The New Wave
of Presidential Authoritarianism
in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa

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THE EVOLUTION of political institutions in Francophone Africa is a harshly disputed and variously interpreted topic. There have been several successive waves and generations of analysts preoccupied by the emergence and the development of the African states. The first was that of postcolonial studies, which approached the ways the states issued from the decolonization process were building political-institutional systems of their own (Bayart, 2010). This is the phase of the early 1960s, when researchers were interested in the general aspects of state building, such as the emergence of the constitutional frameworks, the mode of assuring checks and balances, the mechanism of human rights protection and of ethnic, religious and linguistic groups' representation within the decision-making system. Moreover, as these newly born African states were consumed by ethnic, religious and/or ideological conflicts, numerous researchers focused on the origins and development of conflicts and their entrenchment into the local culture and history (Gaulme, 2005). They tried to explain why and how the emerging political landscapes were trapped into conflicts built over the traditional (physical or symbolical) divisions and fractures (Bayart, 1979 [2006]).

This first stage was rather unitary in that almost all Francophone African states were confronted with the same series of problems and challenges (despite their ulterior differentiations): they had to build their institutional systems, to gain (full) control over their territories, to prevent secessions, to manage the emergence of political parties etc.

However, the following stages highlighted the diversification of these countries' political paths. The great majority of the Central-Western African states underwent processes of temporary stabilization under the rule of authoritarian or dictatorial leaders, as it was the case of Benin under Mathieu Kérékou (1972-1990) (Holo, 1979), Guinee-Conakry, under Sékou Touré (1958-1984) (Jeanjean, 2005) or Niger, under the rule of Hamani Diori (1960-1974) and then under the military regime of Seyni Kountché (1974-1987) (Decalo, 1997). In order to follow the developments that happened in those countries, scholars used concepts and methodological tools devised within the theory of totalitarian regimes and used before for analyzing the evolution of the Central and Eastern European countries under communism (Eteki-Otabela, 2001).

On the other hand, in states such as Senegal, a series of somehow semi-democratic and relatively competitive systems managed to prevail, and for those states scholars rather used the same conceptual apparatus that was used to analyses the Western democracies. Even if this apparatus was revisited and adapted to the post-decolonization context, some critiques pointed out numerous flaws that progressively but decisively discarded the use of this too Western-centered approach (Kokoroko 2009; Méledjé 2009).

Finally, the wave of democratization of the early 1990s caused a new conceptual twist: the transition studies paradigm became the mainstream approach. By the beginning of the 1990s, the Central and Western African states, like the Central and Eastern European ones or like the former Soviet ones, passed through a period of democratic enthusiastic fever, and were rapidly labelled as "states in transition" (from authoritarianism/totalitarianism to democracy) (Banégas, 1998). For all these countries, the anticipated horizon of transition should have been the implementation and the consolidation of democratic systems of governance, following the Western European or North American models. Twenty-five years after the starting moment of these transitions, the political scientists need to sum up the achievements and the failures of transition and to consequently project the possible perspectives of these processes.

Along with this relevant evolution of the analytical approaches to African politics, the changes in the "real" Central and Western African societies themselves have not been at all linear. One can very well notice that during the last ten years a series of developments observed in different Sub-Saharan Francophone countries determined numerous researchers to consider that we face a new period of democratic regression (Smith, 2003; Aïvo, 2007; Coulibaly, 2013).

The multiplication of the number of coups d'état (in Madagascar, in the Central-African Republic, in Niger, in Mauritania, in Mali and in Burkina Faso) ended up, in most cases, with the instauration of military-authoritarian regimes. Even when these regimes authorized the organization of elections, those elections proved to be in fact plebiscites for the candidate "chosen" by the juntas in power, as it happened in Mauritania (in 2008, when General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was elected president) or, more recently, in Mali (in July 2013, when Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta obtained a wide victory).

With two exceptions—Senegal and Benin—where there were alternations in power that came out of elections qualified by the international observers as being free and competitive,[1] the other countries in the region regressed as far as the norms for election fairness and organization are concerned and, more generally, in terms of the quality of democracy and governance.

During the last decade, most Francophone African countries decreased their level of democracy.[2] This is rather paradoxical, as it occurs after a period when, under the impact of Central and Eastern Europe's democratization model, several African states took the path of liberalization. Pressured by the "street" and by the international community, the governmental establishments of states such as Benin, Cameroun, Togo or Gabon were forced to organize a series of "national conferences," gathering the opposition, the civil society, the labor unions' representatives and the religious leaders (Robinson 1994). Through a more or less confrontational dialogue, they settled a commonly agreed

agenda to install some democratic political regimes. By the beginning or, in other cases, by the middle of the 1990s, the governments allowed pluralism and the organization of free elections that generally ended up with the victory of the opposition or at least with a major change within the governmental leadership.

In Benin, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville and Togo, thanks to the public debates and with the support and the expertise of several international think-tanks and intergovernmental organizations, new modern constitutions were adopted providing guarantees for the respect of individual rights and freedoms and, to a lesser extent, for interinstitutional checks and balances (Banégas, 1998). Although they did not entirely follow this model of transition through reconciliation and consensus, states such as the Ivory Coast, the Central-African Republic or Guinee-Conakry succeeded to organize, for the first time since independence, presidential and parliamentary elections. In what regional and international cooperation is concerned, organizations such as the Western African Economic Community (CEDEAO) or the African Union consolidated their positions and developed specific instruments to encourage institutional stability in Central and Western Africa (Dalloz and Quantin, 2007).

Given all these previous positive developments, one should consequently ask why we had this obvious democratic setback in the region during the last decade. Before attempting to provide some answers by analyzing the dimensions of the African democracies' regression, it is necessary to briefly approach, in a separate discussion, the cases of Senegal and Benin—two relevant particular cases.

In Senegal, because of the once renewable seven-year presidential tenure, alternations in power have been rare but generally happened in accordance to the constitutional provisions (Diop, 1993). In 2012, the victory of Macky Sall against the incumbent President Abdoulaye Wade was applauded as a proof of the effectiveness of the Senegalese electoral democracy. A series of democratic reforms allowed for the consolidation of the judicial power's strength and of local autonomy, in a country where the consensus resulting from the articulation of the interests of the numerous and powerful Muslim congregations is vital for maintaining social peace. Later on, the constitutional amendment which shortens the presidential tenure from 7 to 5 years (applicable for the 2019 elections) confirms the democratic consolidation of the Senegalese political system.

In Benin, the alternations in power started in the 1990s, when President Mathieu Kérékou, who had governed the country as a dictator, instituted pluralism and conceded his defeat at the end of the first free elections organized in 1991. Kérékou went in opposition, but returned in 1996, for two consecutive mandates, via democratic elections (Amuwo 2003). Moreover, at the end of his second term, he didn't challenge the constitutional provision that prevented citizens older than 70 to run for the presidency and he duly settled the conditions for the 2006 presidential contest. His successor, Boni Yayi, who was also elected for two consecutive mandates, conceded, at his turn, the defeat of his chosen "heir," Prime-Minister Lionel Zinsou, and accepted the election of the previously apolitical businessman Patrice Talon. These recent elections, held on their due term, in April 2016, reconfirmed the institutional stability of Benin. Given the huge mobilization in favor of the opposition's candidate, the will of the Beninese peo-

ple to discard the neo-colonial-like strategies of "satellization" became obvious: Zinsou, who is also a French citizen, was rejected as being the promotor of the economic and geopolitical interests of the former imperial metropole.[3]

Apart from these two particular cases, the entire region seems to go against the early 1990s trend of democratization and to return to the practices of the immediate post-colonial era. Why? Based on what theory and on what interpretative tools could one describe, assess and explain the contemporary democratic regression of most Central and Western Francophone African states? And, more precisely, are there some contextual trends that one could study following an integrated research strategy and consequently drawing some broader conclusions? These are probably key-questions that could provide a better understanding of the ongoing political transformations taking place in the region. As the limited frame of this article doesn't allow for such a wide endeavor—we already tried to accomplish that in a previous collective publication (Mişcoiu, Kakaï and Hetcheli, 2015) —, in the following pages I will just try to explore the most relevant aspects of the democratic regression by giving some meaningful examples. These aspects are: (1) the consolidation of the hereditary transmission of power, (2) the new wave of clientelism, (3) the intimidation and the persecution of the political opponents, and (4) the consolidation of the mechanisms of control by the party in power over all the relevant political actors.

(1) One of the most recurrent practices is the "dynastic" succession to power. The first leaders of the postcolonial states tried to remain in power as long as possible and then to handle the "ownership" over the state to their heirs. The most "successful" case is that of Gabon, a state where the management of natural resources (and mainly of oil) facilitated the entrenchment of the incumbent leaders, under the generous protection of France. Thus, the first President, Léon Mba (1961-1967), who was confronted with a military coup d'état that was reversed only by the intervention of the French special forces, "offered" the ownership over the country to his chosen successor, Omar Bongo, who became first vice-president and then, after Mba's death, president without passing through elections. Omar Bongo stayed in power for 32 years and was able to promote his son, Ali Bongo Ondimba, as the "natural" heir to the presidential mandate (Boundzanga 2016). In spite of this privileged context, Ali Bongo had to face 22 counter-candidates, among whom at least two major ones—the historical opponent, Pierre Mamboundou, and his former ally, André Mba-Obame. Finally, each of these last two candidates obtained around 25%, and Bongo won with 41%.[4]

In 2016, Ali Bongo ran for his re-election. This time, he had 13 competitors, among whom the leader of the United Alternative Front of the Opposition, Jean Ping (a former foreign minister of Omar Bongo between 1999 and 2008, and also a former president of the Committee of the African Union, between 2008 and 2012) and Guy Nzouba-Ndama (a former president of the National Assembly, between 1997 and 2008). Some months before the elections, at least two major premises indicated the very probable re-election of the incumbent President for a new seven-year tenure: a first-past-the-post electoral system and the president's control over the public administration and

over most media outlets. Nevertheless, given the surprising withdrawal of Nzouba-Ndama and of another important candidate, Casimir Oyé Mba (both backing Jean Ping), most international observers appreciated that Ping largely won the elections (with about 60% of the votes). In spite of this almost unanimous consensus, both candidates—Bongo and Ping—proclaimed their victory the night after the elections. While admitting that Ping led by 60% to 40% nation-wide, the Central Electoral Commission (Cenap), controlled by Bongo, delayed the proclamation of the results in the stronghold region of the incumbent president (Haut-Ougoué) and ultimately issued the "results": Bongo won that region by more than 99% of the votes, while the turnout was of about 95%, meaning precisely the difference of votes needed in order to win nationwide. After several weeks of unrest, the supporters of Jean Ping started to defect and, consequently, even if the opposition did not concede victory, the status quo (Bongo remaining president) is maintained.

(2) In its turn, clientelism seems to be one of the major difficulties that the African political systems have been confronted with. After the wave of democratization of the early 1990s, the optimist observers hoped that clientelism would become less salient and would be replaced by some more officially institutionalized relations. However, the recent developments in states such as Cameroun proved that, with the relative political opening and with the organization of pluralist elections, the need of the governmental forces to "feed" their local and regional networks have been more important than ever (Sepo 2017). As checks and balances are not embedded in the institutional system, President Paul Biya, who has been in power since 1982, succeeded to keep and reinforce his domination over Cameroun via a skillful management of the linguistic (Francophone and English-speaking), religious (Roman-Catholic, Muslim, Neo-Protestant), ethnic, and regional communities.

On couldn't better depict the relationships of power in Cameroun than by referring to the traditional institution of the *griot*. Within the tribal-based Central and Western African communities, the communication between the kings/chieftains and the people was indirect, as the first were believed to have a double nature (divine and human) and consequently they belonged to a different "dimension" (discussing directly with the "gods" would have reversed the natural order and jeopardized the whole community). Consequently, communication was mediated by the *griots*, who were the 'spokesmen' of the king and who facilitated the understanding, the "real interpretation" and the spreading of their will to their subjects. As the territories were generally very wide and the access was difficult, the *griots* fulfilled a crucial role: they were the spine that ensured the hierarchic articulation of the tribe, which cohesion sometimes depended on the "proper" understanding of the king's will. The figure of the *griot* remains particularly important in the collective memory of the nowadays African societies (Biebuyck and Mongo-Mboussa 2005).

In Cameroun, the political elite who revolves around the presidency was more than once described as being the new *griots*: they communicate the will of the country's leader to the citizens (sometimes, indeed, according to their own interpretation) and they expect and demand full compliance and cooperation. In return, the new *griots* benefit from some

degree of autonomy in collecting and discretionarily distributing resources, as they retain a negotiated share of them and enjoy the military protection of the government. But, in order to stay in control and to detach from power those whose might challenge the presidential authorities, Biya organized from time to time "anti-corruption" campaigns, such as the spectacular "Epervier" operation, which started in 2004. Through these "cleanup" campaigns, the president purged at his convenience the political establishment and refreshed the power networks, to such an extent that some observers counted that several former successive governmental teams met in Kondengui (the central prison of Yaoundé).[5] Thanks to the permanent maneuvering of this system, Paul Biya has succeeded to remain in power for more than three decades and to dominate his country in an undisputed authoritative way.

(3) When clientelism is not possible (any longer), some African heads of state pass to massive actions of intimidation and persecution against the non-cooperative opposition leaders and the civil society's most vocal and critical actors. This is the current scenario in Congo-Brazzaville, a state led in a semi-authoritarian way by President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who has been in office since 1979 (Ndaki, 1997). In 1992, he was constrained to interrupt his "term" and to organize for the first time free elections. As he belongs to one of the minority ethnic groups of the north, and as in the entire region people dominantly vote according to their ethnic origin, he was expected to lose the elections. With the financial help of the French oil company Elf Aquitaine, who wanted Sassou-Nguesso to remain, he decided to ally with Patrice Lissouba by backing him for the presidency, on the condition to appoint in the new government a majority of ministers issued from Sassou-Nguesso's party. As after he was elected, Lissouba broke the deal and made his own government. What is more, Lissouba succeeded also to win the following legislative elections and to threaten the former president's already decreasing influence. Consequently, Sassou-Nguesso retaliated in the most brutal way possible: he started a merciless civil war that he finally won in 1999, with the financial support of Elf (which was unhappy about losing some oil plants to an American holding supported by Lissouba) and with the military help of the neighboring and "friendly" Angola (Yengo, 2006).

Once the wave of democratization and the instability of the 1990s ceased, in order to be sure that nothing could prevent his perpetual re-election, Denis Sassou-Nguesso purged in an almost permanent way the entire Congolese political class and administration. During the last twenty years, he discretionarily cancelled the authorization of several tens of candidates to run for elections and, in the case of the most persistent ones, he did not hesitate to arrest or to force them into exile. For instance, the organization and the results of the March 2016 presidential elections (when Sassou-Nguesso was triumphantly re-elected with 60% of the vote) were contested by the press and by the leaders of the opposition, especially by Parfait Kolélas, the leader of the CODEHA opposition platform and the son of the historical opponent, the former mayor of Brazzaville and former prime-minister under Patrice Lissouba, Bernard Kolélas (Clark and Decalo, 2012), and by General Jean-Marie Michel Mokoko, who was accused of an attempted coup d'état. These presidential elections took place with numerous opposition politicians

being jailed (and thus unable to run for office) and also with some major civil society movements' leaders placed under home arrest. It was not surprising that, following the elections, one of the other major opposition leaders, Mathias Dzon, the leader of the Alliance for the Republic, declared that "Sassou-Nguesso is not the legitimate President, as he did actually not win the elections."[6]

(4) During the last fifteen years, in Central and Western Francophone Africa, the attempts to control the entire range of relevant political parties have been increasingly numerous and visible. This is due to the diversification of the "para-political" structures of the civic opposition, which are much more able to mobilize the young generations via the social media. Being aware of the impossibility to control the online environment but also about the increasing lack of interest in the classical party-based politics, the establishment's leaders of several countries of this region decided not only to reinforce the control over the ruling (formerly single) party, but also over all the other sizable political parties.

Togo is a relevant example of a holistic control exerted by President over the entire political spectrum. Faure Gnassingbé, who has been in power since 2005, when he took over the legacy of his father, Gnassingbé Eyadema (1967-2005), has succeeded to hermetically close the party system, by selecting and promoting those trends and those personalities of the opposition who were faithful and obedient to the head of the state (Laloupo 2005, Siliadin 2014). Re-elected for a third term in 2015, Faure Gnassingbé decided to create the official position of leader of the opposition, with specific institutional rights, but also with several duties. To back this innovation, the President invoked the British model and exposed himself to the ironic comments of several NGO leaders, who denounced the official "caporalisation" of the Togolese opposition. But, against all the odds, Jean-Pierre Fabre, the leader of the National Alliance for Change, the main party of the opposition, finally accepted the status proposed by Gnassingbé in order to benefit from the numerous advantages related to this position. According to the presidential decree, in fulfilling his duties the leader of the opposition will have to "defend the superior interest of the nation, to watch for the entire opposition's commitment to the achievement of the national goals […] and to participate, when invited, along with the representatives of the government, to all the official public events.[7] Obviously, by creating this position, President Gnassingbé silenced the opposition and discarded any future claim of Fabre and Fabre's party to embody an anti-establishment platform at the next round of elections.

Conclusions

WHAT CONCLUSIONS could one draw from this brief analysis? First, we observe that the entire Francophone Central and Western Africa is subjected to a metamorphosis of the classical ways of exercising political control (brutal authoritarianism, violence, blackmail, threats etc.) to some more sophisticated methods of imposing political hegemony. Among those methods, three seem to work most effectively: constitutional "engineering" (playing on the number of terms-in-office, on the age

limits, on the length of the presidential tenures), electoral legislation's "harmonization" (changes of the electoral system's different provisions, including the electoral lists and the conditions to be fulfilled in order to be recognized as candidates), and the extension of the various mechanisms of political clientelism.

A second major conclusion would be that the practices of conservation, reproduction and family-based transmission of power have remained untouched. Here, one could also assess the fact that the only evolution concerns the degree of subtleness and indirectness of the generational transmission of power and the complexity of the processual mechanisms of such practices. Before, the "sons of X" were naturally considered the heirs of their fathers, whatever their official or unofficial role (sometimes none) could have been within the political system and within the wider society. Nowadays, the African authoritarian leaders make substantive efforts to hide the process of generational transmission of power under a thicker or thinner veil of institutional complexity.

Finally, we can conclude that, for most Central and Western African long-lasting leaders, the period of incipient democratization of the 1990s was nothing more than a short historical parenthesis. Given the current international context of insecurity and instability, these leaders pretend they have even more reasons to enhance the control over their societies. On the other hand, the popular movements supported and mobilized by the civil society, even if they are only embryonic for the moment, oppose these new authoritative trends in an increasingly active and coherent way. So, while admitting that the Arab Spring is unlikely to be immediately followed by an "African Spring," the new wave of authoritative presidentialism is about the produce a much more important counter-reaction of contestation than was the case in the past.

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Notes

1. http://www.un.org/africarenewal/fr/magazine/ao%C3%BBt-2011/elections-en-afrique-entre-progr%C3%A8s-et-reculs.
2. http://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/156442-challenge-violent-conflict-democratic-regression-west-africa-jibrin-ibrahim.html.
3. https://www.opinion-internationale.com/2016/03/13/le-plus-francais-des-candidats-nest-pas-celui-quon-croit_41502.html.
4. According to the Gabonese electoral code, the President is elected in a first-past-the-post system.
5. http://www.africa-info.org/societe/4836-cameroun-operation-epervier-liste-des-personnalites-et-leurs-supposes-comptes-bancaires-.html.
6. AFP, 15 June 2016.
7. http://beninmondeinfos.com/index.php/monde/33-afrique/1358-togo-jean-pierre-fabre-promu-chef-de-l-opposition-un-cadeau-empoisonne.

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Abstract

The New Wave of Presidential Authoritarianism in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa

In spite of the general wave of democratization of the 1990s, during the last decade, most Francophone Central and Western African states have witnessed a process of democratic corrosion to the point that numerous scholars believe there is a process of political regression to authoritarianism and event dictatorship. Within this article, I try to weigh the existence and magnitude of this democratic regression by breaking it into several dimensions related to the political and institutional frameworks and to the practices of power control and power projection. In order to support my arguments, instead of doing an in-depth country-based case study, I give several relevant examples from different countries of this area.

Keywords

presidentialism, Francophone Africa, authoritarianism, elections, democracy