

# **Historical Analysis of Political-Democratic Liberation in Africa: A Review Paper**

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## **Abstract**

The consolidation of African Democracy hinges on the call for true Africans to understand their own socio-cultural evolutions that synchronizes with a discerning choice of political ideologies and types. This to an extent will minimize the losses made as a result of a wholesale imbibing of western democratic ideals that are seemingly alien to the African traditional and historical construct. This notwithstanding, the indigenous Africans have been partly accused for worsening their plight as a result of their inability to handle their socio-cultural and political transitions well. Colonialism and imperialism have also received some bashing. Unabashedly, under six thematic areas this review article brings to the fore some of the pertinent issues pertaining to the political/democratic liberation of Africa. The question is, has Africa been able to unfetter itself to gain what we have referred to in our working title as political-democratic liberation?

**Keywords:** Politics, Democracy, Liberation, Africans, African Countries.

## **1. Introduction**

Philosophers throughout the ages, from Plato to Marx among others have striven to analyze the nature of politics, both in terms of the state and the obligations of the individual within it. In addition to this, there have also been different analyses and considerations on the different types of political structures and constitutions of the world. Obviously, the word politics does not limit itself to the administration of the state or a certain organization. There is a problem

of defining politics, more so in the African context. Raymond Plant believes that we cannot “attain a ‘real’ definition of politics which can be used independently of the ideological preferences of political agents. This means that we cannot possibly get an objective definition of politics. According to Okwudiba Nnoli, none of the “pre-colonial societies carried on those activities, which today, we closely and popularly associate with politics. For instance, Athenians allowed all free adult citizens to participate and interact together in the political administration of the *polis*, (the Athenian city-state). They usually met in a place to debate issues affecting their society and took common decisions together. There was wide spread of involvement of people in political life in Athens, and this motivated Aristotle, a Greek philosopher of the time, to argue that “man is a political animal.

Concerning the history of Africans, politics “has been more the rule than the exception for mankind as political activities has been confined to a tiny minority in the society, this makes it different from that of Athens’. This confirms the words of J. Philip Wogaman when he says that we cannot reduce politics to science simply because “each political situation is unique and that political history presents us with novelty at every turn. This seems to be the case in Africa. The political history of almost all African countries is unique though, each individual country sometimes identifies itself with other African countries; it does not necessarily set the right or ample stage for Western or American politics. The thrust of the argument has been what works in other parts of the world might not work in Africa because of its nature and structure. The Athenian Democracy is thus far a democracy which laid emphasis on the involvement of *free adult citizens* and not servants. Politics as practiced by the Athenians precluded slaves or bondsmen from engaging in the existing politics. What Aristotle could have meant by man being a political animal was that only the free Athenian citizens were political beings.

In recent times, African thinkers have earnestly tried to identify factors that are shared in common by all forms of political systems either among the Masai of East-Africa, Senufor of la Cote d’voire, Lozi of Zambia, Mchaga of Tanzania, Igbo of Nigeria, Asante of Ghana or the administration of these states as countries. In a working definition, African politics has been known to mean “the distribution of social services, amenities and social welfare facilities to the various geographical and population centres of the African countries. Again, Nnoli postulates that the definition of politics today is associated with state power. He stressed that politics may be correctly defined as all those activities which are directly or indirectly affected with the seizure of state power, the consolidation of state power and the use of state power.

The history of political life in Africa confirms the existence of these three interrelated dimensions of political life. By *the seizure of state power*, we take it to mean the coming into position of dominance in the society a new ruling class. We could state it differently to mean “the assumption of power by a ruling class together with the introduction of fundamental changes in the way of life of the people. When a new ruling class comes to power, their nature and interests become the motive force for the reorganization of the entire socio-economic, political, intellectual life and cultural relations in the society. Illustratively, the seizure of state power is evident in the colonization of Africa. Once the colonialists had succeeded in conquering many African countries, they extended their empire and created new governments, new culture, new religion, new economy, new production, all of which expressed their motives and interests.

Once state power has been seized, the major task of the new ruling class is to find ways of *consolidating* this power. This means that the ruling class has to make sure that people respect and obey the authority and the new established laws, without coercion. Here in Africa, to accept new pattern as morally right and to internalize it may be elicit some resistance. But after a while the populace will get used to the new way of life. During the onset of the colonial system in Africa, the colonialists used force to employ labour, increase taxation,

introduce foreign currency, create artificial scarcity and above all used brutal punishment to force the few courageous Africans who opposed their idea. So as people learnt the high risk involved of not adapting to the new ways, they began to adjust and accommodate the new ways of life, the colonial life.

In term of consolidation, African politicians have learnt to influence their electorates such that they will always want to return them to power at the polls. In the quest to return to power some even change or tried changing the constitutions of their respective countries. Some succeeded while others did not. If the power is seized through coup d'état the new junta will work to prevent any counter coup and will try to win widespread acceptance among the armed forces and the populace.

Immediately state power is sufficiently consolidated, *the use of state power* will be primarily for the benefit of the ruling class. The most obvious cases of the use of state power occur in international relations. When Uganda, for example, sends troops into the diamond rich Congo DR, it is employing state power in posit of the objective of the Ugandan irredentism. Similarly, America uses the same power to when it invades and bombards the Talibans in Afghanistan in her fight against terrorism.

Let us turn our attention to democracy; according to F.A. Olajide, there is “no universally agreed definition of democracy. But what standards should be used to determine whether and to what extent a government or organization is democratic? Is an organization democratic simply because its leaders say it is? In this light then, there is the need to adopt at least a working definition of the term. One of the commonest definitions is that democracy is the government of the people by the people and for the people. This definition seems to lay emphasis on mass participation in government.

Again, the idea of mass participation in government (democracy) started in Athens around fifth century BC. According to some historians, the meaning of democracy at this time was somewhat more precise and was not generally in dispute. It was seen that democracy was a system of rule suitable for small political units, such as a *polis*, the city-state. For only in such units, it was argued, could the people themselves see what was happening at a close range, and participates in it. Generally speaking, that was how the ancient Greeks, particularly the Athenians, perceived democracy. During this time, the Athenian citizens used to meet in a public square to make political decisions regarding their state. There was freedom to raise any issues of benefit to the polis and discuss it. Decisions were reached only after a careful consideration of all arguments; and in a case of serious divergence of opinions on any matter, it was settled through balloting, and the majority decision would be regarded as the will of the assembly. All this required a long process because, in democracy, people have the final authority, they have the right to make or at least influence decisions that affect their everyday lives. This type of democracy is known as **direct democracy**. In fact, the term itself comes from the Greek words *demos*, meaning “people”, and *kratos*, meaning “authority.”

In modern times, such an idea of mass participation in government as carried out by the early Athenians cannot be practicable, considering the population of modern states. In modern sense, therefore, through voting, people could elect representatives who would then take political decisions on their behalf. Thus, democracy as the rule by the people is understood, not as mass participation, but as representative democracy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are those who argue that **direct democracy** makes it exceedingly difficult to arrive at a broad base of consensus on issues, and that in an entity of any meaningful size, direct democracy cannot run efficiently or effectively for the good of all. On the other hand, there are those who argue that **representative democracy** eventually degenerates into a few people grabbing all the power and making decisions that advance their goals and interests at the expense of those they represent.

Generally, the question of whether democracy exists in a particular society and in what form is to be determined primarily by the nature of the struggles within the society. The proposition is that Africa is no exception. This paper therefore has been organized into six thematic areas: Politics and the stages of democracy in Africa, African bourgeois democracy, African socialism, and political liberalization and democratic transition in Africa. The others include managed transition and national conferences.

## **2. Politics and the Stages of Democracy in Africa**

Nnoli reminds us that colonialism shaped not only the character of production in Africa but also the various struggles in contemporary African societies.<sup>2</sup> We know that unlike the Western capitalist societies and Eastern socialist societies, “colonial and neo-colonial African societies have been characterized by struggles which did not have their struggles in locally induced changes in the system of production and class relations. The primary issue to consider is whether we do recognize that Africans were oppressed by foreigners. Although we could say that the colonizing power practiced democracy at home, it was forced down the throat of Africans based on the need to hold down a conquered people using undemocratic methods. Consequently, the Africans were discriminated against in economic, social and political matters. For years, they were forced to pay taxes without their consent, for example the poll tax system in Gold Coast and other British colonized territories. The others include almost the provision of free labour for public works, low wages and salaries for indigenous African labour for equal work and rank with their white or European counterparts. Also, there was a rampant discrimination in the use of colonial social and cultural facilities as well as racial discrimination. In the ensuing years, the Africans that were educated under the new colonial system or in some African countries like the Gold Coast (Ghana) where the colonial power decided to consult African opinion as expressed through the Legislative Council and other institutional mechanism (such as the Provincial Councils) established for that purpose were exposed to the democratic principles of freedom, justice and equality.

African leaders began to point out the inconsistency between the government of the mother countries and those of the colonies. Equipped with this new democratic ideology, the new African colonial elite confronted the colonial administration with demands for the democratization of the African colonies and the recognition of their democratic right to self-determination and independence.

This struggle took various dimensions and lasted for various period of time in different African countries. Some countries were more radical, some less radical and others lenient in their approach to their quest for independence. The African nationalists, in their struggle for independence, mobilized the African masses behind their democratic demands for equality, individual freedom to participate in political life, as well as freedom of speech and association. At the long run, democratic ideology spread to the African masses and it began to form part of their social consciousness. As it became clear to the colonizing power that Africans meant business, they then made reluctant efforts to democratize the society. Fundamental human rights became necessary in the different colonial constitutions, trade unions were recognized, and political participation was allowed. This brought about political parties which were formed under the tutelage of the colonial power, elections were also organized in which different parties vied for the people’s support. This, in a way, brought the democratic experiments in Africa by Africans. Of course, we should understand that the colonialists took every humanly possible step to discourage the emergence of radical political parties that would oppose not only the colonial administrative system, but also the capitalist system which existed.

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<sup>2</sup> O. Nnoli, *Introduction to Politics*, (1986), 1. Longman Nigeria Ltd.

### **3. African Bourgeois Democracy**

After the attainment of independence in many African countries, there was a major difference between the new democracy of African colonies and that of the western countries. In the advanced capitalist societies few achievements were recorded. For instance, democratic values and principles which operated at the level of the superstructure of society and the struggle for equality and justice in the control of state power were anchored in the production process of the society. The process of democratization shifted to the individuals. As the bourgeois had right to buy labour so also the worker had equal right to sell labour; equality in the competition for market, the freedom and equal legal access to the common land. These achievements gave the western democracy strength, discipline, purposefulness and stability, which made democratic values and practice at the level of the superstructure firmly anchored in the system of productions.

In Africa, however, the new aspiring ruling class, or what is referred to as petty bourgeoisie focused attention exclusively at the level of the superstructure. Their role in production was mainly a dependent one, marginal to the production process. Their task was that of the intermediary, shifting resources and values from one part of the society to another. As a result, unlike the western society, their (African bourgeois) "achievements in the struggle for democracy at the ideological and political levels were not anchored in their control of the material base of society, the production system. Therefore, such achievements were quite fragile and have proven to be ephemeral in character. Hence, it is not surprising that as difficulties have beset the new petty bourgeois regimes they have shown lack of discipline, purposefulness and strength of character to continue on the democratic path. At this level things were no longer going smoothly as earlier envisioned by the African rulers. The rulers were very willing to discard democratic practice, and in fact the petty bourgeois leaders exhibited very selfish inclinations in the use of state power for personal aggrandizement: the unity of the nationalist movement was now broken. The leaders were separated from their followers, and their interests were seen as clearly divergent, mutual hostility replaced nationalist co-operation. A new political system now emerges and prevails: capitalism.

Under this new political system which prevails in Africa now, economic, political values and institutions have become luxuries which the leaders cannot afford. The worst is that the leaders are not prepared to leave power, their ambition to remain in power is boundless and they are determined to remain in power and to survive by all means. In this case, leaders will become authoritarians, change or attempt to change the constitutions to suit their selfish motives. African leaders could no longer accept criticism, even from within their own class and party. Any opposition becomes enemy. Anyone who stands up for his people becomes enemy and must be destroyed. In Nigeria, for example, General Abacha eliminated Ken Saro-Wiwa, an environmentalist, who stood for his people. In the same political party, some ministers and Members of Parliament (MPs) are removed, some voluntarily resign just because they can no longer cope with the leader. In fact we could agree with Nnoli that the formal broad national consensus generated and sustained by the anti-colonial struggle has really given way to a division of society into a small clique of rulers in Africa.

### **4. African Socialism**

Although some countries had ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism, the most common model suggested by African politicians as an alternative to bourgeois democracy is African socialism. The characteristics of socialism vary from one politician to another. Nevertheless, all the socialists share the trait of looking back to the pre-colonial African societies for elements of the model. Looking back to the pre-colonial Africa, African socialists find elements of value and modes of behavior which can be the basis for organizing contemporary African society.

The earliest form in which the quest to replace the bourgeois pattern of life was expressed through *Negritude*, a word coined by the late Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal. Negritude sought to distinguish between the African psychology and the American-European psychology. The proponents of negritude argued that the African personality, in contrast to its western counterpart, is unique on the ground that it emphasizes spiritual rather than material values, is oriented to the community rather than individual, thrives essentially on emotions and feelings rather than reason, and is man-centred and, therefore humanistic in character rather than being oriented to efficiency and the creation of artifacts. They therefore argued that African societies should be organized on the basis of these peculiarities so that it can “recapture the African enthusiasm for development. Such an organization was expected to lead to a society quite different from that of bourgeois-proletarian democracy. But the danger of such enterprise, as Nnoli argues, is that it is incapable of providing any guidelines for organizing the neo-colonial African society of today. In fact, Negritude ignores the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the African psyche, “is very selective in the pre-colonial values [negritude] ascribes to the African psychology, oversimplifies the dynamics which underlined the various African civilizations of the past, and pays very little attention to the differences. Although we know that the purpose of negritude is to build upon African pride and engender confidence in the African’s relations with non-Africans, nevertheless, negritude ends up insulting the African intelligence by implying that it is incapable of great technological achievements simply because it stresses on winning friends and influencing people rather than on the transformation of the physical and biological environment. As it appears, it seems that only Senegal could claim to have been guided by negritude in the construction of African socialism. The reason may come from the fact that the engineer of negritude, Senghor, also became the first president of Senegal. Elsewhere, such experiments have been rationalized differently.

In Kenya, African socialism was nothing different from mere ideology that sought to build capitalism in Kenya by relying on African personnel and community development projects called *Harambee*. In reality it hardly contained anything socialistic. Other countries, such as Guinea (Conakry), Algeria and Zambia contained more elements that are truly African in nature, as well as forms that exist in socialist societies. In Tanzania, the leaders were often embarrassed when references were made to the socialism practiced in their country as *African socialism*. This was because of the notorious hypocrisy of African states which practiced neo-colonial capitalism under the ideological guise of African socialism. Nonetheless, Tanzania provided the most articulated basis for the practice of African socialism and also came very close in putting socialist ideals into practice. Julius Nyerere’s socialism was that people’s immediate needs are the motive force for all activities, and these activities ought to be organised by the people themselves without any external influence. The unity and cohesion of family is important, this explains why, for Nyerere, the welfare of the family and society should take priority over that of the individual. While giving a speech at Dar es Salaam University College, Nyerere declared that “it is wrong for one [person] to dominate or to exploit another ... every individual hopes to live in society as a free [human being] able to lead a decent life in conditions of peace with his neighbors. However, Tanzania failed to solve the problems of the population which was a clear indication of the ideological bankruptcy of African socialism. The comradeship earlier preached has now been replaced by individualism.

Apart from the use of the ideology of African socialism as a means to sustain the new oppressive political order in which the people have become the enemy, the African politicians employ various institutional mechanisms. The most prominent is the institution of the life presidency. The aim of this is that the office of the president is to be occupied by a leader until his death. This was initiated in Malawi by law, by a *fait accompli* in Sekou Touré’s Guinea, in Zaire under Mobutu when he declared himself *le Roi de Zaire*, had wanted to work in Cote d’Ivoire, Zambia, Burkina Faso before the populace revolted or the government was toppled by the military. The tendency to cling to power is now the burning issue among the

African politicians. The main reason for this is the fact that they are afraid to relinquish office because they do not trust that their successor will forgive them their highhandedness and other inequities.

To engineer this system, the leader has to do something. Currently, the leaders of political opponents are physically liquidated, accused of serious allegations, or reported 'missing.' Let us look at few examples from around the continent. The former Secretary-General of the then OAU, DialloTelli, desperately 'disappeared' in Sekou Touré Guinea; brutalities characterized Idi Amin's regime in Uganda, Bokassa in the Central African Republic, MarciasNgwema in Equatorial Guinea, Babangida and Abacha in Nigeria, 'eternal' Enyadema in Togo, etc. In fact, what we see in the African politics and the so-called democracy today are "political tin gods, the life-presidents, the political sit-lighters, the ubiquitous one-party systems, the muzzling of the press, the arrest and detention of political opponents without trial, the disappearance of political dissenter, the capricious desire to control what books are read in schools, all these factors have singlehandedly characterized most of the African states.

These atrocities in African democratic political process do not enable the African masses to have a say in the political affairs of their respective countries. In fact these atrocities are a measure employed by the African leaders to silence the political oppositions as well as the entire populace. African politicians are now converting the democratic process into an intellectual fraud and a political illusion, using words and terminologies to confuse people and prevent them from being aware of their true self-consciousness, of their position in society, and of their true interest. Of these entire obvious political quagmire experienced in Africa, how could people have a say in their political affair? No way, they cannot.

## **5. Political Liberalization and Democratic Transition in Africa**

Definitions are odious, they seem to tell us everything about any concept, nonetheless, and political liberalization could be explained as "the reform of a regime by the relaxation of governmental controls on the political activities of citizens. It is often described as a political opening. Such opening occurs when the authorities restore previously denied liberties to individuals and groups in society, and involves freedom of speech, movement, associations, etc. Bluntly put, political liberalization is the reform of authoritarian regimes, and it broadens political competitions.

In Africa, political reform often provokes popular protest in the form of demonstration and general strike. With such impetus, political liberalization is best viewed as a government response to pressures emanating from domestic (and sometimes international) arena. Such pressure occurred in Burkina Faso when President Blaise Comporé wanted to change the country's constitution that would allow him to stay in power "sans fin" (without end); in Cotonou, the capital city of Bénin, in January 1989 when the students of the National University marched out of classes demanding immediate disbursement of long-delayed scholarships and restoring guarantees of public sector employment for university graduates. Thus, we may add that liberalization is "an intermediate phase of transition that occurs between the onset of protest and the emergence of a new regime equilibrium.

Political liberalization has two main key features. First, liberalization is an object of political struggle between incumbents and their opponents. Drawing from African experience, it is clear that in many countries the incumbents want to hold on to power by all means. On their part, opponents continually seek to precipitate ever wider political openings in an effort to reduce the disadvantages they face under the prevailing government. This in fact brings struggle between the incumbents and the opponents. The second feature of political liberalization, as de Walle observes, is that it does not end once and for all. It is an ongoing process that resurfaces in a series of incremental steps. In all, we acknowledge that

liberalization is a step-by-step process of gradual advancement toward a more open political regime, but we must also say that, this process does not preclude temporary setback or permanent reversals along the way, as is always the case in Africa.

At the beginning of liberalization from their formal colonial masters, some African countries such as Bénin, Cape Verde, Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, had ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism. The greatest gains in political liberalization were made when these countries started rights observance and abandoned their commitments to Marxism-Leninism. In these countries, the national constitutions were rewritten to include individual rights for the first time, and those that already had sharply improved their observance of those rights.

In struggles over liberalization in Africa, many challenges are at stake. The first would be the extent to which African regimes would be governments of laws or government of the people. On this ground, neo-patrimonial leaders seek to retain arbitrary altitude over rule-making, whereas the opposition, egged on by lawyers and other activists in their midst, seek to introduce formal and legal constraints on the powers of political executives.

The second issue is about the locus of state sovereignty and the source of political legitimacy. Here the incumbents will appeal to their status as father figures of a symbolic nation; oppositions on their side will convoke national conferences to stake a claim to popular sovereignty. Third, at the heart of struggles over liberalization, there is always the issue of political competition. Obviously, military and one-party leaders *always* prefer monopolistic political arrangements through singular political institution controlled from the top. Here the opponents will seek a much less restrictive framework thereby demanding that a plurality of political forces be allowed to contend for power in a more open and liberal political atmosphere.

The principal constitutional aim of the opposition is usually geared towards uncoupling “the apparatus of the state from the institutions of a ruling military or party. In such cases where there is military rule or one-party rule, or even in multi-party system but which the leaders seem authoritarian, as the case with the Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, the state-run media have to foster the impression that the party, the government and the people are one and the same thing. Such institutional fusion has profound material consequences because the ruling party can easily make use of privileged access to public resources to build its own organization and reward its own supporters. Soon the opposition gets to realize that, in fact, as the transition moves from liberalization to electoral phases, the incumbent leader will not hesitate to use state funding to underwrite his own electoral campaign, and to exercise his command over the state media to gag electoral candidates who hold “non-official” viewpoints. During the presidential election of Ghana in 2000, the oppositions accused the incumbent NDC (National Democratic Congress) party of using the state funds for its electoral campaign.

One interpretation of the flurry of constitution-making that emerged in the early 1990s (during the democratic transition) is that it reflected the gradual emergence of a rule of law. But then a contrary view, according to de Walle, is that “rapid liberalization during this period only drew attention to the shallowness and malleability of basic political rules in Africa. The constitutions that emerged during transitions always reflected both the preferences and neo-patrimonial strongmen and their powers to revise rules almost at will. President André Kolingba of the Central African Republic, for example, dissembled throughout the entire transition, ruling by decree even after conceding the appointment of prime minister, selecting the members of the opposition with whom he would engage in what he referred to as

“national debate,” and suspending the announcement of results for the country’s first presidential election.<sup>3</sup>

## 6. Managed Transition

Talking about managed transition, all African countries try to manage the process of political reform in the sense that they endeavour to master the evolving situation in order to minimize the concessions made to the opposition. According to de Walle, managed transition could be understood as a process where government is “seeking to actively oversee a process of political reform by initiating the process, establishing its timetable, or setting its parameters. Either the military agrees to return the country to multiparty democracy in response to the emergence of protest, or it does so even before protests have erupted, the fact remains that rulers often practice managed transition. For instance, in Nigeria, General Ibrahim Babangida took power in 1985 and promised to return to civilian rule as early as 1986, this was later to be achieved in 1990, then postponed to October 1992, and eventually by August 1993 to an interim leader headed by handpicked Alex Shonekan. In Ghana, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings had first outlined a process of democratization as early as 1987 but had achieved little progress until donor pressures and popular discontent compelled his regime to speed up its lapsed timetable.

Managed transitions occur mostly in military oligarchies—that is, using de Walle’s words, “regimes in which the ruler [governs] directly through the armed forces, having severely circumscribed institutions of competition and participation, notably through the suspension of parliament, the outlawing of political parties, and the emasculation of the civilian judiciary. Among the countries that embarked on managed transitions in the early 1990s were Burkina Faso, Burundi, Guinea, Ghana, Lesotho, Nigeria, Mauritania, and Uganda, albeit with divergent outcomes.<sup>4</sup> If the military is not immersed in governmental affair, it is likely that they could easily adopt a hands-off attitude; but in a situation where military men compose, lead, or participate in the governing coalition, they necessarily played a more directive role, as a military oligarchy. Unlike in Latin America, as observed by de Walle, African military rulers are more reticent about handing over power back to civilians and initiate managed transitions either without great sincerity or in response to popular protest and pressures.

By the late 1990s African military regimes were typically facing a crisis of legitimacy. Their inability to deliver the economic growth they had promised during the take-over, the population’s democratic aspirations, and the military’s own promises of an eventual return to civilian rule all conspired to produce these outcomes with the military highly reluctant and ambivalent about giving up power and its privileges. Indeed, the dramatic events in Nigeria up to and following the June 1993 elections, the outcome of the results of which General Babangida refused to accept, suggests quite openly that at least some of these promises to hand over power back to civilians were less than genuine. Again, because the eventuality of political transition is inherent in the logic of most military regimes, military oligarchs found it possible to respond to the crisis by renewing promises of a managed transition and agreeing to a more precise and perhaps shorter timetable.

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<sup>3</sup> This is just one example that can be drawn from Africa. For the full story on this, see de Walle, pp. 162-165.

<sup>4</sup> Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Teedle, “Uganda,” in *Democracy and Political Changes in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. John Wiseman (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 137-40. Uganda is classified as a military oligarchy, even though it was not a military regime in the normal sense of the word. President Yoweri Museveni, a civilian with no military training, led a military insurgency as the head of the National Resistance Movement. It is determined that the role and prominence of the military in the regime justifies this classification.

## 7. National Conferences

Another tool worth mentioning here is the national conference. National conferences were a major institutional innovation of African transition regimes. Many countries brought in their national elite to address the country's political problems and attempted to formulate new constitutional rules. Although national conferences held were not without any resistance or protest or demonstration or problem, they resulted in governmental changes in many African countries including Bénin, Congo, and Niger. After efforts at repression failed to quell the first political demonstrations, incumbents commonly responded to ongoing protest by conceding that national conference be held. In Congo, for example, the then President Sassou-Nguesso agreed to the opposition's demand for a conference only after the army chief of staff openly declared the neutrality of the army, and unwilling to continue stopping strike activities. The national conferences turned into forums at which oppositions struggled to push liberalization reforms forward which incumbents sought to hold them back.

Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s, African leaders and oppositions proceeded towards national conferences with very different understandings of what it would achieve. The incumbents saw it as another harmless "participatory ceremony" that would end up in providing the existing regime with a much-needed boost, whereas the oppositions understood it as the first step to achieve democratic take-over. Such divided objectives could not last long, and the critical point came when the national conference demanded full sovereign power. The existing regime resisted, as de Walle reported, knowing full well that real political competition would pose grave dangers to its hold on to power. Strong leaders like Paul Biya and Gassingbe Eyadéma were able to avoid the conference or limit its impact; more desperate leaders like Mathew Kérékou and Sassou Nyusso gave in, convincing themselves it had become the best alternative. No doubt, for both of them, the national conference turned into a useful form for negotiating what had become an inevitable loss of power. Thanks to their involvement, each assured his peaceful retirement and absolution from guilt for human rights and corruption abuses.

Although we know that national conferences were a logical deduction of the institutional configuration of the plebiscitary regime, it is important to be aware that international and contingent influences really determined whether or not it occurred. In particular, specific leaders learned lessons from the transition experiences in their neighboring countries. For example, Bénin's national conference was critically and carefully followed in neighboring Togo. Initially, leaders in countries like Bénin and Congo quickly agreed to national conferences whose implications were still not clear and certain. De Walle wrote that as soon as the conferences had changed into "devastating public inquisitions into the regimes-patrimonial malfeasance and incompetence had ultimately stripped the leaders of executive powers. Other leaders understood that they had little to gain from agreeing to a conference and steadfastly resisted opposition demands. According to René Lemarchand, all the national conferences, with the exception of South Africa, resulted, not in compromise or consensus, but in what he called a "zero-sum victory" for one side. Thus, in Bénin, Congo and Niger the incumbents collapsed at the conference itself, in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC) AND Togo, the opposition achieved what is referred to as *Pyrrhic victories* at the conference. They made mistakes that would eventually play into the incumbents' hands and ensure his survival. National conferences were very helpful and politically speaking, useful in liberalization and democratic process.

## Conclusion

We have seen how some African leaders undertook the struggle for democracy and self-governing. We have also seen that some of the African leaders did not live up to what they envisioned. The question is: has Africa been totally freed from all forms of oppression? Has it

been able to forcefully ensure its own democracy and played its own politics? At the moment some gains have been made in Africa's political and democratic transitions. However, the true call could be dialogue, pragmatism and accountability to ensure the consolidation of the political freedoms of the Africans. If this holds to be true, it need not necessarily be a fully western democracy but an adaptation that would integrate positive traditional, sociological and historical systems that have credence and would stand the test of time. It should be that which would ensure development and enforce the laws that promote the fundamental human rights of the citizenry as well as the sovereignty of the African states in general.

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