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The quest for good government and development in Africa: is NEPAD the answer?

PATRICK CHABAL

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)[1] declares that democracy and good governance[2] are preconditions for development. Given the fact that black Africa[3] is currently suffering widespread economic crisis and political disorder, of which protracted and vicious civil violence is only one manifestation, what chance is there that democratization will be consolidated on the continent? How probable is it that electoral politics as it has been instituted over the last decade will lead to good government—which all, inside and outside Africa, now claim is the basis for sustainable economic growth? What, in any event, is good government in the context of contemporary Africa?[4]

On the face of it, the argument is simple. Democracy should reduce the scope for conflict and make good government more likely. In turn, good government

[1] The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is an African programme for African development that came into being as the result of the joining together of the Millennium Partnership for the African Recovery Programme (MAP) and the OMEGA Plan at the request of the Organization of African Unity. The New African Initiative, which is now officially referred to as NEPAD, was approved by the Lusaka summit on 11 July 2001. The Partnership is a commitment by African leaders to get rid of poverty and to place the African continent on a path of lasting growth and development. It is founded on African states practising good governance, democracy and human rights, while working to prevent and resolve situations of conflict and instability on the continent.

[2] Partly because good governance is for ever associated with the Bretton Woods institutions' political conditionalities and partly because I am not sure what it means, I have in the last fifteen years preferred to use the notion of good (or, more concretely, effective) government, as suggested by John Dunn, who writes: 'As a concept good government is holistic and consequentialist rather than specific or procedural. It implies, *ceteris paribus*, and in relation to the policies that it actually pursues, a high level of organisational effectiveness; but it certainly does not imply the choice of a particular ideological model of state organisation ... Good government is best defined ostensively rather than by semantic prescription. It is what Sweden and Singapore enjoy, and what Zaire and Ethiopia distressingly lack.' John Dunn, 'The politics of representation and good government in post-colonial Africa', in Patrick Chabal, ed., *Political domination in Africa: reflections on the limits of power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 169.

[3] Black Africa refers here to the region that lies south of the North African countries (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Egypt) and north of the Republic of South Africa. In this article Africa, or 'the continent', should be taken to mean black Africa. Although its argument may be thought to be relevant to South Africa, it is based on empirical evidence from the countries of black Africa and does not, therefore, claim to be valid for the Republic of South Africa.

[4] For a definition of good government and a systematic discussion of the difficulty of establishing it in postcolonial Africa, see Patrick Chabal, *Power in Africa: an essay in political interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1994), ch. 10.

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should bring about the political stability, the institutional consolidation and the operation of the rule of law that are universally seen as the necessary framework for investment. Greater investment should facilitate economic growth. Growth provides the foundation for development. What has happened in Africa in the last decade, however, is at variance with such a scenario. Why? And how relevant are these considerations for the future success of NEPAD?

The NEPAD document (para. 42) states:

> The New Partnership for Africa's Development recognises that there have been attempts in the past to set out continent-wide development programmes. For a *variety of reasons*, both internal and external, including questionable leadership and ownership by Africans themselves, these have been less than successful. However, there is today a *new set of circumstances*, which lend themselves to integrated practical implementation. (emphasis added)

This raises two key questions. The first is whether African leaders, and those who advise them, are willing to study the 'variety of reasons' that have hitherto prevented development. The second is whether there really is today a new 'set of circumstances' when it comes to the exercise of power on the continent. Unless the lessons of the past are learnt, there is very little reason to believe that the nature of politics in Africa will change simply because of the (admittedly admirable) ambition displayed by NEPAD.

My main concern here is to investigate the extent to which the political changes that have occurred in the last decade have made good government and development in Africa more likely. This article offers an analysis of why it is that the nature of politics in Africa today makes good government difficult and reconsiders the changes that have taken place in the exercise of power over the recent past.[5]

The debate about the nature of the political transitions that have taken place on the continent in the last ten years turns on two key questions.[6] The first has to do with the causes of such changes: is the reform towards more pluralist polities driven by internal forces or by external factors? The second concerns the extent to which the move towards multiparty elections has furthered the cause of democracy as it is usually understood in the West: has political competition enhanced political accountability and good government? There is no scope here for reviewing the vast literature on this question. However, the most common view is that the reasons for political change are, on balance, internal and that political transitions have resulted in a slow, though fragile, move towards democratic consolidation in a number of cases.[7]

[5] For a relevant overview of some of these questions see, *inter alia*, Richard Joseph, ed., *State, conflict and democracy in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).
[6] For a discussion of these issues see Patrick Chabal, 'A few considerations on democracy in Africa', *International Affairs* 74: 2, April 1998, pp. 289–303.
[7] The most comprehensive discussion is to be found in Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic transitions in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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There is no doubt that political changes in Africa since the end of the 1980s have been significant. It is indeed the case that a majority of countries now hold multiparty elections on a fairly regular basis and that a number of governments have been unseated through elections. It is also true that party competition has brought about a much more vigorous debate about the political future of the continent. Equally, there is now far greater freedom of expression in Africa than there was at the height of the one-party state regimes. Nevertheless, with some exceptions—Botswana and, most notably, the island states (Cape Verde, Mauritius)—it is difficult to demonstrate that multiparty competition has resulted in more effective or accountable government. Neither (and this may turn out to be even more significant) is there strong evidence that pluralist politics have led to sustained economic development on the continent.[8] Nor, finally, have such transitions as have occurred reduced either the number or the intensity of conflicts in Africa. Why?

Although there are a number of factors which explain the (relative) failure of these so-called 'democratic transitions' to advance peace and prosperity on the continent, I want to dwell here on the systemic rather than contingent reasons by stressing the processes at work.[9] If the moves towards multiparty politics did indeed take place at a time when it had become clear that one-party state regimes had reached their (political, but especially economic) limits, their institutional complexion was dictated from outside. However much discontent there was in Africa against the regimes in place, the transition to multiparty competitive elections was instigated at the behest of the donor community, which insisted that further aid would be forthcoming only if the new 'democratic' political conditionalities were met. Thus, democracy in the form of multiparty elections was generally seen by African rulers as the price to pay for continued financial assistance rather than as the political modality that would make development more likely.[10] In such circumstances, the effect of the transitions that took place was to constrain political elites in that they now had to undergo the ritual of competitive elections, but not, as we shall see, necessarily to lead to the construction of a political system that delivered greater satisfaction to the bulk of the population: 'Can we eat democracy?' asked Lusaka town-dwellers in response to the questions of the social scientist.[11]

[8] Nicolas van de Walle, *African economies and the politics of permanent crisis, 1979–1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 256.

[9] See here, *inter alia*, E. Chole and J. Ibrahim, eds, *Democratisation processes in Africa: problems and prospects* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995); Richard Joseph, 'Democratization in Africa after 1989: comparative and theoretical perspectives', *Comparative Politics* 29: 3, 1997, pp. 362–82; Crawford Young, 'Democratization in Africa: the contradictions of a political imperative', in J. Widner, ed., *Economic change and political liberalisation in sub-Saharan Africa* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[10] For a less jaundiced African view, see Claude Ake, *Democracy and development in Africa* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1996).

[11] Jean-Pascal Daloz, '"Can we eat democracy?": Perceptions de la "démocratisation" zambienne dans un quartier populaire de Lusaka', in Jean-Pascal Daloz and Patrick Quantin, *Transitions démocratiques africaines* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), p. 243.

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The reasons why such transitions did not enhance accountability or improve the quality of government are, in retrospect, quite clear, as I shall explain below. I want at this point merely to suggest why the changes that took place in the 1990s were never likely to result in either greater 'democratization' or more 'development'.[12] Where the state is not properly institutionalized, where the judicial system is deficient, where there is no scope for productive investment in society, it is difficult to see how multiparty elections in and of themselves can result in better government and a more efficient framework for economic growth. What such political competition means is merely a more acute rivalry among the elites for control of the state—today, as before, the primary (official) fount of resources within the African political economy—and such rivalry is more often than not the cause of conflict.

Of course, the outcome of political liberalization was different in each country, and its study reveals that in some instances party competition has resulted in greater openness and a greater diversity of political opinion (for example, in Benin, Mali and Senegal). Equally, however, there have been instances where the transition has had a profoundly negative impact (for example in Congo, Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya). Each case must be judged on its merits. But what is clear is that there has not been in Africa a process of democratization along the lines of the Western model, as was envisaged ten years ago. For this reason, therefore, it is important to revisit the assumptions made—and still in currency today—about the ways in which political 'transitions' would help to reduce conflict, foster good government and stimulate development on the continent. In order to do so, I now turn to a succinct examination of the nature of politics in contemporary Africa.

Politics in Africa: neo-patrimonialism and disorder

Contemporary politics in Africa is best understood as the exercise of neo-patrimonial power.[13] What this means in concrete terms is that, despite the formal political structures in place, power is exercised essentially through the informal sector. Or rather, it is in the interplay between the formal and the informal that the kernel of politics is to be found on the continent. This form of government rests on well-understood, if unequal, forms of political reciprocity which link patrons with their clients along vertical social lines. The operation of political institutions is thus very largely influenced by the pressures applied upon them by the exercise of personalized power which characterizes Africa today. The logic of the political system, therefore, does not correspond to its Western guise. Bureaucrats, for instance, are seen not primarily as the impartial servants

[12] See here Göran Hydén and Ole Elgstrom, eds, *Development and democracy: what have we learnt and how?* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[13] For one of the most useful definitions of neo-patrimonialism, see Jean-François Médard, 'L'Etat néo-patrimonial', in J-F. Médard,ed., *Etats d'Afrique noire* (Paris: Karthala, 1991). See also S. Eisenstadt, *Traditional patrimonialism and modern neopatrimonialism* (London: Sage, 1992).

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of public service but as putative, if not actual, links in the patrimonial chain that connects patrons with their clients. The two logics conflict: there is little scope for good, at least in the sense of effective, government.

In a neo-patrimonial system, political accountability rests on the extent to which patrons are able both to influence and to meet the expectations of their followers (or 'constituents') according to well-established norms of reciprocity. The quest for political legitimacy thus requires the fulfilment of particularistic obligations which have nothing to do with the emergence of a public sphere transcending subnational identities. Elections, the measure of accountability in Western polities, have become in Africa one of the many instruments of factional mobilization. While most political leaders at independence were new rather than 'traditional' elites, the framework of the neo-patrimonial system which they put in place owed a great deal to what might be called 'traditional' (or indigenous) principles of legitimacy. Within such a context, political representation is seen to occur when patrons meet their obligations in respect of their clients.

Although such a neo-patrimonial system worked well in many countries after independence, it was inherently unstable. First, the situation of relative economic well-being—made possible by useful colonial assets and stable export prices—was shattered by the world economic crisis in the 1970s. As revenues declined and debt increased, African patrons began to run out of means. In a situation where the search for resources became ever more difficult, political competition increased. Since in the African neo-patrimonial system access to governmental assets is paramount, struggles for power intensified. Second—and this is critical—the neo-patrimonial system was essentially inimical to economic development as it took place in the West, or later in Asia. This is because it failed to foster, and in many ways totally undermined economic growth, the prime basis for sustainable development. Political legitimacy was based on the maintenance of a situation in which patrons had simultaneously to uphold the image of substance which their station required and to feed the networks on which their position depended. Thus, they could scarcely defer consumption and expenditure for the longer-term purpose of 'national' economic growth. For this reason, African states as well as entrepreneurs rarely invested in economically productive activities.

Such a perspective on the nature of power in Africa stresses the importance of historical and sociopolitical continuities. It favours an interpretation of politics in contemporary Africa which is somewhat at variance with most other extant paradigms. In the first place, it derives from an analysis of political systems that highlights the links to be found between the precolonial, colonial and contemporary exercise of power. Indeed, despite the admittedly massive differences among the colonial political institutions inherited by the nationalists after decolonization, there has been a quite remarkable convergence in the political evolution of independent Africa. While during the first long decade (1960–75) after independence it seemed that the colonial legacy had enabled the establishment of self-standing (and, we have to remind ourselves, largely democratic)

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political institutions in Africa, the economic crisis unleashed in the 1970s by the sharp increase in oil prices revealed that this analysis of the patterns of authority and power on the continent had been superficial. Put very simply, what that crisis made manifest is the extent to which nationalist euphoria had masked the continuities between the pre- and postcolonial eras.

Hence, African political systems today exhibit three intriguing characteristics which deserve careful analysis, if only because they go against prevailing expectations. They are increasingly informal; they appear to 'retraditionalize'; and they have signally failed to spur sustained economic development.[14]

The first trend—the apparent informalization of contemporary African politics—is best explained by reference to the notion of identity and the relation between the individual and his/her community. Western political systems (from which the formal African political order is drawn) rest on the assumption that citizens are discrete, autonomous and self-referential individuals who cast their votes according to overtly political criteria. The reality in Africa is different: the individual cannot be conceived outside the community from which (s)he hails, however geographically distant (s)he may be from it. The political system thus operates according to criteria which embody this core 'communal' dimension. The individual is less the self-conscious citizen than someone whose behaviour accords with the multiple (and sometimes contradictory) registers of the logics which guide his/her place within the community. These belong essentially to the realm of the informal, meaning here only that they are not encompassed within the legal and constitutional order which is the official political norm in all African countries.

The manner in which power is understood and exercised helps to explain why politics in contemporary Africa diverges from that of the West. Briefly, the state in Africa is not much more than a relatively empty shell, useful in so far as it permits the control of the resources which it commands but politically feeble because it is neither institutionalized nor functionally differentiated from society. Similarly, there is no self-standing civil society because vertical ties remain more significant than horizontal (professional or functional) links. Finally, African political elites behave according to the norms of political legitimation and representation inherent in the neo-patrimonial system. They use their (official) position to fulfil their (unofficial) obligations to their clients and to meet the demands on which their power and standing as rulers rest.

The second paradox is that much of what is happening in contemporary Africa seems to reinforce the notion that the continent is moving 'backward'—that it is in some ways 'retraditionalizing'. What we see in Africa confounds expectations of modernization. Both the ways in which Africans appear to define themselves and the manner in which they behave fail to conform to what social scientists expect of modernization. This notion of 'retraditionalization', as

[14] Here I draw from the arguments presented in Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa works: disorder as political instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

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it were, emphasizes the extent to which Africans function simultaneously on several different registers—from the most visibly 'modern' to the most ostensibly 'traditional'—in their everyday lives. The failure to understand the apparently contradictory nature of politics in Africa is itself very largely the result of a Western analytical convention which tends to assume a dichotomy between the realms of the modern and the traditional. The African elites, however, operate in a world which combines both, a world congruent with the beliefs of the rest of the population. One example will illustrate the point. It is clear from empirical evidence that what is actually illegal (for example, smuggling or the embezzlement of state funds) is often seen as legitimate by those within the community who benefit from it. In other words, neo-patrimonial political accountability allows for actions which in the West would be seen as corrupt and which, in the long run, make development less likely.

The third, and final, puzzle about Africa's path to modernization is the absence of development. The evidence here is disquieting. Although there were in the early 1960s a number of African countries (like Ghana and Zambia) with a GDP per capita equal to some of their Asian counterparts (like South Korea and Malaysia), the situation today is radically different. The erstwhile Asian Tigers have surged ahead, while even the most prosperous African states (Gabon, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire) have failed to achieve anything like sustainable economic growth. The external constraints—falling world prices, debt and structural adjustment—which have impinged on Africa's economies are clear enough, but they cannot in and of themselves account for such disparities in development.

It is becoming more obvious, therefore, that the very organization of African political systems must itself be considered to be (at least) partly responsible for the present condition of the continent. On reflection this is not surprising. Neo-patrimonialism rests on notions of political legitimacy which favour the redistribution of resources from patrons to their clients. If the principal source of revenues is the export of primary or agricultural products, if insufficient attention is devoted by government to the development of such exports, and if the world prices for these commodities tend over time to decrease, then income falls. In the absence of coherent policies to generate growth from other assets, or through other economic activities, resources overall diminish. External borrowing obviates such shortfalls in the short run, but the burden of debt soon cripples the economy. This, with only a few notable exceptions like Botswana or some island states (like Mauritius), is what has happened everywhere in Africa.

Indeed, neo-patrimonialism may well have reached its limits; or rather, it may now have been changed into a political economy of 'disorder'. Where the search for short-term economic gain is paramount, political leaders find that their legitimacy as Big Men is conditional upon their ability to obtain resources —by all means.[15] The informal sector has always been of singular importance in

[15] For one useful discussion of the concept of Big Man, see Jean-François Médard, 'Le "Big Man" en Afrique: esquisse d'analyse du politicien entrepreneur', *L'Année sociologique* (Paris), 1992.

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Africa. There are now indications that the exploitation of the resources engendered by disorder (through corruption, civil strife, war, smuggling, dealing in illegal substances) may well have become the most substantial marketable activity available. Thus, the primacy of communitarian and clientelistic political imperatives—which may make good sense at the micro-level of individuals and communities—leads assuredly to massive economic inefficiency and, possibly, to terminal damage at the national level.

Furthermore, disorder, violence and even conflict are now increasingly being instrumentalized by political elites for the direct purpose of gaining and retaining control of the state so as to further the neo-patrimonial order or, where the state has collapsed, its surrogate warlord politics. Where rulers are prepared to use violence and conflict as a means of 'government', it is not to be expected that they will see elections other than in the instrumental terms that preside over the exercise of power in a distinctly unstable and economically fragile environment. Unless these considerations are seriously taken into account, there is a risk that NEPAD will fail to live up to expectations. An assessment of whether this is likely to happen must consider the ways in which the exercise of power on the continent has evolved in the last decade under the twin constraints of democratization and structural adjustment.

The constraints on power in Africa

The premise on which NEPAD is built is that the moves made in the direction of democracy are such as to provide the political framework within which better government and greater economic sagacity will combine to make development possible. Leaving aside the debate about whether multiparty elections amount to enhanced democratic accountability, are there reasons for thinking that the political changes that have taken place in the last decade are such as to make that desired outcome more probable? An answer to that question demands that we re-examine carefully the ways in which neo-patrimonialism has evolved in the recent past across the continent.

The key political issues are, as they always are in the study of politics, those that touch on accountability, representation and efficacy. Neo-patrimonialism, as we have seen, linked these three pillars of power in a clear, though sometimes complex, manner. Patrons were effectively accountable to their clients, and in this way 'represented' them, in so far as they managed to deliver resources to them. As they ran out of the wherewithal, they became less 'effective', resorted to more coercive policies thus became less accountable and lost face. Under such circumstances, democratization and structural adjustment have acted as both constraints and opportunities for political elites whose very *raison d'être*—other than to hold on to power at all costs—was being seriously undermined. Transitions thus did take place, but were their effects favourable to good government and development? The answer is by no means straightforward.

Partly because of the folly of their governors and partly because of the limits

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of neo-patrimonialism, a number of states have collapsed. For those who happen to live there, there has been nothing but suffering, regardless of the changing international context. Although the most notable cases—Liberia, Sierra Leone, Zaire and Somalia—are well known and need little further discussion here, it is well to remember that many other states have also been in some ways grievously weakened in the recent past. Much as one welcomes the return of some form of electoral politics in Nigeria, one cannot minimize the calamitous political consequences of what has happened there in the last ten years. Not only has an immensely rich country failed to benefit from its wealth, but the use of 'disorder as political instrument' by some of its elites has very seriously weakened its potential for good government.

Similarly, the recent experiences of Congo-Brazzaville, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Cameroon, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia do not augur well for the hypothesis that multiparty elections are a sound basis for the political and economic improvements that are required if the condition of ordinary Africans is to improve. Only in a few cases—Mauritius, Cape Verde, Senegal, Ghana, to some extent Mali—can it be argued that multiparty elections have contributed to the emergence of a political atmosphere in which the key issues of good government and development can at least be addressed. Nowhere can it be shown, however, that recent political transitions have facilitated economic growth.[16] Why is the record so poor?

It must be said, first, that a large part of the problem about the assessment of the current situation in Africa has to do with expectations—expectations which NEPAD raises even higher. Indeed, the notion that 'democratization' (whatever it may, in practice, mean) would lead *ipso facto* to economic growth flies in the face of all available historical evidence. Democracy as we know it in the West is the outcome of, and not the precondition for, economic development—as has been amply demonstrated in the recent past in East Asia.[17] In those settings it is an authoritarian, but (and this is crucial) effective state that has driven economic growth with single-minded determination, in the process forcing local businessmen to invest in their own country.[18] It is only today, when the fruits of development have brought about spectacular improvements in the standards of living of the aspiring middle classes, that the pressure for greater democracy is increasing. To assume, therefore, that multiparty electoral competition will, in and of itself, make development more likely to be guilty of wishful thinking.

More significantly, however, an analysis of the nature of power in Africa today reveals that the transitions that have taken place have been both more limited and less systemically consequential than is usually supposed. In particular,

[16] See van de Walle, *African economies and the politics of permanent crisis.*

[17] For a subtle discussion of this issue in the Asian context, see Sylvia Chan, *Liberalism, democracy and development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[18] On the continued role of the state even in advanced capitalist countries, see Linda Weiss, *The myth of the powerless state* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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it is quite clear that neo-patrimonialism, though seriously battered by the failure of political elites to continue satisfactorily to provide for their clients, has not collapsed but merely mutated. How it has done so is to be explained by the multiple and complex ways in which the political elites have responded to the domestic and outside pressure they have faced.

The argument in favour of democratization is that the new political dispensation changes the nature of accountability and representation and in this way facilitates a virtuous circle of political and economic development. Those who believe that the experience of pluralist politics and the functioning of the institutions it begets will have a positive outcome argue, in consonance with institutionalist theorists, that the gains of 'path dependency'—that is, the vested interests that democratically elected politicians and institutions will have in making the democratic order flourish—will override the weight of neo-patrimonialism.[19] But that can be true only if institutions are able to function properly and effectively and where the prevalent political 'logic' rewards such institutions.[20] Only then would the bulk of the population begin to perceive that good government can lead to a form of development that will be favourable to them, in the long run. Otherwise, the progress made in terms of choosing their political representatives by means of multiparty elections is eroded by the realization that such an exercise does not change their lives. So what is the evidence?

As we have seen, most African countries have held multiparty elections in the last ten years—some several times in succession—and a number of regimes have in this way been swept from office (among others in Zambia, Senegal, Benin, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde).[21] Yet there are only a handful of cases where regime change has been associated with systemic change—where, in other words, elections have helped to reduce neo-patrimonialism. Of these, the most convincing is Cape Verde, a state, however, which arguably never was neo-patrimonial.[22] Both it and Botswana are special cases, interesting counter-examples to what has happened in the rest of the continent but the experience of which cannot be taken as a trend. Elsewhere, the new multiparty dispensation has been adapted to the reformed, or mutated, neo-patrimonial order.

Although it has been argued that pluralist elections came about primarily because of domestic pressure for change arising from discontent with the single-party system, the reality is that in most of Africa such reform occurred only because of externally imposed political conditionalities. Other than Cape Verde, which never suffered structural adjustment, all other countries were induced to

[19] See here, *inter alia*, Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen and Frank Longstreth, eds, *Structuring politics: historical institutionalism in comparative perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[20] See Mary Douglas, *How institutions think* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

[21] For a detailed analysis of the impact of recent elections in Africa, see Staffan Lindberg, 'Problems of measuring democracy: illustrations from Africa', in Hydén and Elgstrom, eds, *Development and democracy*.

[22] Cape Verde is not immune to clientelism; it is simply that its political system is not predicated on it.

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hold elections as a condition of continued assistance.[23] Indeed, those that resisted were threatened with suspension of aid.[24] Thus, the view that 'democratization' issued from internal social pressure was a misreading of a more complex situation.

There was very strong discontent, especially among the very largely disenfranchised young people (who now form the majority in Africa), with the failings of the neo-patrimonial system, which held no prospect for them. There were embryonic movements within society which formed to challenge the political system—or, more often, the political elites—in place. There was also a call for more accountability, if not always democracy, since it was plainly the case that the current system of politics was increasingly failing to deliver to the majority. There was, finally, growing disquiet at the realization that Africa's rulers had managed to spirit away phenomenally high amounts of scarce foreign exchange. In an international context in which socialism had just expired very publicly and the new 'democratic' world order asserted itself with vigour, it is not entirely surprising that such voices echoed the democratic credo.

What the last ten years of multiparty politics have shown, however, is that the transitions that have taken place have not resulted in the widespread systemic political change that was widely anticipated when the third 'democratic wave' apparently swept the continent. In short, 'democratization', like structural adjustment before it, has been 'tamed' by the political elites, who have managed to utilize the resources it provides in order further to consolidate clientelism. The idea, therefore, that neo-patrimonialism is merely a 'policy' which elites may adopt (or discard) according to their (narrowly defined) self-interest fails to account for the enduring nature of a political system that continues to link, however inefficiently, the elites with those whom they deem to be their essential 'constituents' and on whom they depend for their political legitimacy. Conversely, the notion that ordinary people want at all costs to escape the patrimonial clutches of the elites in order to entrust their future to the impersonal market of the ballot box remains wide of the mark. Most people do not see any way other than clientelism, even if they do not much like clientelism as it is now working—or failing to work.[25]

Confronted with dwindling internal resources and a reluctance on the part of donors to continue to bankroll bankrupt states, the African political elites applied themselves to the economic reforms now demanded by the international community. Willy-nilly they began to implement structural adjustment—not primarily because they were convinced of its importance but simply because it was the price to pay for continued assistance. Now, structural adjustment seemingly

[23] On the history of Cape Verde within the comparative perspective of Portuguese-speaking African history, see Patrick Chabal et al., *Lusophone Africa since independence: a history* (London: Hurst; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[24] Even if the ostensible reason for such a move was a failure to have met the requirements set by the Bretton Woods institutions.

[25] The extraordinarily rapid rise of independent, particularly Pentecostalist, churches in Africa is largely to be explained by the fact that more and more people feel there is no place for them within the collapsing neo-patrimonial system.

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struck at the heart of neo-patrimonialism in that it demanded a tightening up of financial procedures, an end to monetary laxity, a reduction in the number of state employees and a privatization of national enterprises—all changes in conditions and practices which had served the ends of political clientelism. But at the same time, the renewed aid which structural adjustment made possible continued to go to support the maintenance of the state and thereby the political elites. Although structural adjustment could be painful and dangerous —especially as it led to the collapse of what was left of social services, hit the urban supporters of the regime the most and frequently provoked protest against the end of food subsidies—it did bring in a new flow of resources to political elites who had become increasingly bereft of the means of their political ambition: being Big Men rather than tyrants.

While on the surface it may appear that African politicians were forced to conform to the diktat of the international community, what is more seldom understood is that they themselves were not short of leverage. Though they could no longer use Cold War rivalry to extract aid, they could make it clear that the growing poverty of their countries was perilous. The repeated famines, most induced by internal conflict, in several parts of the continent (notably in West Africa and the Horn) forced the West to recognize the need for some basic, at least humanitarian, aid. Such aid is, as we know, largely diverted by those who hold power, or the gun, and in any event is not conducive to development in the long run.[26] More generally, the consequences of total state collapse, as evidenced most vividly in Somalia and Liberia, were also unpalatable to the West and required action. Finally, the threat of massive civil conflicts within, and between, countries of Central Africa put great pressure on the international community to buttress those states which appeared at least to be able to maintain order.

Furthermore, the international community was anxious to see structural adjustment bear fruit. For this reason it was willing to reward good (meaning functioning) government, such as was found in Uganda and Ghana, regardless of the zeal with which their leaders executed the structural change required. The dearth of such states meant that the criteria applied for measuring adjustment were not as stringent as the Bretton Woods institutions proclaimed. Here too, therefore, political criteria impinged on the assessment of the success of the economic reforms required. Although in theory adjustment called for rigorous financial and budgetary reform in these countries, in practice the international community found itself having to 'negotiate' with weak states a very imperfect programme of reforms that did not, in the end, threaten neo-patrimonialism. Indeed, some aspects of this restructuring, most notably privatization, conspired strongly to reinforce clientelism in Africa since, by and large, it benefited the political elites and their cronies.[27]

[26] See Alex de Waal, *Famine crimes: politics in the disaster relief industry in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997).
[27] See Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Béatrice Hibou, *The criminalization of the state in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

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The argument here, then, is not that structural adjustment was desirable (although many aspects of it were), nor that it was successful (although in countries with more effective governments, such as Uganda, it did have a broadly positive impact); but simply that it did not, and probably could not, achieve its primary (political) aim of making the African state less neo-patrimonial. Twenty years after it was first introduced, on the basis of the World Bank conjecture that Africa's economic problems were due to the predatory state, structural adjustment has mainly served to ensure that the African state did not dissolve entirely. In so doing, it has offered the political elites access to new, and constantly replenished, resources with which to sustain their neo-patrimonial rule. Since the collapse of the state is simply too appalling to contemplate, the international community has had to reconcile itself with the fact that structural adjustment has not seriously weakened clientelism. In the end, the state must be safeguarded, and the price to pay for this is continued subvention of the political elites who control it.

However, it has been argued that in the last ten years the transition to multiparty elections—or what is commonly called 'democratization'—would bring about what structural adjustment could not achieve in respect of the state. Indeed, and again in theory, a move to democratic politics would certainly result in a decline in clientelism. But is that what has happened? Although I do not wish in any way to minimize the benefits which pluralist politics have brought about in Africa, which I will discuss in more detail below, I want to suggest here that on this front too, African politicians have on the whole managed to adapt to the new political framework without allowing it to undermine the neo-patrimonial political system within which they operate. That they have been successful in doing so is due not just to their authoritarian prowess—though Mugabe has done his best in this respect—but to the fact that the neo-patrimonial system is deeply embedded in the African sociocultural matrix. It is what links political elites and ordinary people. It is still the way in which political accountability and representation are understood.

The present discussion about 'democratization' often fails to take into account the fact that multiparty elections are not new in Africa. In the former British and French colonies decolonization came about by means of, and independence was followed by, pluralist polls, contested by a variety of parties. The reasons given at the time by the governments of these countries as to why in due course they had evolved into one-party states—reasons which, interestingly, the West accepted as valid at the time—stressed the danger of electoral competition in settings where regional, ethnic and communal considerations were paramount. Although that argument is nowadays seen merely as an excuse for preventing 'transition', the reasoning behind it remains as valid now as it was at independence.

The key has less to do with the dangers of 'ethnicity'—which, admittedly, remain great—than with the fact that multiparty politics is incompatible with the 'rationality' of the neo-patrimonial system, for two fundamental reasons. The first has to do with the fact that in such systems, politics can only be a zero-

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sum game. The second is, consequently, that political competition is best resolved by means of cooption and not by winner-take-all elections.

What this means is that within a functioning neo-patrimonial system political elites vie for power by means of the display of their 'substance'—meaning here concretely both ostentation and distributable resources. Access to the state is the primary avenue for the acquisition of such wealth, and the most successful Big Men are undoubtedly those who best manage to combine political and economic clout—hence the alliance struck between the elites from these two groups. The ultimate political aim, however, is less to assert total control—as a dictator would want—than to be respected as *primus inter pares*, the man of most manifest 'substance', the Biggest of the Big Men.

But in order for such respect to be earned and maintained, the political system must be accommodating rather than ruthlessly exclusive; it must allow the demonstration of superiority in a way that is acceptable to those who are required to accept the suzerainty of the top man. This, as will be evident, is most effectively achieved by cooption. And indeed the notable Big Men—of whom Houphouët Boigny was undoubtedly the paragon—were those who most cleverly combined power and wealth and who best knew how to assert their primacy without overt repression.[28]

The metaphor of the father figure may have been abused, especially by the Big Man's sycophants, but it remains a useful description of the nature of political leadership in Africa, as Michael Schatzberg has recently shown quite convincingly.[29] For him, politicians are perceived, and in turn behave, as father figures, whose clout rests on their patrimonial prowess. Such a conception of power naturally has serious implications for the business of government. Not only do the holders of state power seek to validate their hold on power by means of patrimonial legitimacy, but they also consider that their prime responsibility lies more with the redistribution of resources to their clients than with the common good. Accordingly, the workings of the formal political institutions are undermined by the informal logic of clientelism. Thus, the manner in which power is exercised in Africa is in contradiction with modern democracy as it is conceived in the West.

If this is the case, and I believe it is, then it is easier to understand both why the present transitions have not resulted in more 'democratic' polities and why this is not likely to happen unless/until the cultural matrix within which politics

[28] See here Ahmadou Kourouma, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000), one of the most revealing novels on African politics ever written by an African. The book, though fiction, is a devastatingly accurate portrait of the West African political elites of the 1970s and 1980s, and includes an accurate, if caustic, portrait of Houphouët Boigny. It also makes clear how important the world of the occult is to the political elites.

[29] The point of his analysis is to show that the very reality of political legitimacy is intimately bound up with such notions of representation as those embodied in the 'fatherly' relation. The book demonstrates that popular perceptions of politics are conceived in patrimonial terms. This means that Africans project the moral universe that governs family, kin and community relations onto the national political 'system'. Michael Schatzberg, *Political legitimacy in middle Africa: father, family, food* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

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is played out changes significantly. It is not just that authoritarian (or 'evil') elites have sought to block reform demanded by 'enlightened' populations. It is, more significantly, that the essence of neo-patrimonialism is derived from the sociocultural milieu which both elites and populations share. The fact that this system of government is, as I have explained, profoundly unfavourable to the prospect of development and that, as a result, the economic situation of most African countries continues to worsen is as yet insufficiently compelling to challenge the very prevalence of the clientelistic 'logic'. The present failings of most African states are not always interpreted by the populations—as so many outside observers automatically assume—as evidence of the bankruptcy of patrimonialism and of the desirability of 'democracy'. How could it be so, since there is as yet no evidence that democracy brings about sustained development? Rather, such failings are seen as demonstrating the ever more pressing need to choose the 'representatives' who will still be able to deliver.

The currently fashionable view that the impetus for democratic change will come from 'civil society' is, therefore, based on wishful thinking rather than the proper examination of the evidence on the ground. Again, the historical record from the Western experience is clear. However we define civil society—and that in itself is a far more complex issue than most who use the concept today allow for—two observations can be made with some certainty.[30] The first is that the development of a strong, autonomous and politically articulate civil society is the consequence of social differentiation based on economic development. The second is that civil society can act to foil the state only where the state is institutionally differentiated from society. Neither of these conditions applies to contemporary Africa. Now, as is becoming increasingly clear, civil society as it develops in non-Western countries will have to be conceived in terms which allow for the influence of the sociocultural determinants of current political practices; and in the case of Africa today, these include a continued belief in the patrimonial nature of politics.

This is, of course, not to say that the last decade of multiparty politics in Africa has had no effects; but it is to say that those effects have not yet resulted in a systemic transition away from neo-patrimonialism. There has indeed been change in terms of the opening up of the press and the flowering of freedom of expression. Public debate is now common currency on the continent. Similarly, there has emerged a relatively vibrant NGO sector in which important issues are addressed and efforts are made to give voice to the population.[31] Finally, there has been a realization among the African political elites that they will have to endure periodic electoral competition. Yet all of these achievements are fragile and none is irreversible. Furthermore, they do not necessarily represent

[30] For a historically based and analytically sophisticated discussion of the use of the concept of civil society in non Western countries, see Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, eds, *Civil society: history and possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[31] However, most such NGOs are either funded from outside or else in some way connected to the state—thus greatly reducing their putative 'political' independence. The question is, therefore: to whom are they accountable, and how?

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evidence either of an irrevocable march into 'democracy' or, even less, a move towards sustainable economic development. This is because the adaptation to the new pluralist order has not been at the expense of neo-patrimonialism. Paradoxically, 'democratization' has given a new lease of life to a political system that was seriously threatened by its inability to continue to deliver economically in the long run.

While it may appear self-evident that multiparty competition will enhance choice and increase accountability, what has happened in Africa has in some ways done the opposite. Despite claims to the contrary, the new political dispensation has not led to a renewal of elites—nor perhaps, realistically, could it.[32] In most African countries, except where power is seized by force of arms, those competing for high office are part of a relatively narrow circle who have been at the political apex for decades. Equally, in a large number of cases the regime in place has managed—by means of a shrewd combination of 'divide and rule', authoritarianism and cooption—to remain in place. But the outcome of the elections has been to confer on those leaders an aura of 'democratic' legitimacy that, ironically from the perspective of Western donors, has strengthened their patrimonial claim to rule. Finally, since pluralist elections have not brought about notable economic progress, they have been viewed primarily as an 'instrument' whereby established political elites could garner badly needed foreign assistance. In other words, elections are seen 'merely' to act as a facilitating device to obtain foreign aid. Quite clearly, such a perception is counterproductive in terms of instilling a democratic ethos in Africa.

From this point of view, therefore, NEPAD must, in large measure at least, be understood as a commitment on the part of the current (and not so new) elites in Africa to the present 'democratic orthodoxy' in order to guarantee a transfer of resources to Africa: a continuation with, rather than a break from, the type of relations that has guided the continent's engagement with the international community since independence.

32 See Chabal and Daloz, *Africa works*, ch. 3; Jean-Pascal Daloz, ed., *Le (non-) renouvellement des élites en Afrique subsaharienne* (Talence: CEAN, 1999).

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