

Decolonization and Democratization in African Countries: The Impact of Liberal Democracy on Political Stability

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, the African continent has experienced dramatic changes in the political sphere. Specifically, as mentioned by Samuel Huntington in *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, many Sub-Saharan African countries have undergone democratic transitions, marked by reforms from one-party systems or military rule to multiparty systems with regular elections, a process that prominently features characteristics of Western-style liberal democracy. Despite the fact that African countries employing Western-style democracy have made certain progress in political development and social governance, many African countries that have undergone this political transformation exhibit a lack of political stability. As such, this article studies the development of liberal democracy and political stability in Kenya against the backdrop of the third wave of democratization. Through analyzing the historical and socio-economic contexts of African countries, it argues that the “winner-take-all” logic of the western representative democracy contradicts with the cultural tradition in African countries, which emphasizes social consensus and consultation. Considering the historical problems left since the colonial era, it adds to the difficulty of applying the western democracy in contemporary African countries, and thus results in the incompatibility between the liberal democracy model and the reality of African social contexts. Consequently, it is argued that the democratization process in Africa requires further exploration and more appropriate combination of advanced political institutions and the local contexts.

Keywords: party politics, liberal democracy, African politics, political stability, Kenya.

1. Introduction

On June 25, 2024, the Kenyan Parliament voted to pass a bill that included provisions for increased taxation, which immediately sparked large-scale demonstrations across the country. Although Kenyan President Ruto quickly announced that he would not sign the bill and subsequently attempted to quell domestic unrest by cutting government expenditures and inviting opposition members into the cabinet, political turmoil and protests persisted for over a month. This event foreshadowed the significant challenges facing Kenya’s political landscape and serves as a microcosm of the broader issue of political instability in Kenya and many other African countries. After gaining independence, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), led by key figures such as Kenya’s founding father, Jomo Kenyatta, maintained long-term rule. Following the end of the Cold War, a wave of democratization rapidly swept through East Africa, influencing Kenya as well. One of the most

prominent features of this democratization wave was the adoption of multiparty elections. The 1992 election marked the beginning of multiparty elections in Kenya. However, it is important to note that, like many African countries, Kenya's multiparty elections have been accompanied by political instability. Since 1992, almost every election has been followed by public demonstrations and protests by the losing side, a phenomenon often referred to as "loser politics." Examining the factors that influence political stability in African countries from this perspective constitutes the main focus of this paper.

2. Review of the Third Wave of Democratization

2.1. Causes and Impact of the Third Wave of Democratization

Prior to the 1990s, only three countries practiced multiparty political systems out of approximately 50 independent African countries, while 37 countries operated under one-party rule, and 10 were governed by various military institutions led by military regimes [1]. One-party rule was a defining characteristic of African politics during this period. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the political landscape in Africa began to change. This transformation was the result of both internal and external factors. From an internal perspective, the African economy began to deteriorate in the mid-1970s, and this trend continued to worsen into the 1980s [2]. This economic decline forced many African countries to seek loans from international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Thus far, many African countries ended up with accepting the "Structural Adjustment Programs" proposed by Western countries (Economic Commission for Africa). The implementation of these programs sparked dissatisfaction among the urban middle class in African countries, and in many cases, led to large-scale "street movements" or "urban riots" [3]. Externally, the collapse of the Soviet Union caused many African countries to lose their strategic value in the Western world. Moreover, many foreign aids were offered with strict political requirements imposed on the African recipients. During the Cold War, Africa was one of the battlegrounds for U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Take Kenya as an example: during the Cold War, Kenya aligned itself with the pro-Western bloc, with its first president, Jomo Kenyatta, clearly stating his intention to maintain good relations with the Western world and develop capitalism, thereby ensuring the support from Western countries. However, with the end of the Cold War and the democratic reforms taking place in neighboring countries, Kenya found itself in a difficult position. As time progresses, Kenya president Moi was forced to accept Western demands, reinstating multiparty elections and initiating democratic reforms. This sudden shift brought significant political challenges to African countries, where the foundations of democracy were weak.

2.2. Definition of Western-Style Liberal Democratization

With the existing numerous academic research on democracy, it is difficult to pinpoint an exact definition of Western-style liberal democratization. That said, there are some widely recognized political constituents, such as fair competition between political parties, regular elections, and a basic respect for freedoms of thought, speech, and assembly, as well as respect for the rule of law, highly responsible governance, and the protection of human rights [4-5]. Here, Western-style democracy is defined from the perspective of political and social characteristics. Zhang Hongming suggests that (Western-style) African democratization consists of three distinct but interconnected stages: the initiation of democracy, democratic transition, and democratic consolidation. These stages form a continuous process that progresses step by step, with each stage influencing and deepening the next [3]. Such viewpoint highlights the implementation of democratic procedures. Whereas, it is equally important to point out that the democratization process in African countries was primarily initiated by Western countries, and thus the establishment of political systems were significantly influenced

by the Western-style democratic model. As previously mentioned, the Western world had a profound impact on African countries during the Third Wave of democratization. Therefore, the democracy-oriented political systems established in African countries encompass a great number of Western political elements, including the multiparty systems, regular elections, and parliaments. This highlights the significant role of Western influence in the democratization process in Africa.

3. Achievements of Kenya Under Thirty Years of Western-Style Democratization

After gaining national independence, Kenya implemented one-party system for a long period. Influenced by the Third Wave of democratization, Kenya held its first multiparty election in 1992, adopting a presidential system with elections held every five years. The current political system in Kenya is modeled after the U.S. system of separation of powers, with the President, the judiciary, and the parliament providing checks and balances on each other.

Over the thirty years of practicing Western-style democracy, Kenya has achieved several notable successes. First, its electoral politics have become increasingly stable, with the general elections pursuing the principle of procedural democracy and the purpose of power transfer. Kenya is one of the relatively few African countries that has never experienced military intervention in politics or a violent coup, which is rare in the African context. Since independence, Kenya has maintained a stable system of regular elections. Although nearly every election since 1992 has been marred by “loser politics” and public protests, Kenya has preserved the integrity of its democratic process. The losing parties in elections have not resorted to violent uprisings to overturn the results and rather chose to resolve issues within the framework of Kenyan law. This can be partly attributed to the Kenyan military and police, as well as the tacit “gentlemen's agreement” between the competing political parties, driven by a shared sense of democratic awareness.

Secondly, Kenya has made significant progress in the rule of law, marking a milestone in the country's political development and that of African nations more broadly. Given the weak foundations of democracy in Africa, many countries often face challenges such as an underdeveloped judiciary, lack of judicial independence, and judicial corruption. However, over the thirty years of Western-style democratization, Kenya's judicial system has made remarkable advancements, playing the role of an arbiter within the Western-style system of “checks and balances.” A specific example of this is the presidential election in 2017, in which Kenya's Supreme Court declared the results of the August 8th presidential election invalid and ordered a new election to be held within 60 days. This was the first time in African history since the end of the Cold War that a nation's highest court overturned an election result, serving as a “gatekeeper” in maintaining political stability [6].

Lastly, Kenya's multiparty political system has matured. The country has established a clear legal framework for regular elections, mandating that presidential elections be held every five years, with a two-term limit for the presidency. Before 1990, it was rare for African countries to have constitutional term limits [7]. Additionally, a number of competitive new political parties have emerged in Kenya, avoiding the “formalized multiparty system” seen in some other countries—where, despite the existence of a multiparty system, a single party consistently wins elections and maintains power for extended periods. Under the framework of Western-style democratization, Kenya's development of a multiparty political system has achieved notable success.

4. Shortcomings of Kenya Under Thirty Years of Western-Style Democratization

As previously discussed, the development of Western-style democratization has brought some commendable political progress to Kenya. However, it is undeniable that the promotion of Western-style democracy has also encountered challenges in Kenya, leading to adverse impacts on political stability and development. After 1992, the phenomenon of “loser's politics” began to appear

frequently. This term specifically refers to the attitudes towards the outcomes of open political elections, ranging from acceptance to protest, and even to violent opposition. [8]. In Kenya's case, the "loser's politics" often manifests in the form of protests. The development of "loser's politics" in Kenya perfectly illustrates the negative impact of Western-style democratization during the Third Wave of democratization. Marking the 1992 election as a turning point, Kenya experienced few instances of "loser's politics" during its one-party era (although objectively, the elections of that period laid the groundwork for the later emergence of such issues). After the 1992 election, every subsequent election has seen occurrences of "loser's politics," ethnic conflicts, and other phenomena that undermine political stability. In 2007, Kenya experienced its most severe instance of "loser's politics" in history, and it was only through the mediation of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that the country was able to return to normalcy [9]. During the one-party era, due to factors such as the political system, the political acumen of a generation of leaders, and a stable external environment, the seeds of "loser's politics" were sown in Kenya but had not yet sprouted.

At the same time, Kenya's electoral politics frequently face disputes over whether elections are "fair," which often sparks protests and undermines political stability. In the elections in 1992 and 1997, Moi was re-elected as president, amid continuous accusations of him suppressing opposition, manipulating the law, and controlling the media. Statistics show that approximately one million young people were not allowed to register to vote because they lacked the national identity cards required for registration [10]. The 2007 unrest was triggered when the main opposition leader, Raila Amolo Odinga, accused Kibaki's faction of serious electoral fraud and refused to acknowledge the election results, leading to riots in major towns across the country [11]. Similarly, in the election in 2017, there were controversies over hacking and tampering with the vote count. These instances highlight the persistent challenges in ensuring the fairness of electoral politics, or at least in achieving public acceptance of this fairness. The former reflects the inadequate democratic awareness among some Kenyan ruling parties and leaders, as well as a lack of material and technical resources. The latter points to the fragmentation of Kenyan politics and the ethnic tensions that contribute to ethnic-driven politics. Ensuring the fairness of electoral politics is often a critical aspect of Western-style democratization, and in this regard, Kenyan politics still have considerable room for improvement.

Finally, the negative impact of ethnic issues on political stability in Kenya is increasingly evident. Kenya is a country where ethnic politics are particularly pronounced. There are 44 ethnic groups nationwide, with the majoring ones including the Kikuyu (17%), Luhya (14%), Kalenjin (11%), Luo (10%), and Kamba (10%) [12]. Since the national independence, there have been economic and political conflicts and discord among these ethnic groups. During the struggle for independence, the Kikuyu made significant sacrifices, and Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, was also Kikuyu, giving the Kikuyu a dominant position in post-independence Kenya, which caused fear among smaller ethnic groups. The Luo, who initially formed a political alliance with the Kikuyu, grew suspicious after the assassination of Tom Mboya, a prominent Luo leader, believing it to be a Kikuyu plot to seize power, leading to deteriorating relations between the two groups. When Moi, a Kalenjin, came to power, he suppressed the powerful Kikuyu and fostered his own ethnic group's influence, further exacerbating ethnic tensions. Western-style democratic reforms introduced multiparty elections, allowing various ethnic groups to use political parties as a means to participate in politics and secure greater benefits for their own communities. In Kenya, this is primarily reflected in the conflicts between ethnic groups in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. Kenyan politics have been overshadowed by ethnic conflicts, resulting in a form of ethnic politics unique to Kenya. In practice, many political parties are rooted in ethnic foundations (though in 2013, Kenya banned the establishment of parties on an ethnic basis), and voters often support parties and presidential candidates based on ethnic identity—this contradicts the original intention of elections under Western-style democratization. Ideally, voters would base their decisions on the candidate's image,

administrative experience, and policy agenda, rather than on ethnic identity. This not only destabilizes the political landscape but also undermines national unity and state-building efforts.

In conclusion, while Western-style democratic reforms have led to some progress in procedural democracy in Kenya, allowing the country to establish a relatively complete political system modeled after Western nations, this system has not addressed the deep-rooted issues within Kenya. On the contrary, it has provided a platform for the eruption of underlying problems that had been brewing since the one-party era.

5. Conclusion

In the context of shifting international dynamics, the third wave of democratization reached Africa in the 1990s, introducing a form of “Western-style democratization” that was imposed on several African nations. Over the past thirty years, the effects of this model on political modernization in Africa have been decidedly mixed. While Western-style democratization has contributed to some degree of political progress, particularly through the establishment of electoral politics and the rule of law, it has not resolved many of the underlying political, social, and ethnic issues prevalent in African countries. In some cases, it has even exacerbated these issues. The imposition of Western democratic models in Africa has frequently led to political instability and disillusionment, as these models do not align with the continent's historical and social realities. Instead of importing a one-size-fits-all approach, African nations must explore political development models and pathways that are tailored to their unique national conditions. This could involve modernizing beneficial aspects of traditional political cultures to create forms of political democratization that resonate with African values and embody “African wisdom.” One potential approach is to integrate elements of traditional governance systems with contemporary democratic practices to forge a hybrid model that respects cultural norms while promoting political inclusivity and stability. By drawing on the strengths of both traditional and modern systems, African countries can develop political structures that better address the complexities of their societies. In fact, before the colonial era, Africa already had a “democratic” foundation: although there was evident inequality, the privileged classes were required to ensure that the benefits created by the state were widely shared, as the common people also possessed strong bargaining power [13]. Traditional authoritarian rule in Africa also left room for effective political opposition [14]. Based on this, Zhang Chun argues that in pre-colonial African states, public debate and consultative democracy were important components of political governance [15]. This demonstrates that Africa has the potential for democratic politics. Moreover, the core of African political wisdom should be more inclined toward balancing the interests of all parties, rather than a “winner-takes-all” approach. In conclusion, while the third wave of democratization has brought notable advancements to Africa, its Western-style approach has not always been effective in addressing the continent's unique challenges. To achieve genuine political stability and development, African nations must move beyond superficial democratic reforms and seek models that are more attuned to their historical and cultural contexts. Embracing and modernizing traditional political practices and creating a form of democracy that aligns with African values, may offer a more viable path forward. This approach would not only honor the continent's rich political heritage but also provide a foundation for more sustainable and inclusive governance.

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