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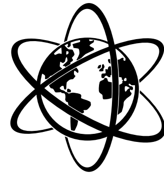

Embedding African democracy and development: the imperative of institutional capital

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Abstract

The concept of democracy has remained central in most academic and political discourse on African development. Beyond the state-centric model of democracy, what alternative approaches are open to African states and how could they enhance the nature of state–society relations and the process of economic development? While this question informs the general thesis as well as the specific arguments advanced in this article, suffice it then to state that Africa's peculiar condition presents a case not so much about transitions to democracy (since these have been attempted in many cases) but about the consolidation of enduring democracies. The missing link is in the acquisition of critical institutional capital that would facilitate a systemic shift from traditional models of development to more pragmatic and integrative approaches. In order of priority, what Africa needs most are institutional reconstruction, state consolidation, and democratic governance.

Contemporary experience indicates that everywhere in Africa the history of democracy and economic development has mostly been based on a history of disappointments. In the same vein, conventional analyses or studies of these experiences have generally been built around a theory of criticisms with a less alternative voice granted to the fundamental issues inherent in the African context (Bates, 1981; Sandbrook, 1993; Widner, 1994; Clapham, 1996; Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997; Ayittey, 1998; Herbst, 2000). To address this epistemological anomaly, this article begins by elaborating four central themes: the meta-political context of African

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democracy, the dynamics of the state system, the challenge of post-modern liberalism, and the case for the primacy of *institutional capital*.

By building on the central thesis of Parsonian structural functionalism and its implication for contemporary institutional analysis, this article advances a central argument that the lack of stable democracies in Africa is due mainly to the weakness or absence of institutions rather than the 'state' per se. The purpose of institutions is to create the basis for collective action, while the basis for 'states' is the integration of action in such a way that it serves a purposeful and legitimate end. A failure in the first obligation makes success in the latter more difficult or impossible.

Evolving mechanisms of democracy

When viewed as a desirable end for which all societies ought to aspire, democracy takes on the semblance of a universal norm. This also goes with the presumption that if it can work in a particular country, it should also work in others. But once exposed to the dynamics of different geopolitical and cultural contexts, democracy offers quite unique variations both in its substantive merit as well as in its rhetorical appeal. It is in this light that we can view democratic failures in Africa as both a structural and cultural issue. As Amartya Sen (1999: 2) argues, 'a country does not have to be deemed fit *for* democracy, rather it has to become fit *through* democracy' (my emphasis). What matters most is not a pre-emptive assumption on the universality of democracy's promise but rather on how specific cultural processes engender the conditions that make democracy an indispensable choice for political consensus and governance. When seen in this light, we are then in a better position to assess properly democracy's multiple virtues which includes 'the intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life; the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights, and duties' (Sen, 1999: 7).

The irony of democracy is that while it makes it possible for issues and policies to be contested, genuine victory is only possible if all actors agree to abide by the rules of the game. But where fundamental institutions are lacking or where they are easily changed and replaced according to the political wind, it becomes very difficult to establish a permanent placeholder or an institutional anchor upon which these rules of the game can be constituted and legitimized. Effective democracy, therefore, requires both an institutional and procedural legitimacy based on mutual consensus among competing actors. Where this consensus is lacking and the pressures for democratization are placed on the political society, premature democratization occurs in such a way that it could enable competing groups to strike out on their own on the basis of a zero-sum calculation. This condition is akin to what Jurgen Habermas (1973: 27) refers to as 'the "*fundamental contradiction*" of a social formation when its organizational principle necessitates that individuals and groups repeatedly confront one another with claims and intentions that are, in the long run, incompatible' (my emphasis). But as 'soon as incompatibility becomes conscious, conflict becomes manifest, and irreconcilable interests are recognized as antagonistic interests' (Habermas, 1973: 27). By defining group interests in terms of their conflict with one

another, thereby excluding the idea of an interest of society as a whole, the resultant of the group pressure (conflict) would thus become the only determinant of the course of government policy (Bentley, 1949). This phenomenon seems to embrace many of Africa's contemporary experiments in democracy.

The dialectics of African democracy

At the prodding of the World Bank, the IMF, the United States and major European powers such as Britain and France, African countries like Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Niger, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Mali, and others were forced into engaging in what would be considered premature liberalization of their economies and politics. Nonetheless, the process of democratic transition requires a passage of two phases, liberalization and democratization. Linz and Stepan (1996: 3) point out that in a non-democratic setting, *liberalization* may entail a mix of policy and social changes, such as less censorship of the media, somewhat greater space for the organization of autonomous working-class activities, the introduction of some legal safeguards for individuals such as habeas corpus, the releasing of most political prisoners, the return of exiles, perhaps measures for improving the distribution of income, and, most important, the toleration of opposition. However, *democratization* entails liberalization but is a wider and more specifically political concept. Democratization requires open contestation over the right to win control of the government and this, in turn, requires free competitive elections, the results of which determine who governs. But though these ideals may be generally acceptable, democracy requires a preliminary consensus among competing interests that specific electoral procedures would be recognized, that electoral results would be upheld, and that the institutions charged with expending such collective responsibilities be granted legal and popular legitimacy.

However, the level of openness and political permissiveness that liberalization entails oftentimes generates its own contradiction. Political liberalization has the tendency to resurface critical issues of poverty, resource redistribution, property rights, and power relations as the cornerstone of political contestation. When broad political interests diverge and become factionalized, they present breeding grounds for factional conflict and political dissent. Various social forces and reactionary elements arise to challenge the legitimacy of those in control of state power, and economic opportunists, both internal and external, move in to take advantage of the uncertain situation. The ensuing crisis of legitimacy, struggle for state power, and economic uncertainty reproduces itself into a state of anarchy that quickly brings the liberalization process to an abrupt end. The first stage (liberalization) in the process of democratic consolidation is thus aborted, as the regime in power cracks down and scuttles most of the liberties granted at the beginning of the liberalization process.

Test cases abound in the African context. In November 1987, Kenya's Daniel Arap Moi closed Nairobi University and had several student leaders arrested following demonstrations and protests critical of his government. Consequent attempts to liberalize the economy as well as institute governmental accountability ran head on with the interests of the entrenched political élite. As the Kenyan business élite (mainly the European and Asian middle class) teamed up to resist the seemingly

state-centric economic policies of the Kenyan government, President Arap Moi felt a conspiracy against his control of state power and he clamped down on the opposition. Nonetheless, 'it was the repressive methods employed by President Jomo Kenyatta (before him) and Moi (later) that have helped to contain dissident elements, including tribal and ethnic separatist movements' (Ingham, 1990: 113–14).

The same approach to *containment* policy can be said of Ghana. When Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings first took over the reins of power in Ghana as leader of the Provisional National Defense Council, his first economic program was no more than a hurried flirtation with some crude form of centralized planning. He started out on a Marxist–Socialist economic framework but quickly back-tracked as Ghana's economic realities set in. Ghana needed the infusion of foreign direct investment and to secure that, it would have to liberalize its economy, dispose of moribund state enterprises, and reduce the size of the labor force in the public sector. Rawlings' subsequent rapprochement with the IMF and the World Bank and the imposed liberalization policies earned Ghana enviable fame as a test model on how a structural adjustment program could work for many African countries. But in quick succession, a combination of high inflation and a fall in cocoa prices derailed much of the early economic successes and Ghana once again fell into political turmoil and economic stagnation. With stagnating economic conditions, increasing internal opposition, and widespread political discontent, Rawlings had to clamp down on the opposition in order to stay in power. Again, the road toward market liberalization and democratic consolidation was aborted.

Nigeria's case with periodic abrogation of the democratic process has become legendary. The country offers

> within a single case, characteristics that identify Africa . . . Forces of both integration and dissolution are evident throughout the country's independent history, with one or the other being most prevalent at any moment. These opposing forces are rooted in the constant struggle between authoritarian and democratic governance, the push for development and the persistence of underdevelopment, the burden of public corruption and the pressure for accountability. (Joseph et al., 2000: 547)

Nonetheless, there remain many glaring cases of state anarchy and official malfeasance. In June 1993, the then military head of state General Ibrahim Babangida nullified the presidential election that would have ushered in a democratically elected Third Republic. This very act created both a constitutional and political crisis that eventually paved the way for another military take-over by General Sani Abacha on 17 November 1993. Over a three-month period between July 1994 and September 1994, the oil union workers and the Nigerian Labor Congress went on strike in protest of the military regime of Sani Abacha on its arrest of M.K.O. Abiola (considered by many as having won the 12 June presidential election) and other leaders of the democracy movement. The military responded by arresting the most vocal leaders of the pro-democracy movement, shutting down universities and media houses, and expanded its surveillance of groups and other avenues of civic expression. The basis for the emergence of civil society came to an abrupt end. 'Nigeria today remains essentially an *unfinished state* characterized by instabilities and uncertainties' (Joseph et al., 2000: 547; my emphasis).

There was a time when Côte D'Ivoire was celebrated as a leading 'island' of political and economic stability in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ironically that was when the country was under the nepotic rule of Felix Houphouet-Boigny (1960–93) and could hardly be characterized as a 'democratic' polity, at least by western standards. The political exit of Houphouet-Boigny ushered in the short-lived administration of Henri Konan Bedie in 1993. Within two years, amidst a series of political machinations and subterfuges between elements of the various political and ethnic élites, the military, for the first time in the history of the country, took over the reins of government. Since then, there have been two more military insurrections or coups in the country and the political crisis seem to have unearthed deep-rooted ethnic and religious divisions that were hitherto subdued by the overbearing leadership of Houphouet-Boigny. As with most African countries, once they are set on the path of political conquest by the military, they rarely recover the true instincts for the democratic process. This state of affairs is akin to what Li and Thompson (1975) call the *contagion effect* — a term that suggests that 'once the military intervenes against civilian leaders, military leaders become much more confident and willing to pursue similar actions in the future' (Schraeder, 2000: 247–8). Once a coup occurs in a country, there exists a greater possibility of successive coups occurring within the same country.

The same situation applies very much to miniscule Gambia, in which the old guard had retained political and economic power under the presidency of Dawda Jawara (1965–94) until he was overthrown by Captain Yahya Jammeh in 1994. Since then, various elements within the military have continued to plot against Captain Jammeh. Since Samuel Doe overthrew the government of William Tolbert in 1980, Liberia has seen no peace. Today, both Liberia and Sierra Leone (its adjacent neighbor) are still on fire. And what do these two countries have in common? The seething tension between the indigenous population and the returnees from the early American and British slave trade ushered in a class system and cronyism that eventually manifested itself in the struggle for control of political power. Unlike many other African countries, Liberia and Sierra Leone were never colonized and so did not have to seek independence from the colonial powers. As the 'quest for independence' did not provide a political foundation for the expression of nationalism as a unifying force, class, ethnicity, and cultural divisions became more pronounced (and, in fact, consequential) in all matters of national political discourse.

When Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) secured its independence from the white minority government of Ian Smith in 1980, Robert Mugabe became its first President. It was hoped that racial harmony, economic stability, and democracy would prevail. After more than 20 years in power, Robert Mugabe has no intention of relinquishing political power, either by the ballot or by other means. But instead, an economic warfare has ensued between the government and agricultural landowners who are mostly white Zimbabweans; political opposition has literarily been subdued; and the economy has fallen into disarray.

The African context exposes a series of intriguing dilemmas: why is political leadership viewed more as an entitlement rather than as a privilege to serve? James S. Coleman (1994: 98) touches on this particular issue when he stipulates that 'one of the factors nudging several African leaders toward greater authoritarianism, is the constant threat (real or imaginary) that dissident tribal, ethnic, or regional groups pose

to the integrity of new states'. Though he points to the cases of Sudan, Ghana, and Guinea; one could also add to the list such authoritarian–oligarchic regimes as those of Idi Amin in Uganda, Sani Abacha in Nigeria , Jean-Bedel Bokassa in Central African Republic, Mobutu in Zaire, Blaise Compaore in Burkina Faso, Arap Moi in Kenya, Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia — the list is endless. In abject disregard for formal institutional checks and balances, 'leaders intent on silencing outspoken elements of civil society depended on loyal military troops and police forces that were both willing and able to enforce presidential directives. As a result, the creation and rapid expansion of a coercive apparatus, comprising a wide variety of security forces, served as a critical component of the concentration of state power' (Schraeder, 2000: 225) — a legacy not lost on the fact that the 'coercive nature of colonial police and military forces may have contributed to the creation of an authoritarian environment that carried over into the post-independent era' (Schraeder, 2000: 105).

In their much acclaimed work on democratic experiments in Africa, Bratton and Van de Walle (1997: 10) contend that 'the efforts of African citizens to hold their leaders accountable for providing the common good are, at heart, a quest for democracy', but it remains to be seen how many African countries measure up to this standard. Yet, they argue of the necessity 'to view recent African political developments as a useful point of comparison both within the continent and to other world regions' (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 10). By adopting a minimalist orientation in their study, they seem, in a way, to understate the driving parameters of African democracy. By preferring an 'approach that captures *basic* elements as most useful in distinguishing political regimes, especially in situations where democratization has only just begun' (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 12; my emphasis), they essentially limit the argument to specific cases of stalemated transitions to democracy (in which initial promising processes seem to have bogged down). Though the study encompassed the period from 1990–94, it is important to look at what obtained prior to the study and what was observed at the end. A study of '*authoritarian reversals*' does not ipso facto offer enough explanation or knowledge concerning the lack of democratic consolidation among African states. And neither do increasing trends in indicators like political protests, political liberty, competitive elections, or *attempts* at multi-partyism suggest democratic consolidation in the absolute sense. They only reflect episodic and strategic shifts in regime transitions rather than a genuine indicator of trends toward democratic consolidation. Table 1 provides a characterization of various African regimes in terms of specific political orientations. Notwithstanding whether the elections were free and fair, popular or imposed, it shows that only five countries can be assumed to meet one crucial requirement of democracy: competitive party systems (at least two or more parties).

But a closer look at Table 2 indicates that the same political dynamics remain essentially in place and, in most cases, even worse. Many of the countries indicated as undergoing democratic transitions (the Congo, Cape Verde, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sao Tome, Zambia, Mali, Central African Republic, Niger) have all fallen back into tremendous chaos and anarchy, i.e. assuming that there was ever an initial movement toward democratic transition. If we are concerned about attempted transitions to democracy, then the answer should be obvious. But if we are more interested as to why these attempted transitions did not consolidate or take hold, then it behooves

Table 1 Modal regimes by country, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1989

Plebiscitary one-party systems ($n = 16$)	Military oligarchies ($n = 11$)	Competitive one-party systems ($n = 13$)	Settler oligarchies ($n = 2$)	Multiparty systems ($n = 5$)
Angola	Burkina Faso	Cameroon	Namibia	Botswana
Benin	Burundi	CAR	South Africa	Gambia
Cape Verde	Chad	Cote d'Ivoire		Mauritania
Comoros	Ghana	Madagascar		Senegal
Congo	Guinea	Malawi		Zimbabwe
Djibouti	Lesotho	Mali		
Eq. Guinea	Liberia	Rwanda		
Ethiopia	Mauritania	Sao Tome		
Gabon	Nigeria	Seychelles		
Kenya	Uganda	Sierra Leone		
Mozambique		Tanzania		
Niger		Togo		
Somalia		Zambia		
Swaziland				
Zaire				

Source: Bratton and Van de Walle (1997: 79).

us to look elsewhere, perhaps at the *institutional* and *structural* foundations of the typical African state.

The missing link in the Bratton and Van de Walle thesis is their inability to address the 'why' question. Rather they point to the fact that 'most nations in the developing world, especially sub-Saharan Africa, retain in *modified* form many of the characteristics of patrimonial rule, and as such should be construed as *neopatrimonial* – those hybrid political systems in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism co-exist with, and suffuse, rational-legal institutions' (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 62; my emphasis).

> Compared to the bureaucratic systems of most western societies, patrimonial political systems explain a situation where an individual rules by dint of personal prestige and power. Authority is entirely personalized, and shaped by the ruler's preferences rather than any codified system of laws. The ruler ensures the political stability of the regime and personal political survival by providing a zone of security in an uncertain environment and by selectively distributing favors and material benefits to loyal followers who are not citizens of the polity so much as the ruler's clients. (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 6)

As with classic patrimonialism,

> the right to rule in neopatrimonial regimes is ascribed to a person rather than to an office, despite the official existence of a constitution. One individual, often a president for life, dominates the state apparatus and stands above its laws. Relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system, and

Table 2 Transition outcomes, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1994 (as of 31 December 1994)

Precluded transitions (2)	Blocked transitions (12)	Flawed transitions (12)	Democratic transitions (16)
Liberia	Angola	Burkina Faso	Benin
Sudan	Burundi	Cameroon	Cape Verde
	Chad	Comoros	Central Africa Republic
	Ethiopia	Cote d'Ivoire	Congo
	Guinea	Djibouti	Guinea-Bissau
	Nigeria	Eq. Guinea	Lesotho
	Rwanda	Gabon	Madagascar
	Sierra Leone	Ghana	Malawi
	Somalia	Kenya	Mali
	Tanzania	Mauritania	Mozambique
	Uganda	Swaziland	Namibia
	Zaire	Togo	Niger
			Sao Tome
			Seychelles
			South Africa
			Zambia

Source: Bratton and Van de Walle (1997: 120).

> officials occupy bureaucratic positions less to perform public service, their ostensible purpose, than to acquire personal wealth and status. Although state functionaries receive an official salary, they also enjoy access to various forms of illicit rents, prebends, and petty corruption, which constitute sometimes an important entitlement of office. (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 62)

A characteristic feature of *neopatrimonialsm*, therefore, is the incorporation of patrimonial tendencies into the workings of bureaucratic institutions, thereby undermining formal rules of governance and the institutions that undergird them. When procedural mechanisms of governmental action are subject to arbitrary interpretation and execution, when the laws they reflect are flaunted, then the institutions that legitimize their public purpose are reduced to irrelevance. If we accept this notion, then what has been compromised so far is not so much about the nature of governance in most African states, rather it is the *institutions* and the *rules of the game* that are necessary to provide the enabling conditions for good governance. Credible institutions and the rules they enforce should lay the foundation not only for democracy but also provide a conducive environment for the expression of various rights of citizenship, property, and political participation. It is, therefore, necessary to explore some of the structural conditions that set African polities apart from others in the quest for democratic consolidation: the resiliency of primary conditions, the character of state–society relations, and the challenge of post-modern liberalism.

The resiliency of primary conditions

The introduction of colonial rule in Africa ran head on to the paternalistic indigenous institutions of traditional authority. The customs, symbolisms, cultural mysticisms, and belief systems came under enormous stress. To adapt to the challenges of the new political regime as well as the necessities of the emergent cosmopolitan society, the indigenous social structure had to change. The growth of industrialization, the establishment of railroads, the commercialization of the economy, advancement in education, the emergence of a rudimentary civil service system, and the need for manual labor created a migration of people from the rural areas to the urban centers. As people of different ethnolinguistic backgrounds who could barely understand each other's local vernaculars found themselves as *strangers* in the big townships, the only mechanism for ensuring cultural homogeneity was to create tribal or ethnic associations as a basis 'for continued expression of loyalty and obligation to the kinship group, town, or village where the lineage is localized' (Coleman, 1994: 15). Ironically, while this 'general ferment produced forces which tended to break down tribal barriers on the one hand; yet the kinship ties remained obdurate by asserting itself in the tribal associations' (Coleman, 1994: 16).

By providing a medium for the perpetuation of different aspects of the traditional culture among the increasing urban population, the tribal associations can equally be said to have retarded the process of cultural integration, at least in the formative stages of national political development. The issue of cultural integration is very important as a way of bridging the ethnolinguistic, economic, and the rural–urban cleavages that have tended to undermine a genuine sense of universal loyalty to the state, as opposed to the ethnic group. Furthermore, a central administrative authority controlled by the colonial regime was, in many cases, 'forced to co-exist with widely differing local authorities each of which derived some powers from its imperial masters and some from the traditional loyalty shown by its people' (Ingham, 1990: 3). The concept of *indirect rule* in Northern Nigeria during the period of colonial administration of the country is a good case in point. To the extent that colonial authority is coercive and traditional authority is paternalistic, the historical method of resolving fundamental issues in African politics has generally involved either of the two types of authority; and has only marginally (if not recently) embraced the virtues of consensus and compromise — two crucial elements of the democratic process.

In *Democracy and Development*, Alex Hadenius (1992: 133–4) points out that while political democracy *sensu stricto* signifies that people should *control* the activities of the state, it requires that citizens are able, in various respects, to function as free and equal rulers. But the possibility of *control* can naturally also depend on the nature of the object of influence; hence, governments may differ in the extent to which they are amenable to democratic control. For instance,

> the establishment of a large state in an economically weakly developed society makes it particularly difficult to apply the democratic form of the division of labor. Since public positions in these societies represent essentially the only way to social and economic improvement, the control of government becomes crucial. When so much is at stake in political life, there is no scope for the tolerance and peaceful competition which democracy requires. For the fact that the difference of result

> between gain and loss is too great, politics instead assumes the nature of a relentless zero-sum game. (Hadenius, 1992: 136)

Suffice it then to state that Africa's peculiar conditions encumber not so much about transitions to democracy as the consolidation of enduring democracies. Not surprisingly, Richard Sandbrook (1993: 87) asks a very fundamental question: 'Can liberal democracies emerge and survive in Africa?' He argues that with the waning of the Cold War, geopolitical considerations are no longer as compelling (as formerly) in the capitals of the major global powers. France, the United States, and Russia are no longer willing to support 'their' African strongmen against all challenges. Moreover, western liberal democracies and the international institutions they dominate are now freer to pursue their natural preferences for electoral democracies. He concludes that just as the cultural, historical, political, and socioeconomic conditions of Africa have not been fertile ground for nourishing strong developmental states, they are generally unfavorable to democracy, hence Africa (Sub-Saharan Africa in particular) is unlikely soon to yield many stable democracies.

State and society: the dichotomy of power and governance

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991: 113–14) vividly narrates the ordeal of new nation-states as many achieved their independence in the post Second World War period. He argues that in the 'nation-building' policies of the new states, the blend of popular and official nationalism has been the product of anomalies created by European imperialism: the well-known arbitrariness of frontiers and a bilingual intelligentsia poised precariously over diverse *monoglot* populations. One can thus think of these nations as projects the achievement of which is still in progress, yet projects conceived more in the spirit of Mazzini than that of Uvarov. *Mazzini* stands for the centralizing ambitions of colonial (metropolitan) *absolutism*, while *Uvarov* passes for '*Russification*' — a subtle but creeping form of bilingual neo-colonialism. Mazzini and Uvarov stand as crucial metaphors that can explain the history and trajectory of state power in Africa. What the colonial regime left, African leaders did not abandon but, instead, have perfected the most predatory form of Machiavellian statecraft.

There are contemporary assumptions about what the 'state' is, especially in Africa. But when we assume that a universal rule runs through the typical 'state' in Africa as in other regions of the world, we run the risk of over-generalization. Different conceptions of the 'state' view it 'as the organized aggregate of relatively permanent institutions of governance' (Duvall and Freeman, 1981: 106); or as 'a set of associations and agencies claiming control over defined territories and their populations' (Skocpol, 1985: 7–8). While these conceptualizations may seem quite basic and self-explanatory, the problem with any analysis of the 'state' in Africa is that 'its institutions are neither neutral nor aloof; they are organizations with interests of their own' (Chazan et al., 1992: 40). Hence, who controls the state, invariably, controls those interests and would be in a position to determine the critical parameters for social action as well as the authoritative allocation of values.

The issue of the 'state' in Africa is not an academic exercise as we often tend to

rationalize it, it is a practical as well as an instrumental issue. In his book *Africa in Chaos*, the Ghanaian economist George Ayittey (1998: 227) proclaimed that 'the state as usually understood, does not exist in Africa'. While Ayittey's seeming frustration might be taken literarily, it reflects a genuine revelation of the shattering level of decay and compromise to which the 'state' in Africa has been subjected, more or less by its own people. As Claude Ake (1996: 14) points out,

> when we use phrases such as the 'state in Africa,' we immediately give it the content of our own historical experience. Having named it and given it this content, we feel we have already settled the question of what it is, beforehand. We conflate experience and reality, form and content, because our knowledge is so tied to our language.

For Ake, the 'state in Africa' has been a maze of antimonies of form and content: the person who holds office may not exercise its powers, the person who exercises the powers of a given office may not be its holder, informal relations often override formal relations, the formal hierarchies of bureaucratic structure and political structure are not always the cue to decision-making power. In essence, control of state power occurs within a tripartite arrangement of indigenous political élites, entrepreneurial capital (the contractor class), and the military aristocracy.

In the Nigerian case as well as in many others, the state has become private property encapsulated and legitimized within the public sphere. 'Overwhelmed by societal pressures, its institutional integrity compromised by individual or sectional interest, the state has turned into a "weak Leviathan", suspended above society' (Mamdani, 1996: 11). As the primary source of capital accumulation and social mobility in Africa, the state has become the ultimate price for all political contests. As the state ceases to reflect society in general, and frustrated by the social and economic costs of rudderless governance, the average citizen withdraws and disengages him/herself from the sphere of public discourse. What is rarely acknowledged is that the contest for democratic rule in Africa is an *intra-élite* struggle for control of state power, rather than a struggle to guarantee fundamental civic rights and liberties for all. In the functional sense of the term, the *state* in Africa exists alone; hence it 'cannot be used as a vehicle to take Africans on the "development" journey' (Ayittey, 1998: 222).

But others equally hold out some element of optimism. Jeffrey Herbst (2000: 30–1) suggests that by 'examining both the environment that leaders had to confront and the institutions they created in light of their own political calculations, the entire trajectory of state creation in Africa can be recovered'. Nonetheless, by relying on the role of human agency interacting with powerful geographic and historical forces to bring about a positive reconstruction of the African state, Herbst's argument plays back into one of the main sources of political conflict in Africa: the personalized and patrimonial nature of the African political culture. To the extent that systemic and structural forces do constrain the role of human agency, the state in Africa harbors 'an intrinsically dual anchorage in class-divided socioeconomic structures and an international system of states' (Skocpol, 1979: 32). The inability to resolve the contradiction generated in the first, has made a true realization of the latter much more difficult.

The challenge of post-modern liberalism

As indicated by Michael Chege (1995: 324), the case for African democracy rests on entirely different premises: after the collapse of colonialism and communism, popularly elected governance and the rule of law ought to be demanded as human values in their own right, irrespective of whether or not they promote economic growth.

> The truth is that generalizations about economic conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa (or Africa in general) hide a great deal of intercountry variation and should be approached with considerable circumspection. The optimal long-term development policy options for African states may in fact be more country-specific than the African development crisis debate suggests. (Chege, 1995: 314)

Priority should be given to deep-seated structural reforms such as diversification of the agricultural monoculture, cuts in defense spending, investment education, in human capital skills, an efficient and technically-oriented bureaucratic system. Even as we look at the

> tenuous statistical relationship between growth and democracy in Africa, as well as the abundant evidence of spectacular economic growth under authoritarian governments in the Asian NICs [newly industrialized countries], Chile under Pinochet, and Brazil under the military, it may be unrealistic to place too much stress on the link between democracy and Africa's economic recovery. (Chege, 1995: 324)

As Malawi's Thandika Mkandawire has argued, 'the case for liberal economic reforms in Africa is erected on contestable factual premises, and it will continue to be opposed as long as it subverts the African nationalist agenda in support of indigenous capital class' (Chege, 1995: 313). Even so, this assumption remains problematic: how to create a viable indigenous capital class that is genuinely linked to the productive and financial sectors of the economy? In most African countries, the classic dichotomy between macroeconomic and microeconomic policies is very fuzzy at best, and the reason is not far fetched. The corporate interest that binds the entrepreneurial and the political class means that access to capital is limited and not widespread. The state is the primary source of private capital accumulation and this is due more to the entrenched patron–client relationships embedded in the domestic economy as opposed to wealth generated in the standard production process. In order to obtain credit from such multilateral lending institutions as the IMF and the World Bank, many African countries have very little problem engaging in the process of economic liberalization, especially as it entails privatization, debt reduction, and streamlining the public sector. Privatization of public utilities means that only those who have money can bid for such facilities. While the majority of the citizens are poor and uneducated, they will not be able to bid or buy shares in such public utilities.

Furthermore, a typical approach to debt reduction has always been to re-schedule old loans that invariably pass enormous credit obligations to future generations — a perfect recipe for continued economic paralysis. However, streamlining the public sector means that poor low-level workers will be laid off while the economic interests of the entrepreneurial–political alliance is well protected. Elite economic interests have sustained a hegemonic influence, thus creating a policy disequilibrium in which

only powerful and well-connected actors benefit more from maintaining the status quo than from risking policy uncertainty in the name of liberalization. And so, one finds that, in many African countries, liberalization programs rarely spread the wealth or improve the lot of the average citizen, they only protect and solidify the chokehold of the entrepreneurial–political alliance on the domestic economy.

In the advanced economies of the West, the middle class is generally viewed as a crucial element in the market economy. This is essentially correct because not only are there more people in this category, it also forms the cornerstone of capitalist consumerism as well as the foundation of most national economic policies. In many African countries, especially Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana where perhaps there were some rudimentary formations of the middle class, such economic classifications have since evaporated at the onslaught of wrenching economic mismanagement, predatory governance, and institutionalized corruption. There is no vibrant middle class: you are either rich or you are poor; hence, any economic model prefaced on the conventional macroeconomic classification is bound to fail.

Elsewhere, it has been argued that increased infusion of foreign direct investment in the African economy will lead to increased economic development. But first, African countries must achieve sustained political stability under popular democratic governance. The irony of this argument is that the massive poverty in many of the African countries has remained a source of factional crisis, death, deprivation, and political instability as the general clamor for resource redistribution is directed at the political center. In the same way that foreign direct investment can thrive in an atmosphere of political stability, it can also create conditions that make political stability possible, by creating jobs and providing opportunity for economic prosperity.

In a study on the relationship between democracy and economic development, Adam Przeworski et al. (2000: 270) points out that 'one way poverty binds is that when a society is poor, so is the state, and when the state is poor it cannot extract resources and provide public services required for development'. 'Poverty breeds frustration, and frustration frequently breeds aggression, both domestic and external' (Obasanjo, 1999); hence, 'even if democracies do occasionally spring up in poor countries, they are extremely fragile when facing poverty; whereas in wealthy countries they are impregnable' (Przeworski et al., 2000: 269). 'Barriers to development are often more subtle than the current emphasis on "good governance" in debtor countries suggest' (Sachs, 1999). So the idea of using political stability as a precondition for increase in foreign direct investment in Africa negates the alternative possibility that foreign direct investment can also provide the incentive for creating political stability in the first place.

Do institutions matter? A case for institutional capital

According to John Ikenberry (1999: 56–65), to the extent that they can help overcome and integrate diverse and competing interests (states, regions, classes, religions, and ethnic groups), institutions matter. He quite marveled at the fact that policymakers in 20th century America have sustained a genuine assumption that institutions (in this case international institutions) limit the scope and severity of conflicts and states that agree to participate in such institutions are, in effect, joining a political

process that shapes, constrains, and channels their actions. The same assumption holds (ought to hold) true for nation-states since much of the fundamentals that drive international relations can be localized to the level of internal (indigenous) political actors. The dynamics of political power and dominance at the international level is very much replicated within the typical nation-state. In the same way that the separation of powers, checks and balances, and other constitutional devices were created as ways to limit power (Ikenberry, 1999), 'institutions construct actors and define their available modes of action; they constrain behavior, but they also empower it' (Scott, 2001: 34). Hence, the *structure* of political systems, such as the state, matters (Skocpol, 1985).

A fundamental prerequisite for the democratic process is that critical institutions should be in place, so as to enable the assimilation of the core values of democracy. While democracy creates value, institutions enable democratic values to be assimilated and sustained within society. Where such institutions are not present, the democratization process either becomes stalemated or is rejected outright by opposing forces. There is a primary need for institutions such as educational facilities to expose citizens to the essential virtues and imperatives of democracy; agricultural infrastructure to prevent hunger and reduce the level of social frustration generally associated with poverty; health care to live a better and quality life; and of course, an independent judicial system to safeguard the fundamental rights and liberties that democracy provides.

The conventional argument has been that *democracy* will enable functional institutions to be created but it remains to be seen how democratic virtues could begin to permeate society without the initial conditions provided by institutions. Because 'the flowering of any type of regime requires the mature development of a system of inter-locking political institutions and sets of widely shared political values' (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 12) and to the extent that 'all sustained development must rest on this assumption, development cannot take place in the absence of stable, reliable institutions' (Tyson and Garber, 2001: 6) that reinforces the will of the governed. While knowledge of events and their value are connected to previous understandings, to the understandings of other people, and to social linkages of friendship and trust (Daft and Weick, 1984); 'it takes political institutions to organize these interactions in ways that shape interpretations and preferences' (March and Olsen, 1989: 41).

While early institutionalists like Marx (1844), Weber (1947), Davis (1949), Durkheim (1949) and Parsons (1956) view institutions as the structural embodiment of different sets of a functional and normative order, contemporary advocates of institutional theory (Zysman, 1983; March and Olsen, 1984, 1989; Skocpol, 1985; Williamson, 1985; Hall, 1986; Krasner, 1988; Keohane, 1989; Shepsle, 1989; Weingast, 1989; Moe, 1990; North, 1990) seek to re-establish the importance of normative frameworks and rule systems in guiding, constraining, and empowering social and political behavior. Talcott Parsons' cultural-institutional model strikes a deep note here. As in most of his writings (Parsons, 1937, 1956; Scott, 2001: 25–6), Parsons stressed the subjective dimension of institutions, whereby individual actors internalize shared norms so that they become the basis for the individual's action. But in his analysis of organizations, Parsons shifts attention to the objective dimension: a

system of norms defining what the relations of individuals ought to be. He argues that 'these wider normative structures serve to legitimate the existence of organizations (institutions) but, more specifically, they legitimate the main functional patterns of operation which are necessary to implement the values' (Parsons, 1956: 27).

> As organizations (institutions) become infused with value, they are no longer regarded as expendable tools; participants want to see that they are preserved. By embodying a distinctive set of values, the organization acquires a character structure, a distinctive identity. Maintaining the organization is no longer simply an instrumental matter of keeping the machinery working; it becomes a struggle to preserve a set of unique values. (Scott, 2001: 24)

Traditional and recognized institutions engender a stabilizing effect and reduce the burden of decisional analysis involved in the process of seeking immediate remedies for seemingly intractable social and political problems. In the same way that interest groups reinforce democratic pluralism, institutions provide the legitimate infrastructure that makes popular democracy possible, or even efficacious. In countries like Nigeria, where institutional decay has reached incomprehensible proportions, the sun may already be setting on its nascent democracy. As the process jolts and sputters, key institutions of law enforcement have practically been abdicated. The public safety system has been overtaken by extra-judicial vigilante groups, while the court system and *justice* itself has been deeply politicized and compromised. The mission of the bureaucratic institutions has equally been co-opted to serve such interests that are unconnected to their original mandates. The army, with its own sets of rules and doctrine, has taken over law enforcement now conflated under the guise of national security. The result is more than 200 civilians shot dead by army personnel after they were sent in late October 2001 to the Benue state of Nigeria to contain ethnic and religious strife between three ethnic groups.

While institutions help to maintain consistency and, perhaps, predictability in the behavior of political actors but even when performance fails to meet expectations, they provide a natural basis in the search for new solutions.

> When individuals enter an institution and encounter a new situation, they try to associate it with a situation for which the rules already exist. Through rules and the *logic of appropriateness*, political institutions realize both order, stability, and predictability, on the one hand, and flexibility and adaptiveness, on the other. (March and Olsen, 1989: 160; my emphasis)

In the same way that institutions enhance democratic competition, they also mitigate the chances of personalizing administrative issues into political conflicts. Hence, 'a major activity of political institutions is educating individuals into knowledgeable citizens' (March and Olsen, 1989: 161).

A knowledgeable citizen is one who is familiar with the rules of appropriate behavior and with the moral and intellectual virtues of the polity and who, thus, knows the institutional reasons for behaviors and can justify them by reference to the requirements of a larger order (MacIntyre, 1988). Institutional durability and legitimacy is enhanced the more an institution is widely integrated into a larger political order in such a way that changes in one institution will necessitate reciprocal changes in others. Though collective action dilemmas generally lead to the creation of institu-

tions to solve them, 'institutions, on the other hand, provide the means by which cooperation dividends are captured; and nothing inherent in the logic of these approaches makes them antithetical' (Shepsle and Weingast, 1995: 22). 'By shaping change to make it more consistent with existing procedures and practices, institutions maintain stability in the face of pressure to change' (March and Olsen, 1989: 63).

Empowering institutions

The concept of institutions as utilized in this article goes beyond the structural characteristics. It includes such elements as the rule of law, traditions and customs, etiquette, obeying traffic conventions, press freedom, systems of bureaucratic accountability, genuine electoral participation, political responsiveness, independent judiciary, impersonality of office, sanctions, and other normative considerations of public office. The African political culture must also cultivate a new behavioral norm among the citizenry. The average citizen must come to accept the necessity and importance of critical institutions and by obeying the rules that govern the existence of these institutions, s/he invariably gives it legitimacy. But when traffic conventions are violated because there is no police officer around the corner; when speed limits are constantly abridged; and when public officials are bribed to do that which they are already being paid for by the government, then the people become reluctant accessories to the decay and ineptitude confronting institutions in Africa. More often than not, the law itself becomes the victim. When simple rules of social conduct are adjudicated outside the laws of the land and without any credible challenge to this kind of behavior, there is the tendency that the people will eventually come to accept and internalize this as a standard practice. Without regard to the conventions that stipulate the nature and scope of the relationship between the government and the governed, between individual citizens and others, it would be very difficult to create a favorable environment where rule of law would enable the process of democratic consolidation.

In his work *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Ake (1996) bemoans the fact that 'there was little concern about how the political structures and practices, the administrative system, or even the social institutions of a country might affect its possibility of development'. He concludes that 'while the institutional environment in Africa has become so complicated and so important in determining how people behave, any development paradigm that takes this environment for granted will not be a useful tool for the pursuit of development'. In the developmental process, even 'the traditional institutions, often castigated as "outmoded", can be very useful' (Ayittey, 1998: 312). In the structural-functional tradition, *institutions* create structure and *structure* creates *function*. What Africa needs most are *functional* institutions.

Conclusion

In this article, three fundamental issues have been addressed. First, Africa's democracy does have its peculiar conditions which are rarely recognized; second, that the failure of democracy in Africa is not due to the decay or absence of the 'state' system but is simply due to the weakness of institutions; and third, that democracy as an

objective is generally possible within African states but the approach to its attainment needs to be redefined and redirected from what currently obtains. 'While Western democracies, especially France and the United States, and the Soviet Union were notorious for their willingness to buttress "friendly" African dictators during the heyday of the Cold War' (Sandbrook, 1993: 99), 'the retreat from Africa by these former cold war patrons, may have therefore unleashed internally disruptive rather than democratic politics' (Chege, 1995: 329). Adapting the structural-functionalist theme of early socioanthropologists and the neoinstitutional thesis of contemporary institutionalists, it is argued that the development of *institutional capital* must be given precedent if the democratic impulse in Africa is to be successful. By institutional capital is meant the acquisition of such instrumental objectives as academic institutions, health-care agencies, robust political parties, effective judicial systems, independent press agencies, acceptable cultural and political conventions, effective civil service and banking systems, recognition of traditional and cultural power hierarchies, constitutional law and order, the right of plebiscite, and other critical elements of political development.

Institutions provide integrative norms and sanctions that affect the ways in which individuals and groups become activated within and outside established rules of appropriate behavior, 'the level of trust among citizens and leaders, the common aspirations of a political community, the shared language, understanding, and norms of the community, and the meaning of concepts like democracy, justice, liberty, and equality' (March and Olsen, 1989: 164). The contemporary orientation to nation-building and state consolidation which tends to focus change at the top should be re-evaluated in favor of a more horizontal and society-based approach. There should be a redirection of focus on institution-building rather than nation-building. Effective institutions will, in turn, yield effective nation-states.

A most acceptable framework for the democratic experience is that it has to be constitutive, consensual, and reciprocal. Hence, a 'satisfactory institutional solution must cope with the need for exchange, the problem of enforcing deals, the problem of extending the life of deals, and the necessity for making deals robust to unanticipated events' (Shepsle and Weingast, 1995: 11). These seem, in very fundamental ways, to reflect the immediate and long-term challenge to Africa's democracy and development.

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