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“We might ask whether Africa's new democracies are democracies at all”

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While the small (but noticeable) uptick in Africa’s recent economic growth is not in dispute, its causes are not entirely clear. Like Miguel, I would like to believe that democratic reforms deserve some credit for this unexpected turn of events. Most African countries today hold regular elections, and political leaders in Africa are significantly more likely to leave power voluntarily than through a coup, violent overthrow, or assassination.

Yet it has been frustratingly difficult for social scientists to find robust evidence of democracy’s economic dividends. Analyses of global trends often yield contradictory findings. And there is disagreement both about the data and how it should be analyzed. One recent study, for example, suggests that the poverty-reducing potential of democracies has been overstated simply because the datasets researchers use tend to lack information about the most successful autocratic regimes. Causation is an even harder nut to crack, as there are compelling arguments suggesting that economic growth spurs democracy and not vice versa. Some recent evidence from Africa points to increased spending on primary schools and reductions in infant mortality following the democratic transitions of the early 1990s, but as the graphs in Miguel’s essay make clear, recent increases in GDP per capita have come nearly ten years after the wave of political reforms began.

The absence of convincing evidence linking democracy to economic growth is surprising. One would expect societies with democratic processes to better police the behavior of politicians and bureaucrats, thereby ensuring more responsible policy choices. Societies in which a greater share of the population plays a role in selecting leaders should also have policies that are more broadly beneficial. The story is plausible, and I am still prepared to believe it, but there is reason to suspect that Africa’s recent economic good fortune has little to do with democratization.

We might ask ourselves whether Africa’s new democracies are, in fact, democracies at all. Many observers of African politics were too hasty in crediting countries with having transitioned to democracy, simply because those countries held elections. In 2002 Thomas Carothers famously penned an epitaph for the “transition paradigm,” critiquing the long-dominant notions in aid circles that any move away from dictatorship is a move toward democracy, transitions unfold in a sequence that inevitably results in democracy, and that elections are determinative in bringing about a democratic political order.

Reality looks much messier. The majority of countries that initiated elections in the early 1990s are in what Carothers terms the “gray zone,” as “pseudo-democracies” or “hybrid regimes.” African governments have often done the bare minimum to appease outside donors pressing for political change—holding elections, permitting opposition parties to contest—while avoiding reforms that might truly level the playing field. Many African democracies, in practice, are controlled by a single political coalition that blurs the line between state and ruling party and sees government assets as tools for enhancing its political domination. Recent booms in commodity prices and the growing importance of unconditional Chinese aid and investment further undermine the incentives that might induce leaders to permit real political competition. And a closer look at Africa’s economic success stories—Equatorial Guinea, Chad, Angola, and Sudan (among oil producers); Mozambique, Rwanda, Botswana, and Uganda (among diversified economies)—should give us additional pause. In the last decade, not one has experienced a peaceful transfer of power between political parties. For many political scientists, alternation between governing parties is the sine qua non of democracy.

A less familiar, but equally important, reason for questioning the link between Africa's recent progress and democratization is the fact that democratic politics can have its own pathologies, pathologies that are especially apparent in weak democracies. In highly diverse societies—and Africa is composed of the most ethnically heterogeneous countries in the world—democratic competition is often reduced to an ethnic headcount. Parties are mobilized along ethnic lines, as groups compete with one another for control of the state budget. As we saw so tragically in Kenya in December, politicians can successfully exploit simmering ethnic tension to consolidate support, even when their performance in office would hardly merit re-election.

Moreover, democratic transitions are, by definition, unstable—a fact that might account for the stubborn persistence of civil war in Africa, even during a decade of substantial political liberalization. War scares off foreign investors, distorts the economy, and undermines incentives for good public policy and domestic investment. Democracy can only bridge deep social and economic divides when people have faith that government institutions serve interests beyond those of the group that temporarily inhabits office.

I do not raise the question of whether we can truly credit Africa's recent economic success to its democratic progress in order to rebut the general importance of liberal institutions for growth. But, given the state of African democracy, it seems more likely that rising commodity prices and increasing Chinese aid and investment are doing much of the work. This may represent good news in the short term (and the World Bank has trumpeted it as such), but the danger is that Africa's development miracle will be short-lived. Only a firmer institutional foundation can sustain it.

Democracy can create the conditions for development, but only when its protectors (and strongest advocates)—the voters—are in a position to observe how politicians behave and choose to replace them if they fail to deliver. The good news is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for ruling parties to hang on to power unfairly. Mechanisms that generate transparency—such as access to media, cell phones, and the Internet—are making a huge difference. Exit polling sent strong signals to the opposition in Kenya that they had actually won the election. The public posting of precinct results in Zimbabwe—a key concession won by the Movement for Democratic Change in pre-election negotiations—provided the basis for its candidate's claim to have defeated Robert Mugabe.

More broadly, efforts to shed light on the behavior of governments and inform voters are yielding real benefits. Uganda has been an important laboratory. Greater transparency in public expenditures has led to a dramatic increase in the share of government revenue allocated to education that has actually made its way to the schools. Community-based monitoring of government health centers has inspired higher quality care. And efforts to inform voters about what their Members of Parliament do are radically changing politicians' incentives to be active in the legislature.

Decades of dictatorship coincided with a period of economic decline and stagnation in Africa. That the Amins, Mobutus, and Bokassas now inhabit only the pages of history books may be bearing some fruit, as Miguel argues. But the extent of institutional reform should not be overstated; more work remains to be done. As greater transparency and more credible institutions are established, perhaps the economic dividends of democracy will no longer be so difficult to uncover.

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