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DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH: THE CASE OF WEST AFRICA

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Abstract

Following years of unprecedented economic growth and technological transformation in Africa, preceded by decades of poor economic performance and bad governance, Africa as a whole has become a vibrant arena for democracy, civil society activism, and robust efforts, such as through the participation of young educated, middle class youth, regional organizations like the African Union and ECOWAS, to advance democratic and constitutional rule across all countries albeit with many challenges. This is more evident in West Africa as the region strives to enhance accountability and to provide support for the sustenance of democratic systems; elections have taken center stage despite records of conflict and mal-governance that have marked severe setbacks for the continent. This paper examines how the recent boom in economic growth is affecting democratic transition in West Africa by reviewing the most recent literature on this subject. In other words, the paper focuses on how the economic and technological transformations, a process which has been accelerating over the past decades, is changing the dynamics of politics particularly when it comes to voting and evaluating political leaders. It also accesses the crucial role of the regional bodies and big countries like Nigeria's role in this new landscape. In order to understand the complete transformation of events and factors which are responsible for the historic changes, due assistance was taken from the concept of modernization. It concludes that economic growth makes a huge difference in the effort to build strong political institutions but it alone is not a panacea, but it offers room for hope as elections have now become the main means through which power transitions occur.

Key Words: Democratization, Economic growth, West Africa, Elections, Middle Class

DEMOKRATİK GEÇİŞ VE EKONOMİK BÜYÜME: BATI AFRIKA'NIN DEĞERLENDİRME

Özet

Yıllarca süren zayıf ekonomik performans ve kötü yönetişimin ardından Afrika'da benzeri görülmemiş ekonomik büyüme ve teknolojik dönüşüm sonrasında, Afrika bir bütün olarak genç eğitimli, orta sınıf gençler, Afrika Birliği ve ECOWAS gibi bölgesel örgütlerin, birçok zorlukla olsa da, tüm ülkelerde demokratik ve anayasal kuralları ilerletmesi ile demokrasi, sivil toplum aktivizmi ve sağlam çabalar için aktif bir arena haline geldi. Bu dönüşüm, hesap verilebilirliği arttırmaya ve demokratik sistemlerin sürdürülmesine destek vermeye çabaladığından dolayı Batı Afrika'da daha belirgindir; seçimler, kıtada ciddi aksaklıklara yol açan çatışma ve kötü yönetime rağmen gerçekleştirilebilmiştir. Bu çalışma, ekonomik büyümedeki son patlamanın, Batı Afrika'daki demokratik geçişi nasıl etkilediğini bu konudaki en güncel literatürü gözden geçirilerek incelemektedir. Bir başka deyişle, son on yılda hızlanan bir süreç olan ekonomik ve teknolojik dönüşümlerin, özellikle siyasi liderleri oy kullanırken ve değerlendirirken, siyasi dinamiklerini nasıl değiştirdiğine odaklanıyor. Ayrıca, bu yeni manzara içinde bölgesel kuruluşların ve Nijerya gibi rolü büyük ülkelerin rolünü inceliyor. Tarihsel değişimlerden sorumlu olayların ve etmenlerin tam dönüşümünü anlamak için, modernleşme kavramından gerekli yardım alındı. Aynı zamanda, ekonomik büyümenin güçlü siyasi kurumlar oluşturma çabasında büyük bir fark yarattığını, ancak tek başına her derde deva olmadığını, ancak bir ümit ışığı olduğunu savunuyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Demokratikleşme, Ekonomik büyüme, Batı Afrika, Seçimler, Orta Sınıf

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, the study of democratic transition has grown into one of the most important fields of Political Science among researchers on African politics. It is also one of the most debated and controversial subjects in political science discourse. Democracy as a system has been with humanity for millennia. It is the standard in which government around the world are measured. From America to Europe to Africa it is seen as the best system of governance (Ake, 1991). The end of the Cold War and the rapid spread of globalisation and technology foster the spread of the idea of democracy throughout the world.

In the 1970s and 1980s, what political scientist Samuel Huntington called the "third wave" of global democratization led to breath-taking political changes in the world, starting in Eastern Europe, soon spread to Latin America parts of Asia and Africa (Huntington 1991). There was a modicum of hope in Africa that after many years of the "Big Man" syndrome, Military rule, and One-Party Politics, the dawn of democracy was finally arriving in Africa. But few years later, democracy, as we know it in the textbooks and practiced in West and other advanced countries, became a distant dream and

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illusory. Noteworthy, by the end of Cold War, there were only three countries in Africa, Senegal, and Botswana, that could be described as democratic with periodic multi-party, free and fair elections. (Meredith, 2011)

For much of the 1970s towards the end of the 20th century, Africa was known as the byword of War, hunger, repressive regime, rapacious and despot leaders. Television viewers and news readers were inundated with images and stories of dying African from internecine civil wars and famine. This prompted many observers to label Africa a doomed continent. (Meredith, 2011). However, since the turn of the millennium, Sub-Saharan Africa has turned things around and achieved impressive economic growth. The narrative of a rising Africa began to take shape amid mixed feelings, emotions, and debates across the academic, socio-economic and political spheres. While the boom is on, many African countries have started to witness some level of political tolerance, institutionalization of governance, periodic elections as well as constitutionalism, sparking the fourth wave of democratisation in many parts of the continent particularly in West Africa.

Without discounting the value of previous research on this topic, this paper aims at filling in a large lacuna within the literature on economic growth and democratisation and also contributes to literature that has examined the relationship between Africa's growing middle class and political participation. Additionally, the research contributes to the academic community's only very nascent understanding of how and to what extent recent presidential elections in Senegal, Nigeria, Benin and Ghana is impacting on West Africa's quest to be a stable and democratic region that changes its leaders through free and competitive elections. Additionally, the role of regional organisations like The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union will be highlighted. The overarching goal of this research is to deepen the emerging understanding in politics of how the peaceful handovers of power from an incumbent president to a democratically elected president which is highly fuelled by economic transformation is potentially transforming the political landscapes of West Africa, in the context of a rapidly evolving economy.

1.2 Literature Review

There have been a plethora of large and small-scale studies and anecdotal evidence used to highlight the politically salient impacts of economic growth on democratisation. One of the most classic work in this area is Downs' seminal work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) which pointed out the irrationality of voting, and the opportunity costs associated with political participation why people do vote (or participate) and who does vote (or participate) are of huge interest to researchers in political science. Previous studies notably by Lipset (1959) had shown a significant and positive correlation between economic development and democracy. Lipset believes that the richer the nation, the more likely it is to sustain democracy. It was also one of the first articles to address the modernization theory of development in an empirical fashion. While countries may switch from authoritarian to democratic government at any level of development, they are much likely to remain democracies if they rise above a certain threshold of per capita income, this suggests that there may be something in the process of economic development that makes democracy more likely (Fukuyama 2013).

According to the Classical Modernisation Theory, economic development breeds social mobilisation by creating new social groups who are conscious of themselves as people with shared interests, identity and value (Fukuyama 2014). In the wake of industrialisation with economic boosting creates new social groups, such as workers, students, professionals, managers. These new groups create political change by demanding participation in the political system. In 18th century Europe, for example, after the beginning of the industrialisation revolutions, trade unions were set up that demand higher wages, better and safe working environment and support political parties which in turn win elections like the Labour Party in the UK and Social Democratic Party in Germany (Fukuyama, 2013). Not all economic factors, conditions, and environments are equally conducive to transitions to more democratic regimes, nor are they all equally supportive of maintaining the achieved level, let alone advancing it. Great variations that have been observed have allowed for an array of substantiated standpoints pertaining to the matter. Cross-national studies have established the existence of a broad middle class alone is not enough to bring about liberal democracy. But it is incredibly critical in sustaining it. (Lindberg, 2009).

Democracy as a system has been with humanity for millennia. It is the standard in which governments around the world are measured. From America to Europe to Africa it is seen as the best system of governance. Attempts to define democracy have been innumerable. Disagreements on their validity have been equally frequent. In the previous century, the modern discussion in political literature dedicated to democracy has seen many approaches to defining democracy, deliberative, substantive and procedural being among the most prominent ones. While different observers and analysts see democracy differently, this paper takes the definition of Huntington which put free and fair elections as the benchmark for democracy. For him, a country or system is democratic "in so much as its most powerful decision-makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible for votes" (Huntington 1991:7). This focus on the electoral process has later often been criticized as narrow, overly minimalistic, and insufficient. Indeed, it is not hard to be misled by an oversimplified understanding of these words.

Despite Huntington's emphasis of certain freedoms, he too makes this point: "democracy does not mean that problems will be solved: it means that rulers can be removed: and the essence of democratic behaviors is doing the latter because it is impossible to do the former. disillusionment and the lowered expectations it produces are the foundation of democratic stability. Democracy becomes consolidated when people learn that democracy is a solution to the problems of tyranny but not necessarily anything else (Huntington, 1991, p. 263). Huntington argues that election is what resurrects credibility and legitimacy to a leader who is lacking both. Elections help revive declining credibility and is also the global trend in which leaders are chosen. "Elections are the sirens of democracy because they induce peace, enable temporal horizons and "incessantly rekindle our hopes". (Przeworski, 2004).

The term "democracy" has, therefore, varied in its meaning, ranging from those deemed narrow and insufficient, usually concentrating on electoral processes, over those that call for wider institutional, social, economic, and other requirements, to those that encompassed such a wide and numerous variety of factors, that it made the concept almost completely elusive, and the fulfilment of such conditions close to impossible.

1.3 Economic Development in Africa

African countries started to gain independence in the aftermath of the Second World War after going through many decades of colonial rule, which was preceded by a brutal slave trade that bereft the continent of the much-needed human resources to develop. The newly independent African states were enjoying some amount of wealth as commodity prices skyrocketed due in large part to the industrial revolution and oil-rich African states like Nigeria, Algeria, Libya and Egypt to name a few, experienced an economic boom due to high demand for oil in the Northern countries. In the 1980s this boom burst and left many African economies in distressing financial situation. Poverty which was prevalent became endemic. Determine to contain the contagion or spillover effects, Western countries chipped in to "diagnose ailing economic with comprehensive remedial measures" (van de Walle, 2001, p. 11). These measures were contained in a package dubbed "Structural Adjustment Programme" in short 'SAP' as it is widely called.

The Structural Adjustment Programme was coined by Robert McNamara, the then World Bank chief. The SAP is a policy recommendation to African leaders to diagnose "decaying African economies" as Dambisa Moyo said in her *Book Dead Aid*. The reforms advocated for by the Bretton Woods Institutions (The World Bank and The International Monetary Fund) through SAP include inter alia retrenchment of workers in "the over bloated civil service", privatization of the state cooperation that incurred ballooning debts due to corruption, liberalizing the economy, transparency and accountability, good governance and reducing artificial exchange rate to market standards. This, in turn, will spur growth, produce effective and efficient service delivery and help tame a restless population living in poverty.

For a start, many African countries capitulated to these demands as they came with aid money despite stringent conditions attached to the aid package. This harsh economic measure as a condition for aid was a huge threat to the system of patronage and patrimonialism that underpinned the rule of most Africa. Desperate to appease some disgruntled and disenchanted supporters on the one hand, facing

Bankruptcy on the other, African leaders had little if any alternative but to sign up the pact (Meredith, 2011). According to figures published by the World Bank, between 1975 and 1990, African countries owe the World Bank a staggering amount of 160 billion US Dollar. This figure is also collaborated by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, an organization run and set up by Mo Ibrahim, a Sudanese telecommunication tycoon, to promote good governance in Africa.

With a diverse economy, this single recommendation was unable to “diagnose African economies”. The situation in some African countries was peculiar so they fell far short to be rescued by the “well- intention but insensitive World Bank and IMF officials”, who did not understand the African problem. According to Dambisa Moyo, some African countries differ in terms of demography institutions and culture. She, therefore, argues that different sort of reforms should be recommended in these different countries if they are to stand on their feet strongly. There is a spin of truth in what she said. Sub-Saharan African Countries are different from one another as the Sahel and the Maghreb countries are different in their situations. (Moyo 2004).

The liberal thinkers always assert that with transparency and accountability, liberalize the economy, good governance, and privatization or entrepreneurship, African countries would inevitably experience growth. They always point out Botswana, Ghana, Cape Verde and Mauritius to buttress their points. For instance, President Jerry John Rawlings and Yoweri Museveni took over Ghana and Uganda respectively with a virtually ruined economy in the late 1980s. Determine to put their countries’ economy back on a strong pedal, they implemented the policies recommended to them by the Bretton Woods institution wholeheartedly and their economy improves remarkably much to the disbelief of many. When Museveni came to power in 1986 after a prolong guerrilla struggle, he inherited an economy that was in tatters; he later presided over an economic boom which rivals that of stable Kenya in the East African region. The same is said about Ghana. It is worth noting that Museveni had reverted to the “big man style of the ruling” and his country no longer hold the enviable position as the economic powerhouse of East Africa as Kenya and Tanzania are now the hubs of the region.

The international development community seems to have decided that structural adjustment is the way to recovery and sustainable growth. Although African governments and leaders disagree with the policy, they have had to go along with it. African governments adjusted for more than ten years, yet arguments about the merits and demerits of the program are still raging. Many critics cited the damages caused by the program which they believe caused prices of social services and staples to rise enormously, and inflation rates soar. These are the kinds of magnitudes of austerity that have earned the IMF the title of mad doctor. “They break down social consensus, cause violent conflict, anxiety and deep despair, and sometimes premature death on a large scale”, especially among children. The fiscal and monetary restraint envisaged by the structural adjustment programme was either abandon by some African leaders or not pursued vigorously at best by others. (Ake, 1991).

By the end of the 20th Century, Africa was almost sinking and wallowing in poverty, civil wars and diseases like HIV Aids was claiming the lives of millions and orphaning many children. Media coverage was very negative. Images of starving children in Africa became among the most popular stories western viewers have to endure with. The *Economist* Magazine, for example, went to an extraordinary length to label Africa as the “Dark Continent” and “Hopeless Continent”. Big music celebrities like Bob Geldof, Bono and movies stars like Angelina Jolie and football legend like David Beckham were active beating the drums for humanitarian assistance to save Africa. As this appeal by celebrities and well-wishers reached its crescendo, an economic tsunami that unleashed an unprecedented growth in Africa was gathering force. After an epic and dark episode of poor growth and large-scale poverty then came the silver lining at the dawn of the 21st Century. Buoyed by a boom in commodity prices and massive demand from emerging markets like India, China, and Brazil and sustained by improved macroeconomic and fiscal management, Africa start to pick up the pieces and attention shifted from a dark continent and “Africa Rising” became the catchphrase.

Africa as a whole, according to the World Bank (2012), between the period from 2000 and 2011 recorded growth rates of more than 4.6 percent per year. The mineral-rich countries like Angola, Nigeria, and Libya were the biggest beneficiaries of this commodity boom but overall Africa as a whole recorded some unprecedented and tremendous growth that help lift millions out of poverty. The number of

African people living below the poverty line has fallen from over 50 percent in 1981 to less than 45 percent in 2012, according to the African Development Bank (2012). At the same time, consumption driven by a mushrooming middle class has risen sharply, offering investors higher returns on investment compared to countries with older and low demographic profiles. The middle class is helping to spur growth within the private sector in Africa as they offer a key source of effective demand for goods and services like housing, banking, insurance that are supplied by private sector entities.

Not only African economically growing it is also better governed. Sub-Saharan Africa made one of the biggest and greatest democratic gains at the end of the 20th and the dawn of the 21st Century. The improvement in governance dispels the arguments sometimes advanced by African autocratic rulers that the continent is too poor, ethnically polarised, and too illiterate for democracy to flourish. The continent, from post-apartheid South Africa to Benin, parted company with one-party rule and the big man syndrome, embraced democracy and held credible elections. Many long-serving rulers at the end of the 20th Century including the military in Nigeria lost their firm grip on power ushering in new blood into the system (Dowden, 2010). However, according to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, there has been overall governance scores which have evolved positively over the last decade but taking a look at the breaking down of the numbers, it is uncertain whether the upward trend will last for the years to come. While this improvement in the political area goes on in the decade to 2016, corruption and bureaucracy declined in almost 33 African countries. This will hamper the efforts in the fight against corruption that are very crucial for effective resource management.

It is not a coincidence, however, that this changes and improvement of governance came right at the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent changed of attitudes by the West towards Africa. Western governments having won the battle of ideas between communism and liberal democracy no longer had strategic interests in propping up repressive regimes merely because they were friendly to the West. Along with the World Bank, they concluded that one-party regimes lacking popular participation constituted a serious hindrance to economic development and placed new emphasis on the need for democratic reform (Meredith, 2011).

This impressive development set off in Africa at a time when growth in the traditional developed world of America and Europe was running out of steam and their economies plunged into the biggest economic crisis since the great depression of the 1930s. This has sparked a huge public debate about both the right approach to economic development and an interest in the burgeoning African middle class as an identity-based group and potential bedrock of political stability and democracy, making it almost the contemporary buzz-topic for scholarly and public agendas in academic centers and global economic fora.

1.4 Middle Class and the Fourth Wave

Until recently not much about Africa's middle class was talked about or at least little attention was paid to it. But now there is a growing attention to the rise of the middle classes in Africa among researchers on African politics. There are contested arguments as to who or what a middle class is and how big is this middle class in Africa. The African Development Bank (AfDB) using a benchmark of \$2, declared that as of 2011 there were already 313 million people – or 34 percent of the continent's total population – that could be considered as middle class (AfDB 2011). While many economists, as highlighted above, tend to approach the middle class issue on the basis of income, sociologists look at the middle class on how the income is earned including occupational status, level of education an asset.

Across Africa, a growing middle class has become the poster child for the 'Africa rising' narrative. Ambitious, aspirational and increasingly affluent, this group is said to embody the values and hopes of the new Africa, with international bodies ranging from the United Nations Development Programme to the World Bank regarding them as important agents of both economic development and democratic change. This narrative, however, obscures the complex and often ambiguous role that this group actually plays in African societies. (Melber, 2016).

The middle class has been a primary moving force behind democratic change. In other authoritarian countries that grew rich, the new middle classes demanded political change. In South Korea, for example, student-led protests in the 1980s helped end military rule. In Taiwan in the 1990s middle-class demands for democracy led an authoritarian government to allow free elections. According

to Huntington “in virtually every country [that has democratised] the most active supporters of democratisation came from the urban middle class” (Huntington, 1991, p. 134).

As the middle class grows in size, they would build a new network of business and society outside of the control of the state. They would gain more education, build more ties to the outside world of democratic ideas and increasingly demand more social, political and economic freedom, as observed Joshua Kurlantzick. Furthermore, development would promote a higher level of interpersonal trust, seen as critical to civic engagement in politics, to open debate and to forming opposition political movements (Kurlantzick, 2013).

Francis Fukuyama argued in *Political Order and Political Decay* that the process of democratisation is rooted in social mobilisation driven by underlying socio-economic change. In nineteenth century Europe, for example, when “industrialisation progressed, it created an expanding middle class and a proletariat”. Many of these groups left the countryside for the urban areas in search of better jobs and this made “available to recruitment by new political parties and susceptible to appeals based on identity politics” (Fukuyama, 2013, p. 430). Sub-Saharan Africa is witnessing a similar trend today. There is rapid urbanisation and a massive number of university and college graduates who are relentless in getting a job that commensurates with their qualification. These are the people at the forefront of political demand and mainly active using social media and the internet in calling for a change of governments that are economically underperforming like in Nigeria, or with poor human rights record like in the Gambia. Fukuyama went further to draw a parallel between the Arab Spring of 2011 and development in Europe following industrial revolution (Fukuyama 2014). The Arab Spring was triggered and carried on by mainly the emergence of larger middle class in the region mobilised by new technologies such as satellite TV station like Aljazeera and social media platform like Facebook, Twitter. Previous democratic waves that swept the world never reached the Middle East and North Africa leaving many observers and analysts wondering why the region was so immune to democratic change. But decades of breakneck economic developments in the Arab region had produced a new middle class and huge number of university and college graduates whose expectations surpass that of the generations before them and is these groups that fear that chances and hopes in life are being stymied by despotic and autocratic leaders and took to the street to demand for political change. In this regard, they make their choices at the ballot box based on policy issues rather than on tribal and cultural lines as elections continue to be a regular fixture on the political calendar of almost all West African nations. As argued, the causality of economic development and democracy is inconclusive and divisive. However, if we consider that democracy should be supported by some preconditions, it is economic growth that creates these conditions for democracy: industrialization, urbanization, widespread of education and literacy, wealth, and a strong middle class which are involved with the protection of their right and issues of public affairs. Karl Marx argued that a society political system inevitably changes when the economic foundation changed, because the former rests on the latter. As societies become more market-oriented, they tend to turn toward democracy. The historical record confirms this connection between market economics and democracy, though naturally with some time lags. Fareed Zakaria observed that all countries whose wealth comes from non-oil revenues, “in the entire world today there is only one country that has reached a Western level of economic development and is still not a fully functioning democracy—Singapore.” (Zakaria, 2008, p. 94). Many of the star economics performers of the past few decades, including the Asian Tigers, Brazil and Turkey which have achieve middle-income status tend towards liberal democracy. This pattern, as Zakaria himself confessed “is the single most important and well-documented generalization in political science” (Zakaria, 2008, p. 94)

However, economic growth alone is not sufficient to create the environment for democracy to thrive if it is not broadly shared. Analysts suggest that the size of the middle class relative to the rest of the population is a key variable in determining how it will behave politically. (Fukuyama, 2013). Despite the tremendous growth registered in Africa and the massive number of people lifted out of poverty, there is still a huge chunk of the population that is still below the poverty line and many development experts including Jeffery Sack still believe that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that has been growing in many parts of Africa has not been translated into real development and shared prosperity (Sack 2005).

1.5 The Role of Regional Organisations

African regional organisations are playing a growing and enhanced role in democratic consolidation. The African Union in 2001 launched the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is a unanimous agreement among African leaders to embrace the ethos and the values of human rights and good governance. The launching of this initiative at the South African city of Durban was greeted with much celebration among Africans and non-Africans alike including Western donor partners and human rights groups. It was widely hailed as a new dawn for Africa where the rule of law and fundamental human rights will be respected. Encouraged by this, the Sudanese telecommunication tycoon and billionaire Mo Ibrahim, launched in 2006 the Mo Ibrahim Prize for good governance, which is a five million dollar award prize to be given to an African leader who voluntarily leaves office while having a good record in terms of both economic performance and governance. Even though the prize is supposed to be given out annually, it has failed to be won several times since its inception; only a handful of African leaders (Nelson Mandela of South Africa in 2007, Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique in 2007, Festus Mogae of Botswana in 2008, Pedro De Verona Rodrigues of Cape Verde in 2011 and Hifikepunye Pohamba of Namibia in 2014) have managed to grab it, highlighting the challenge of governance in Africa.

The Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), which is a regional intergovernmental grouping comprising of sixteen West African states, has also of late placed a high premium on democracy and good governance at the center of its agenda to help foster peace, security and stability in the region. The latest test to this commitment by the group was demonstrated in the Gambia, when after the former President, Yahya Jammeh, who was in power for more than two decades and was seeking for a fifth term in office, lost elections in December of 2016 and refused to accept the results which threaten the peace of the country. The group immediately intervened. First, with diplomatic mediation headed by Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari, and later with a military intervention that ultimately persuaded Jammeh to leave office and go on to exile. ECOWAS actions in the Gambia recently were unprecedented and can serve as a prototype and a blueprint to be repeated elsewhere when a similar situation arises. But for this to be effective there have to be bold, courageous and credible leaders that can lead the race with passion, conviction and sincerity. Sound leadership and partnership that can rival the one orchestrated by Obasanjo, Mbeki, Wade and Kuffour, the leaders behind the setting up of NEPAD, its power and intensity is crucial for this to happen.

Prior to the Gambian Crisis, West Africa as a whole was witnessing positive diffusion effects in which peaceful democratic change in one country spill over to the neighbouring country. This has cemented in the minds of many observers and analysts that democracy is the up and coming thing in Africa. Since 2011, there has been an exceptional wave of polls in sub-Saharan Africa, starting with Senegal spreading to Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia that saw incumbents losing power through the ballot box something unprecedented and unthinkable in previous decades. This is a marked improvement in democratic quality and an encouraging sign in the competitiveness and fairness of elections. While this group of countries is not representative of the whole region, it is diverse enough in terms of levels of economic and political development to provide some helpful insights beyond individual cases and rekindling hopes that change of government can be affected by the ballot box rather than the barrel of the gun which was the norm until now. The developments also demonstrate that coups are no longer simply tolerated: the disgruntled military leaders who seized power (as in Mali in 2011 and Burkina Faso in 2015) immediately came under domestic, international and regional pressure to hold credible elections and return power to civilians.

However, amid worries about "democratic recessions" in both the developed and developing world particularly in Africa, the resilience of many electoral systems cannot be ignored. It has been argued that regular elections, even if flawed and imperfect, improve democratic quality over time (Linberg, 2006). A successful election in the big countries like Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal provided a basis for the widening of the spread democracy in West Africa and underscore the possibility of conducting credible elections in difficult electoral environments and changing leaders through the ballot box.

Nigeria by virtue of its economy and population is the most vital nation in West Africa. It is also the nerve center of West African diplomacy—Abuja, The capital of Nigeria, is where the headquarters of the regional grouping, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is located. Therefore, the example of Nigeria matters the most in the region than those of the smaller, less influential states like Benin

which has been a bastion of democracy for a very long time. According to studies by political scientists Adam Przeworski, Micheal Álvaro Et el, a key indicator in determining the chances of whether a country will democratise is to look at the international and the regional climate. When powerful countries fail to democratise, this diffusion effects affect the neighbour derailing the “causes of democratic change in their entire region” (Kurlantzick, 2013, p. 21). The peaceful and transparent election in Nigeria in 2015 in particular has implications to the advancement of democracy in Africa and this has already started to manifest itself. As the most populous country and largest economy in Africa, Nigeria is the most important country on the continent and has the potential to influence developments not only in West Africa but, indeed, the entire continent. Transparent elections will strengthen the country’s leadership role in the continent, both as an example of successfully resolving conflicts and as a stalwart against undemocratic transitions.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis suggests that the prospect of consolidating democracy in West Africa through elections remains a tough order, though within reach due to increasing political will and participation by young people in the political dispensation. The recent gain in the economic transformation has to be sustained if there is to be any meaningful progress and economic growth needs to be translated into real development and fight against poverty and inequality. Economic growth alone cannot be a panacea to the continent long-held dream of having democratic rule especially when the majority of the people are jobless and hopeless. While the middle class is a key driver for political changes, when it constituted only a tiny proportion of the population let say 20-30 percent, it may not necessarily support democratic movement and may opt to side with anti-democratic forces for the fear that the poor people and populist policies may hurt them.

In his first visit to Sun-Saharan Africa in 2009 as President of the United States, Barak Obama told Ghanaian parliamentarians what Africa needs today is not strong leaders but strong institutions which can spur development and smoothen the transition of power. Many African countries like Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana to name all but just three, are growing both economically and democratically. This is due to the simple fact that any leader who assumes the helm of affairs is always determined to leave a long-lasting legacy before stepping down from office. This promotes healthy competition and it stimulates development by boosting investors’ confidence to invest. The only way that Africa can free itself from the York of poverty, disease, conflict, internal strife and ethnic hatred is by having a leader who enjoys a broad base support. This can only be acquired when the leadership contests in a free, transparent election and serves for a limited term.

Looking towards the coming decades, the subcontinent will face numerous socio-political, economic and security transformations, which carry both opportunities and risks for their societies. One can express hope that with the recent development in Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia will help consolidate this new fourth wave of democratisation and the mantra of peaceful transfer of power after free and fair elections would spread to all the region and African countries in general in the not long distant future. It is hard to predict the long-term consequences or the sustainability of this political development in West Africa. However, history has shown us that the journey of democratisation can be a long, chaotic and a violent process, as in Europe century ago. But unlike Africa today, Europe in the nineteen century had no prior experience of democracy and therefore no clear institution model to follow. Today it has been proven that governments that have strong institutions with legal and democratic contrarian on power has become a normative standard around the world. Despite all the daunting difficulties, there are reasons for optimism. Regional organisations like ECOWAS, Civil Society Organizations, pro-democracy forces and opposition parties are fighting relentlessly for a comprehensive reform of the political process and this is bound to achieve historic gain and signal a better future. For the region of West Africa as a whole, this is a new and historic dawn of growing trend of peaceful transfer of power from one leader to another without creating political crises.

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