e. most of them are 'inchoate' systems according to Mainwaring's terminology, as both quantitative and case studies confirm (Kuenzi and Lambright 2001). The development of autonomous organisations, for example, is a component of party system institutionalisation, yet many African parties remain organisationally underdeveloped. In Zambia, for instance, the United National Independence Party, which ruled the country between the 1960s and 1990s, is still in the hands of the Kaunda family (Rakner and Svåsand 2004:54,59,64). Similarly, in Madagascar, Marc Ravalomanana's Tiako i Madagasikara was set up a few months prior to elections and staffed with personnel from the president's well-known company, Tiko, to make sure that personal loyalties would prevail (Marcus and Ratsimbaharison 2005:506ff.).

5. Conclusions

The introduction of democratic reforms since the 1990s sparked a return to multipartism in most African polities. The resurgence of political parties, in turn, generated a discontinuity not only in the continent's politics, but also in the study of it. A number of analyses of parties and party systems were produced which contributed to the growing integration of the study of politics south of the Sahara with mainstream political science.

Recent research efforts unquestionably advanced our knowledge of the changing politics of Africa. New works, for example, shed light on issues such as the widespread diffusion of systems dominated (but no longer monopolised) by one party, the recurrent fragmentation of opposition camps into a number of weak and volatile parties, the role of ethnic identities and clientelist networks as bases for party mobilisation, the structural limitations parties encounter in developing effective organisations, the weak policy-making capacities of the new parties, the generally low level of institutionalisation of the continent's party systems.

In spite of recent progress, however, research into African party politics is still unsatisfactory. Neither side of the balance – the elaboration of theoretical frameworks and the detail of empirical knowledge – has achieved adequate levels

of development as yet. Theoretical reasoning must address the question of the extent to which contemporary political science models can be used for the analysis of African politics as well as deepen our understanding of more specific issues, including the relationships between the ethnic, clientelist and personalist bases of political parties or the patterns of transformation that party systems in the region are going through. Empirical research, on the other hand, must primarily fill the gap of information on the actual functioning of individual parties – their programmes, organisations, development: an extremely demanding, but indispensable task.

Appendix

TABLE 3. *Multiparty elections and political parties in Africa, 1989-2005.*

	Presidential elections	Legislative elections	Ruling party	In office since	% seats for largest party	% seats for second largest party	Effective number of parties	Legislative volatility %	Freedom House
Angola	1992*	1992	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA)	1975	59%	32%	-	-	NF
Benin	1991, 1996, 2001	1991, 1995, 1999, 2003	Mouvance présidentielle/Union pour le Bénin du future (MP/UBF)	1996	63%	37%	6.16	59	F
Botswana	-	1965, 1969, 1974, 1979, 1984, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004	Botswana Democratic Party (BDP)	1966	77%	21%	1.42	10	F
Burkina Faso	1991, 1998, 2005	1992, 1997, 2002	Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP)	1987	51%	15%	1.23	12	PF
Burundi	(*1993)	(*1993), 2005	Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie–Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD–FDD)	2005	54%	25%	-	-	PF
Cameroon	1992, 1997, 2004	1992, 1997, 2002	Rassemblement démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC)	1982	83%	12%	2.09	60	NF
Cape Verde	1991, 1996, 2001	1991, 1996, 2001	Partido Africano da Independência de Cabo Verde (PAICV)	2001	55%	42%	2.07	1	F
Central African Republic	1993, 1999, (*2003), 2005	1993, 1998, 2005	Convergence Nationale Kwa Na Kwa (KNK)	2003	40%	10%	4.26	16	NF
Chad	1996, 2001	1997, 2002	Mouvement Patriotique du Salut (MPS)	1990	71%	8%	2.93		NF
Comoros	1990, 1996, (*1999), 2002	1992, 1993, 1996, 2004	Camp des Îles Autonomes (CdiA)	2002	67%	33%	-	30	PF

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Congo (Republic of)	1992, (*1997), 2002	1992, 1993, 2002	Parti Congolais du Travail/Forces Démocratiques Unies (PCT)	1997	39%	20%	-	14	PF
Congo (Democratic Republic)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	NF
Equatorial Guinea	1996, 2002	1993, 1999, 2004	Partido Democratico Guinea Ecuatorial (PDGE)	1979	98%	2%	1.13	15	NF
Eritrea	-	-	People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)	1991	-	-	-	-	NF
Ethiopia	-	1995, 2000, 2005	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF)	1991	62%	21%	5.72		PF
Gabon	1993, 1998, 2005	1990, 1996, 2001	Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG)	1967	73%	7%	1.57	25	PF
Gambia	1982, 1987, 1992, (*1994), 1996, 2001	1966, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2002	Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC)	1994	85%	0,6%	1.14	9	PF
Ghana	1992, 1996, 2000, 2004	1992, 1996, 2000, 2004	New Patriotic Party (NPP)	2000	56%	41%	2.16	33	F
Gibuti	1993, 1999, 2005	1992, 1997, 2003	Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (UMP)	1981	100%	0	1.00	17	PF
Guinea (Konakry)	1993, 1998, 2003	1995, 2002	Parti de l'Unité e du Progrès (PUP)	1984	75%	17%	2.33		NF
Guinea-Bissau	1994, (*1999) 2000, (*2003), 2005	1994, 1999, 2004	Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné (PAIGC)	2004	45%	35%	3.66		PF
Ivory Coast	1990, 1995, (*1999), 2000	1990, 1995, 2000	Front Populaire Ivoirienne (FPI)	2000	43%	42%	2.79	9	NF
Kenya	1992, 1997, 2002	1992, 1997, 2002	National Rainbow Coalition (NARC)	2002	59%	30%	3.22	28	PF
Lesotho	-	1993, (*1994), 1998, 2002	Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD)	1998	64%	17%	1.02	99	F
Liberia	1997, (*2003), 2005	1997, 2005	Unity Party (UP)	2005	23%	12%	1.66	-	PF
Madagascar	1992, 1996, 2001	1993, 1998, 2002	Tiako I Madagasikara (TIM)	2001	64%	14%	4.89	64	PF

Malawi	1994, 1999, 2004	1994, 1999, 2004	Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)	2004	31%	-	2.68	4	PF
Mali	1992, 1997, 2002	1992, 1997, 2002	-	2002	41%	32%	1.31	32	F
Mauritania	1992, 1997, 2003 (*2005)	1992, 1996, 2001	Parti Républicain Démocratique et Social (PRDS)	[2005]	[79%]	[4%]	[1.58]	3	NF
Mauritius	-	1967, 1976, 1982, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1995, 2000, 2005	Alliance Sociale : Parti Travailleiste/ Parti Mauricien Xavier-Luc Duval (PTr/PMXD)	2005	61%	35%	1.47	72	F
Mozambique	1994, 1999, 2004	1994, 1999, 2004	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO)	1975	64%	36%	1.99		PF
Namibia	1989, 1994, 1999, 2004	1989, 1994, 1999, 2004	South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO)	1989	70%	6%	1.66	19	F
Niger	1993, (*1996), 1996, (*1999), 1999, 2004	1993, 1995, 1999, 2004	Mouvement National de la Société de Développement (MNSD)	1999	42%	22%	3.32	46	PF
Nigeria	1999, 2003	1999, 2003	People's Democratic Party (PDP)	1999	62%	27%	2.22		PF
Rwanda	2003	2003	Front Patriotique Rwandais (FPR coalizione)	1994	75%	13%	-		NF
Sao Tomé e Príncipe	1991, 1996, 2001 (*1995, *2003)	1991, 1994, 1998, 2002	Movimento Democrático das Forças da Mudança/Partido de Convergência Democrática (MDFM/PCD)	2001	44% (MLSTP)	42% (MDFM/PCD)	2.36	24	F
Senegal	1983, 1988, 1993, 2000	1983, 1988, 1993, 1998, 2001	Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS + coalizione Sopi)	2000	74%	9%	2.40	12	F
Seychelles	1993, 1998, 2001	1993, 1998, 2002	Front Progressiste du Peuple Seychellois (FPPS)	1977	68%	32%	1.27	9	PF
Sierra Leone	1996, (*1996), 2002	1996, 2002	Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP)	1996	74%	20%	-		PF
Somalia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	NF
South Africa	-	1994, 1999, 2004	African National Congress (ANC)	1994	70%	12%	2.15	18	F
Sudan	1996, 2000	1996, 2000	Al Muttamar al Watani (AM)	1989	99%	1%	1.03		NF
Swaziland	-	1993, 1998, 2003	-	-	-	-	-	-	NF

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Tanzania	1995, 2000, 2005	1995, 2000, 2005	Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM)	1961	89%	8%	1.20		PF
Togo	1993, 1998, 2003, 2005	1994, 1999, 2002	Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais (RPT)	1967	89%	4%	1.04	56	NF
Uganda	1996, 2001	1996, 2001	National Resistance Movement (NRM)	1986	-	-	-	-	PF
Zambia	1991, 1996, 2001	1991, 1996, 2001	Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD)	1991	43%	31%	2.88	12	PF
Zimbabwe	1990, 1996, 2002	1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)	1980	72%	27%	1.92	10	NF

Notes: The asterisk indicates a year when a coup or other armed initiative took place; “in office since” indicates the date when either the president (as of 2005) or his party took over power; the classification in “Free” (F), “Partly Free” (PF) and “Not Free” states is the one by Freedom House. In Liberia e Malawi, the majority of seats is controlled by two opposition parties; in Mali, the current president is not a member of a political party; in Mauritania, the PRDS was ousted by a coup in 2005; in Saõ Tomé the coups of 1995 and 2003 had no substantial consequences; both in Swaziland and in Uganda (until 2006) political parties have not been allowed to take place to elections.

Sources: *Electionworld.org*, Nohlen *et al.* (1999), Lindberg (2005:48), Kuenzi and Lambright (2001:449), Freedom House (2005).

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