Political Parties and Democratic Consolidation in Africa

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**Introduction**

There is a prevalent view that political parties, in tropical Africa, as elsewhere, must play a vital role in democratic consolidation\(^1\). Our paper takes this argument as the starting point for a discussion of the role and character of political parties and party systems in the region in the context of the latest democratising wave. We begin by examining what the general democratisation literature has to say about the potential contribution of parties to consolidation. We then turn more directly to African experience. Assessments of the prospects for democratic consolidation in tropical Africa vary, with the pessimistic voices increasingly drowning out the optimists, making judgements about the role of parties necessarily provisional at this stage. We consider aspects of the ‘performance’ of parties to date and the extent to which it falls short of what democratisation theory prescribes. Then in the final and longest substantive section of the paper we look at reasons for this underperformance, focusing on party system imbalance on the one hand and factors contributing to the general ‘weakness’ of parties on the other.

**Democratic consolidation**

We will not spend long discussing what we mean by democratic consolidation, especially since this formed a central theme of the ECPR workshop a number of us attended two years ago\(^2\). Definitions vary from simple mechanistic tests such as whether a country has experienced two successive and peaceful transfers of power to much ‘deeper’ conceptions of what democracy ought to entail. However an influential and widely used definition suggests that consolidated democracy refers to ‘a political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase “the only game in town”’.

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behaviourally, attitudinally and constitutionally³. ‘Behaviourally’ means that that no significant actors attempt to use non-democratic means to obtain their goal; ‘attitudinally’ implies that democratic procedures and institutions are considered by the vast majority to be the preferred way of organising politics, and ‘constitutionally’ signifies that actors – governmental as well as non-governmental, are subject to the laws and institutions of the democratic process⁴.

We would add only two further brief points. First, there is a difference between democratic consolidation as a state, or if preferred consolidated democracy, and democratic consolidation as the name of a process. In the present paper we must be primarily concerned with the latter. Second and as Linz and Stepan warn⁵, we should not presume that there is only one kind of consolidated democracy. And if there are different forms - as well as degrees - of democracy, then there must also be more than one possible path. That’s to say the potential and actual role of parties could be expected to vary.

**What parties can contribute**

Although parties as such are not, usually, part of the definition of democracy, the emergence of some form of multi-party system is seen both as an unavoidable consequence of basic democratic rights, such as freedom to associate and freedom of expression, and as a necessary component of the idea of democracy as it is practised in real-world democracies. In Crotty’s view for example "Democratic government is unlikely and may not be possible in the absence of competitive political parties”… "Orderly government, much less a democratic polity, cannot exist without some form of stabilised party representation”⁶, and more recently Seymour Martin Lipset speaks of “The indispensability of political parties”. ⁷ An interest in the role of political

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⁴ Linz and Stepan, op.cit., p. 6
⁵ Linz and Stepan 1997, p16
⁷ Journal of Democracy 11.1 (2000) 48-55. However one dissenting voice is Toka, writing about parties in east central Europe. Noting that recent scholarship has presumed a causal link between institutionalised party systems and democratic consolidation, he observes that although most countries
parties is of course not only due to the transition to multi-party democracies, but reflects a change in approach in political science more generally. Under various headings, political scientists have taken a renewed interest in the study of formal political institutions, including political parties.

Our concern is specifically with the contribution of parties to the process of democratic consolidation, meaning both parties individually and the party system. Within the broad literature on democratisation world-wide, there is not in fact any extensive body of writing that explicitly seeks to pin this contribution down. Certainly there is a widespread assumption that parties play or can play a crucial role in democratic transition. Parties are not, typically, expected to feature prominently in the earliest stages, whilst repressive political conditions prevail. But with the prospect of freely contested elections they come into their own. In the words of O’Donnell and Schmitter: ‘If there is ever a “heroic” moment for political parties, it comes in their activity leading up to, during and immediately following the “founding elections”, when, for the first time after an authoritarian regime, elected positions of national significance are disputed under reasonably competitive conditions’. At this point they move centre stage. So what is it at this point and thereafter that the literature suggests parties can do to forward the process of democratic consolidation? The functions that it is hoped parties can perform can be grouped as follows:

1. **representation**. Parties need to play a key role in organising elections. But beyond this they have a wider function of representation, not only in the sense of standing for

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8 See for instance B. Guy Peters (1999): *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism*, (London, Pinter). This applies also to students of development issues. Thus, Peter Lewis, for instance argues that ‘It is…time for Africanists to take institutions seriously once again. The rapid enfeeblement of central institutions in the early years of independence prompted many observers to focus instead on social structures and political processes in Africa. Largely for good reasons, there have been few studies in recent decades of constitutions, electoral arrangements, party systems, or legal orders. These structures have attained new relevance, however, and it has become possible to examine them in the field’. See Peter Lewis (1996) ‘Economic reform and political transition in Africa. The quest for a politics of development’, *World Politics*, 49, 92-119.

9 1986, p.57
their members/constituents/ sections of the public but helping to articulate and aggregate their interests\(^{10}\). As an extension of this Crotty talks about how, where civil society organisations are relatively well developed, the party can assume the role of an additional brokerage agent serving to inter-connect the mediating groups into larger and more powerful electoral coalitions\(^{11}\).

2. *conflict resolution*: to some extent this overlaps with the potential role of parties in promoting democratic government. In contexts where the process of democratic transition is understood to centre on crucial explicit or more commonly tacit ‘pacts’, parties or their leaders may play an important part in bringing these about. With particular reference to the Mediterranean region, for instance, Pridham stresses the need for party leaders, some of whom may be implicated in the preceding regime, to be willing to ‘bury the hatchet’ and work together\(^{12}\).

3. *making government accountable*: in consolidated democracies the political leadership is held accountable for its actions. Accountability has many facets\(^{13}\) but a common distinction is between vertical and horizontal accountability. Political parties have a central role in both types. Regular elections are the formal mechanism for ensuring ‘vertical accountability’ and parties’ role in this process usually implies two separate mechanisms. First parties are supposed to offer various policy alternatives to the electorate and the underlying assumption is that voters will choose among those preferences. The electorate is supposed to reward office holders they approve of and throw out the ones they are dissatisfied with. The party label is a way for the electorate to identify candidates with past as well as future performance. For this to take place, there must be some continuity in the party system and that different parties are perceived to represent alternative policies. Secondly, parties constitute the opposition which challenges the incumbent government. Thus, the role of and the structure of political *opposition* become important. Horizontal accountability is the answerability

\(^{10}\) See for instance the Introduction to Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully (eds), *Building Democratic Institutions*, (1995)

\(^{11}\) See William Crotty; op. cit

\(^{12}\) See Geoffrey Pridham... Also O’Donnell and Schmitter

of political institutions to each other, such as a government’s accountability towards the parliament. Horizontal accountability is ensured when for instance the legislature is able to control the executive arm of government

Making government accountable implies the ability of political parties, or at least the elected leaders, to effectively gain control of the governmental apparatus, while at the same time not subjugating this apparatus to their own benefit and using it as a tool against the opposition. “Democratic accountability is best seen as a relation between the past acts of those who exercise public power and their future personal liabilities.”

The argument to be made in favour of political parties is that they are tools, not only for representing the electorate, but also a way for the electorate to hold parties accountable for their actions and promises. This rests on the assumption that some parties are capable of constituting a regularised and effective source of opposition.

The next cluster of functions, which of course overlaps with those preceding, is to do with:

4. institutionalising democracy. Parties themselves should be mechanisms within which people become habituated to democratic norms and procedures. Pridham, for instance, talks about “the way in which parties, acting individually and collectively, give substance to constitutional rules and thus confirm and enlarge on the formal outcome of transition”. Going back to Linz and Stepan’s three aspects of democratic consolidation, parties as institutions are especially critical for behavioural consolidation, that is in eliminating non-democratic behaviour. Parties that advocate violence make democratic consolidation impossible.

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16 Op cit, p

17 It would seem that the possibility for this to occur is strongly related to the process of transition to a democratic system. The most difficult starting point is where parties are emanating from a civil war type situation. Mozambique and Angola are contrasting cases in this respect. In the former, the previous military adversaries have been reconciled to accept the outcome of the electoral process, while in the latter the democratisation process was reversed and civil war again resumed. What needs to be
5. finally by effectively performing the preceding functions, party systems can contribute to regime legitimacy, establishing a reservoir of good will to help fragile new democracies tide over bad times.18

**What parties need to be like to make this contribution**

Logically there is a distinction to be drawn between what parties are to contribute and what they need to be like in order to make this contribution, though actual discussion often blurs the two. The ability of parties to perform these functions necessary for democratic consolidation is seen to depend partly on characteristics of the parties and party systems. Thus it is argued that ideally parties need to be national in scope and built on a broad coalitional base, not confined to a particular constituency. The strength and institutionalisation of parties and party systems is emphasised, one dimension of institutionalisation being seen as the extending of roots into the wider society. The number of parties, or of effective parties, within the party system is also considered highly relevant: a high level of party system fragmentation, particularly combined with unbalanced party systems, means that parties will not provide an adequate source of political opposition.

The contribution of parties to democratic consolidation is also seen, however, to depend on the context of party politics. Thus Crotty stipulates that the party system should be independent of state control and that the electoral procedures should be reasonable, fair and inclusive. Van de Walle and Butler contend that the character of parties will be influenced by the nature of political system, including the ‘quality of democracy’ - which has the danger of producing rather a circular argument.

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20 William Crotty, op cit

We hypothesise, in particular, and as is discussed further below, that behavioural consolidation (as in the Linz and Stepan formulation previously cited) is linked to constitutional engineering. Thus, the probability parties will adopt and help to institutionalise democratic behaviour will in part be a consequence of various forms of inclusion mechanisms. Democratic institutions can be organised as a ‘winner take all’ situation or may be organised in a more inclusive way. Presidential systems are in this sense winner take all oriented, while parliamentary or semi-presidential systems are more inclusive oriented. Newly democratized states that opt for a more balanced institutional system are likely to accommodate political adversaries more easily. Such mechanisms can be proportional representation, a significant role for the legislature, term limitation for presidents, a local and regional level of government with some autonomous decision-making, and various forms of consociational mechanisms, like coalition government or some form of segmental autonomy.

**Democratic consolidation in tropical Africa**

So far as democratic consolidation in tropical Africa is concerned, accounts of developments in the 1990s have ranged from optimistic to pessimistic but with the pessimistic voice seeming to gain in volume as the decade wore on. Commentators like Letitia Lawson\(^ {22} \) would now question how far it is appropriate to talk about democratic consolidation at all, except in a handful of cases. Van Walraven says that ‘Viewed in terms of the growth in political equality induced by fundamental shifts in the balance of social forces, one can only conclude that, in general, Africa is nowhere nearer to democracy than ten years ago’ (though he does also say that in comparative terms ten years is not very long)\(^ {23} \). Typically now in tropical Africa, democracy is described as crumbling, virtual, declining, illiberal or more positively just surviving. This incidentally makes any discussion of what is needed for consolidation a matter of extrapolation and speculation rather than being based on the retrospective analysis of achieved changes.

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There are, however exceptions to this negative assessment, of which the most notable recent example is Ghana. Ghana is now seen to represent a relatively successful case of attitudinal consolidation. Haynes’ pessimistic view of Ghanaian consolidation - “the chief problem is getting members of the ‘political class’, the leaders of opposition parties and senior figures in the governing party, consistently and routinely to observe the democratic rules of the political game” seems to have been replaced by optimism. After the 1992 election, which large parts of the opposition boycotted, the 1996 election, and later, the 2000 presidential election, have been judged to be both fair and resulted in a peaceful turnover of the presidency.

Another kind of exception is constituted by survey evidence that in the southern African states at least the change to multi-party democracy seems to have been largely welcomed by public opinion. Mattes et.al found that there was little “authoritarian nostalgia” and that democracy is largely described in positive terms. However, public opinion is quite critical of public institutions which may also apply to political parties, although they are not specifically included in their survey.

**Contribution of African parties in practice**

The perception that parties are necessary for democracy to function raises further concern among students of democratisation in Africa. There, political parties are generally considered to be a weak link in the chain of elements that together makes for a democratic state. Monga for instance, identifies eight problems with African politics, and the two first are the weakness of political parties and the problems involved in the electoral process, while de Walle and Butler argue that “African political parties are plagued by weak organisations, low levels of institutionalisation, and weak links to the society that they are supposed to represent”.

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26 Robert Mattes et.al. (2000) “Public opinion and the consolidation of democracy in Southern Africa: An initial review of key findings of the Southern African democracy barometer”
28 Nicolas van de Walle and Kimberley Smiddy Butler, p. 15
Earlier we listed the kinds of contributions that it is expected or hoped parties can make to democratic consolidation. Generally in practice African parties are not perceived to deliver these effectively. Thus for instance, in the context of ensuring government accountability, the extent to which parties actually present different policy alternatives has been questioned even in established democracies, but in the new African democracies the overwhelming judgement seems to be that parties do not care very much about presenting clearly distinguishable policy platforms, and that if they do, it has little relevance to what they do once in office. As an example, parties in Mauritius have only ‘the loosest commitments to particular policy positions’29. Van de Walle and Butler, in their survey of parties in tropical Africa note that the small number which have attempted policy-based campaigns have met with minimal success. Thus the NLP (National Lima Party) in Zambia supported by Zambian Farmers’ Union, presented itself as defender of rural interests in the 1996 general election but failed win any seats. Similarly, they note that in francophone Africa several avowedly Marxist parties regularly fail get more than symbolic support30.

Some critics will of course argue that this is also an irrelevant criteria against which to judge African parties. It assumes that voters do indeed examine party policy platforms and choose among the alternatives rather than following a more patrimonial logic of self-interest.31

**Explanations for party performance - imbalanced party systems**

To the extent that the performance of political parties has been disappointing, a range of possible explanations are offered either explicitly or implicitly. Some focus on party systems where others concentrate more on the record of individual parties, although inevitably these overlap. We begin with explanations at the level of party systems. In the extensive democratisation literature we have cited above, particular attention is paid to the need for party systems to be ‘institutionalised’. Mainwaring32 identifies four dimensions of party system institutionalisation concerning respectively

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29 Carroll and Carroll, op.cit. , p. 181. See also Chabal and Daloz, op.cit. 151.
30 Van de Walle and Butler, op cit.
31 On the other hand, the Afrobarometer survey showed that a significant majority of respondents in each of the state included in that survey were of the opinion that it did matter who was in power and also that people thought that voting did have an effect, see Mattes et.al.op. cit, p. 61
the stability of patterns of party competition, the rootedness of parties in society, the legitimacy accorded to parties by major political actors and parties’ organizational development. Although he recognises that in some contexts very high levels of institutionalisation can be associated with a ‘stultified’ party system, he diagnoses the reverse problem in the emerging democracies. We have discussed the notion of party institutionalisation at length elsewhere. Without denying that the issues discussed under that heading are often important, we argue that as a concept it is used in ambiguous and contradictory ways and understood to combine a number of very different dimensions. At any rate we suggest here that perhaps the most pertinent aspect of party systems for parties’ contribution to democratic consolidation concerns their degree of internal imbalance.

A long time back, and specifically in the context of the ‘African labyrinth’ Sartori argued it was useful to distinguish between three types of party system: dominant authoritarian, dominant non-authoritarian, and non-dominant. A number of authors have recently observed that whilst in formal terms ‘multi-party politics with more or less regular elections has become the norm’ in tropical Africa, and dominant authoritarian party systems are correspondingly few, the emerging predominant type of party system is the non-authoritarian dominant type. Whilst there are typically a great many parties, this generally contributes to fragmentation rather than the possibility of meaningful competition with or opposition to the ruling party. Bogaards suggests that few non-ruling parties can be deemed ‘effective’ in the technical sense, and even then, they may not be effective in the sense of having blackmail or coalition leverage. Bratton, surveying later (post 1994) founding elections and second elections in tropical Africa, concludes that ‘The trend is toward entrenchment of incumbent presidents and domination by ruling political parties’.

32 Scott Mainwaring, op cit
33 See Randall and Svasand, op cit
35 Van de Walle and Butler, op cit, p16.
Incumbency has obvious practical advantages in any electoral contest. In states such as Zimbabwe and Botswana, the incumbent party has always been in power, even in a context of multi-party politics. Following elections in the new democratising wave, several states, including Kenya and Tanzania, have seen the previous state-carrying party continuing in power. Incumbent parties or regimes have in some cases been defeated, as in Zambia where UNIP was defeated by the MMD in 1991, Mali where an opposition coalition ADEMA was victorious in the same year, South Africa where the ANC emerged victorious in 1994, and Ghana at the end of last year where the ruling NDC has been defeated by the NPP. But even in these cases fears have been expressed that the newly victorious party will be want and be able to consolidate its own dominant position.38

State carrying parties are strong as formal institutions. They have access to and apparently make use of as much as possible of the state resources at their disposal.39 This enables them to outcompete newer parties that both lack a national organisational network, have limited access to newspaper and other media resources, and inadequate party finance.40 For instance, amongst the reasons cited by Molomo and Somolekae for the persistence of the dominant party system in Botswana is that the rules for state funding are heavily skewed towards the governing party. If this is not enough they can resort to various forms of malpractice of the electoral process, as in Kenya in 1992, including violence and intimidation of the opposition, as was clearly the case in Zimbabwe’s parliamentary elections in 2000. To the voters, the boundary between the state and the party becomes blurred.

38 See for instance Peter Burnell’s paper for this workshop
Although a change in government is often used as a criteria to evaluate to what extent democratisation has become consolidated, it would be unreasonable to claim that a system could not be democratic if there was not turnover in government. One might very well imagine a situation where a party was successful in government, electorally dominating over the opposition for prolonged periods, while still maintaining all the procedures of a democracy. Moreover, political opposition could have other avenues to advance its claims than through the party system, such as through a vibrant civil society, a form of societal corporatism or forms of decentralisation within the ruling party. One party dominance is therefore not by itself contradictory to democratic governance. But it is nevertheless a structural feature of a party system that is not conducive to democratic consolidation – particularly not in case of the absence of the alternative channels of participation. of attitudinal consolidation, acceptance of the rules of the game.

**Weakness of political parties**

The imbalance of the party system is clearly related to the second issue we want to focus on, the ‘weakness’ of political parties. The state-carrying or dominant parties are evidently ‘stronger’ than the rest. The numerous non-dominant parties are weak relative to the dominant parties. But beyond this what do we mean by weakness? Whilst the weakness of African parties is regularly commented upon, this is more often than not left unspecified. Weakness could simply be defined as or inferred from these parties’ failure to contribute effectively to democratic consolidation in the ways listed above. But we suggest the following additional criteria, relevant to individual parties as organisations - how far they are able to penetrate, through their network of branches, the territory they perceive as relevant, how far they are able to incorporate significant numbers of their electorate into more active or regularised forms of party membership or support, the extent to which they incorporate regularised procedures

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43 As for instance in Samuel P Huntington’s ‘two-turnover test’ which requires the winners of the ‘founding elections’ to be defeated, and then for the new winners to be defeated in turn. See *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Noran: University of Oklahoma press).

their different spheres of activity\textsuperscript{45}, and the extent of their resources, especially funding.

**Explanations for weakness of African political parties.**

How then is the general weakness of African political parties to be explained? Below we identify six factors that can be extracted from the literature on Africa’s democratisation. These factors range from contextual factors (the cultural and economic preconditions) to micro-level explanations (the role of the political elites), to institutional explanations (the structure of the state and its institutions). In most cases in practice there will be multiple causes for the weakness of political parties and the individual causes outlined below may also interact. It must be left to an empirical analysis to confirm or disconfirm these factors in individual countries, or preferably in comparative studies.

**a. economic development.**

The classic argument about the link between democracy and economic development has been subjected over and over again to empirical tests, and indeed largely verified\textsuperscript{46}. Here, the explanation for weak parties is outside of the political sphere itself. The development of democratic structures, including parties, is a side effect of economic development. One implication of this thesis is that a stabilised party system is more likely to emerge under improved economic conditions. Economic development gives rise to various interest groups, which will seek to improve their situation by forming or linking up with political parties.

Economic development correlates with factors such as urbanisation and educational level and general improvement of living conditions. Each of these factors has an impact on the development of political parties as organisations. Urbanisation makes communication easier for political parties, both internally to members as well as externally to voters. The problematic infrastructure in many African states and the fact

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{45} Mololomo and Somolokae, op cit, note that one weakness of opposition parties in Botswana is that they lack standard procedures for leadership competition and for candidate nominations.

\end{footnotesize}
that the governing party has easier access to transportation than opposition groups, limit the latter’s ability to develop a national organisational network. Similarly, improved educational level raises the awareness of voters and with increased personal income they are able to purchase newspapers and pay subscription or donate contributions to political parties. Van Walraven for instance claim that lack of urbanisation and little industrialisation prevents the organisation of class oriented parties. With special reference to Africa and the absence of economic development, Lipset et.al. are pessimistic about democracy’s chance of being consolidated: ‘There is need for considerable caution about the long term prospects for multi-party structures in many of the newer systems.’

Presumably, it should be possible to subject this thesis to empirical tests. First, a cross-national comparison should reveal contrasts between countries with respect to macro-level economic and social characteristics, and within-nation comparisons of discrepancies in developments between regions should do the same. However a large literature and the example for instance of party politics in India caution us to resist such an overly determinist thesis.

b. parties and civil society

A common view of parties is that they are the political expression of politicised cleavages in society. Such cleavages cause development of a network of associations mobilising supporters on each side of a given cleavage. In this sense parties are a special kind of civil society organisation. Several scholars have argued that African societies score very poorly with respect to the development of such organisations and Chabal and Daloz dismiss the idea that the emergence of civil society should present something fundamentally new to the structure of African politics: ‘The current assumption about the emergence of such a recognisable civil society in Africa is thus

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47 It was no coincidence that it was in Zambia, a fairly urbanised country in the African context, that a broad coalition was able to unseat the incumbent party.
48 Lipset et.al., p. 171
50 See f.i.Gyimah-Boadi (1997) op.cit., and
eminently misleading and derives more from wishful thinking or ideological bias than from a careful analysis of present conditions’.

Others tend to present a more positive picture. Glaser, assessing the prospect for democracy in South Africa, refers to the positive development of civil society: ‘It (South Africa) also has a sizeable middle class which, though largely white, is in the process of being multiracialized. This is a sociological fact favourable for the autonomy of civil society and maintenance for democratic institutions as is the presence of a large organized urban working class’. 52

The link between strong civil society mobilization and the electoral success of new parties challenging the incumbent government has been frequently noted. Thus the success of the MMD in Zambia was precisely because it was a coalition of groups united in the aim of ousting the Kaunda regime. Similarly, the new opposition party in Zimbabwe, MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) which managed to win 57 of the 120 seats in Parliament in the June 2000 elections, was built on a pro-democracy network embodied in the National Constitutional Assembly, which in turn included ‘scores of civil society organisations like the influential and well-respected Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace: religious organizations like the Zimbabwe Council of Churches; human rights advocacy groups such as Zimrights; women’s groups like the Women’s Coalition; student organizations such as the Zimbabwe National Students Union; and, most important of all, the powerful Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions’ 53.

However, also in this case there are dissenting voices. Carroll and Carroll, in their assessment of the quality of Mauritius’ democracy, claim that one of the strength of that democracy is the vitality of the civil society. Yet, at the same time, they argue that the parties in Mauritius can hardly be characterised as strong 54. It is possible of course that strong parties require a strong civil society, but that the latter do not necessarily result in the former.

52 Glaser, op.cit., p. 220
54 Carroll and Carroll, op.cit., p. 181
Perhaps the most careful analysis of the relationship between parties and civil society organisations is provided by Widner\textsuperscript{55}. She notes the proliferation in the 1980s in Africa of new forms of association based on common economic interest and including trade associations, unions, consumer groups, transporters’ organizations, parent-teacher associations, and student leagues. Whilst the degree to which such associations have been independent of government, or external donors and at same time distinct from old sectarian and clientelistic networks, has varied, many speak the language of government accountability and have tried to influence public policy. And yet political parties have not generally sought to mobilise or appeal to such associations. Widner suggests a whole range of reasons for this ‘paradox’ but they include the consideration that the actual membership of such groups is very low - ‘Under these conditions, to assemble a significant vote base, party leaders must “press the flesh” with many members of these groups. This is a very time-consuming and costly prospect\textsuperscript{56}. Furthermore leaders of such associations have little power to deliver their members’ votes. Perhaps most importantly, few associations represent the interests of farmers. Although churches and teachers’ associations have networks reaching out into the rural areas, teachers are dependent for their livelihood on the incumbent government, whilst churches are generally reluctant to take a partisan political stance. If there are many reasons why parties might be wary of reliance on civil society organisations, as Burnell points out in his paper for this workshop, there are similar reasons why such organisations would avoid too close a relationship with any particular party.

c. the salience of ethnicity

Many commentators associate the weakness of African political parties with the salience of ethnic identities and divisions. In some cases this is linked to the absence of class divisions or strong civil society organisations as an alternative basis for party mobilisation. Lawson writes, for example, ‘In the absence of formal associations clearly apart from the state and capable of engaging the population, the introduction of


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, p77.
liberal democratic procedures, at the behest of external donors, has led political parties to appeal to the only available alternative: ethnic identity \(^{57}\). Walraven \(^{58}\) similarly suggests that ethno-regional and clientelist interests may represent the most rational strategy for political parties to aggregate social interests and mobilising countervailing power against governments, which then contributes to extreme party fragmentation, while Nikiwane \(^{59}\) observes that in southern Africa ‘The biggest weakness of these opposition parties is that they are regional, at best, and tribal in orientation. Their only hope was to unify their organisations. But because of their fundamental structures (parochialism), they have consistently been unable to come together, let alone to agree on unified positions’

Other commentators, whilst not denying the tendency for parties to draw disproportionately from the ethnic constituencies associated with their leadership, not only question the assumption that this inevitably contributes to political instability \(^{60}\) but stress the extent to which ethnic identification is modified and constrained by other considerations. Thus Clapham notes that when the Nigerian military regime in 1993 put up two carefully vetted candidates for the Presidential elections, relying on normal electoral arithmetic to ensure that its favoured northern candidate would win, to its consternation the southern candidate, Chief Abiola, was able draw substantial support from northern Nigeria, leading to annulment of the elections \(^{61}\). Mozaffar and Scarritt go further, arguing that ‘ethnopolitical fractionalization does not directly impact the structure of the party systems. Instead their impact is mediated by a combination of social structural; variables (specifically, degree of ethnopolitical concentration and dispersion), institutional variables (notably, electoral formula and

\(^{57}\) Letitia Lawson, op cit, p12.

\(^{58}\) Klaas van Walraven, op cit


\(^{60}\) Van de Walle and Butler, op cit, for instance point out that it depends on how far elections are winner take all exercises between polarised communities or an arena for multiethnic negotiations that result in broad governing coalitions.

district magnitudes) and contingent variables directly linked to the dynamics of
democratic transition’

d. Actor oriented explanation: party as instrument of individual ambitions.
As we have seen a common critique of African parties is that they do not emerge out
of civil society. Thus, one frequent type of explanation for the weak character of
parties emphasises the motivations of the political elite. Rather than being developed
as organisations, parties appear as useful vehicles for ambitious politicians. Even in
the case of the only African state to maintain a continuous multi-party system and
electoral turnover, Mauritius, it is claimed that parties are largely ‘personalised
coalitions of supporters of a particular political leader’
. In other newly democratised
states, to cite Claude Ake, ‘Paradoxically the democratisation of Africa has focused
on the power elite, who are the natural enemies of democracy....their involvement in
democracy movements is mainly a tactical manoeuvre. It is a response to internal
contradictions and power struggles within a group for whom democracy is essentially
a means to power’
. This view is echoed by Decalo, who claims that an effect of
democratisation has been an opening of “political floodgates, swamping countries
with scores of political parties, mostly narrow ethnic and personal power-machines
and thousands of power aspirants”
. Supporting such claims are examples of political
parties presumably formed in opposition to the ruling parties, but where the leadership
of such opposition groups eventually agree to serve in the cabinet of the incumbent
party : as when Edem Kodjo broke ranks with the victors of the July 1994 legislative
elections in Togo to join the government of the dictator, Eyadema, or when, in
Nigeria, Abiola’s vice-presidential running mate, Baba Gana Kingibe, became
Abacha’s foreign minister
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Thus, this type of explanation focuses on the motives of political actors that the new
democratisation has attracted. Explanations for why there has been this rush of

62 Shaheen Mozaffar and James R Scarritt (2000), ‘Why are there so few ethnic parties in Africa?’,
63 Carroll and Carroll, op.cit. , p. 181. See also Chabal and Daloz, op.cit. 151.
64 ibid. 11
297
individually based parties diverge. On the one hand, this pattern fits with a well established theory in party analysis. Schlesinger\textsuperscript{67} has argued (in a completely different context) that the most basic unit in a party organisation is that unit which it is necessary to organise for the purpose of electing a candidate to an office. Organisation is here seen as a means ambitious politicians use to get elected. Such motivations may also be encouraged by institutional arrangements, such as financial incentives in the election campaign. Such incentives may have been deliberately designed by the incumbent state carrying party to achieve this result, as it would lead to an extremely fragmented party system that could only be to its own benefit. The rush to establish parties based on individual candidates could also be a function of the speed with which democratisation occurred. Bratton and de Walle\textsuperscript{68} argue that domestic pressure for democratisation was the main explanatory factor for the abolition of the one-party regime. The implication of this is that there would probably be a number of political entrepreneurs who would try to benefit from the liberalisation when it occurred, without the time – or the incentive- to organise in a broader coalition. Over time, several of these initiatives are likely to fail. Thus, the party system can be expected to gradually become more structured.

To the extent that parties are perceived to be of this personalistic nature, they are not likely to contribute to ‘attitudinal consolidation’. It seems reasonable to believe that parties that function in this way will alienate voters from the democratic process, but combined with the next point, patrimonialism, parties may be able to represent the voters, although in special way.

e. (Neo-) patrimonialism and clientelism..

Another type of explanation, which partly overlaps with the previous one, is that the logic of party competition as we understand it from established democracies is irrelevant in the African context. The structure of African societies is dominated by vertical dependencies; various forms of patrimonialism and clientelism. Thus,


\textsuperscript{68} Bratton and de Walle, op.cit.
according to Chabal and Daloz, “the foundations of political accountability in Africa are both collective and extra-institutional: they rest on the particularistic links between Big Men, or patrons, and their constituent communities.” Accordingly, African voters cast their vote as they do “because they must placate the demands of their existing or putative patron”\(^69\).

One should note, however, that various forms of patrimonialism and clientelism also exist in societies in which parties have been developed as strong organisations, such as the Christian Democrats in Italy and the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan. (Neo)patrimonialism alone may not therefore be the explanation for weak parties, but it is the combination of patrimonialism and the general scarcity of resources in African societies that has such powerful consequences. Thus, in van Walraven’s view, a change of governing parties does not imply a change “in the nature of politics”.\(^70\) When the opposition wins an election it will try to exploit the state in the same way as the previous incumbent party. Zambia under Chiluba is often cited as an example of this.

The extent to which this is the case means that parties are able to function as long as they can provide their supporters with some of the spoils from winning office, either in the form of positions in the public sector for individuals, in preferential treatment in bids for licences and so forth or in the distribution of state resources to geographic areas. The whole idea of representation in African societies is ‘necessarily communal or collective’ and ‘literally entails the active improvement of the material condition of the community represented’.\(^71\) The dominance of the state in the economy therefore has an impact on the probability of developing an independent civil society – including political parties – as ‘key social groups and their organisations are ultimately dependent on government’.\(^72\) Thus, the greatest threat to the survivability of the individual

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\(^69\) Chabal and Daloz, op. Cit., p. 37, 39. See also Klaas van Walraven (2000): Of canvassing and carnival. Some reflections on the political economy and culture of democratic politics in Africa, Paper to the 43\(^{rd}\) ann. Meeting of the African Studies Association

\(^70\) van Walraven, ibib. p. 29.

\(^71\) Chabal and Daloz, op.cit., p. 55

patrimonial party is the impoverishment of the state, although patrimonialism as a system will survive.

f. the structure of the state and its political institutions.

Political parties function within a set of rules and institutions. In established democracies parties themselves are to large extent able to structure such rules, as for instance in terms of party finance. In newer democracies the design of political institutions may have a considerable impact on the survivability of the new regime and the nature of, among other things, the political parties. African democracies seem for the most part to be characterised by a combination of institutional inheritance, such as the electoral systems of the former colonial power, a strong presidency, inherited from the single-party rule era, and a strong central government. To some analysts this structural set-up is itself a problem in democratisation.

Claude Ake, for instance, has in several publications advocated institutional changes in African political systems. ‘One of the most remarkable features of democratisation in Africa is that it is totally indifferent to the character of the state.’ A consequence of this, in his view, is that the introduction of multi-party democracy without significant alterations in the structure of the state makes democratisation meaningless. Democracy would be improved, he says, by changing the distribution of power, and three changes he advocates will in our view have implications for the role of political parties. First, African states gives too much power to the presidency: ‘In all too many cases, democratisation has been a manner of replacing a self-appointed dictator with an elected one’. Second, the role of the legislature in the governing process should be improved, constitutionally as well as in terms of the resources available for the legislature as an institution. [His third recommendation, for multi-tiered government, we return to below.]

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75 Claude Ake (1996b), p. 6
De Walle and Kimberley are likewise of this opinion. They argue that the importance of the state for the distribution of patronage puts an enormous premium on the executive branch and that ‘party competition in the legislative branch is in many respects a sideshow’. Gyimah-Boadi similarly observes that even if parliaments have enjoyed a come-back, they are weak as institutions: African parliaments tend to be ‘negative coalitions’ cobbled together to dislodge - or to entrench - incumbents, and conditioned by ‘a persistent culture of authoritarianism’. Whether by design or simply by historical tradition, most African states have weak legislatures. Combined with winner take all electoral systems and central level dominance, this is not conducive to democratic consolidation.

Shugart argues that there is a trade-off between the strength of parties and the balance of power between the legislature and the presidency. This is in part a consequence of legislators’ preference, but also linked to the way democracy was introduced. Legislators who are primarily seeking to build personal reputations will opt for a proactive presidency, whereas politicians advancing party reputations will opt for a weak executive. Those preferring a balance will opt for a reactive presidency. The ability of politicians to impact on the institutional choice is linked to the transition process, which Shugart divides into decompressive and provisionary. The former is a gradual transformation from the old regime, in which semi-competitive elections precede constitution-making and competitive elections. In the second model a provisionary government arranges competitive elections, followed by constitution-drafting. In each of these models, one can distinguish between insiders and outsiders.

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76 De Walle and Butler, op.cit., p. 26
79 Matthew Soberg Shugart (1998): “The inverse relationship between party strength and executive strength: A theory of politician’s constitutional choices”, British Journal of Political Science, Vol. 28, Part 1, pp. 1-30. Interesting as this hypothesis is, Shugart does operate with a very specific notion of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ parties. On page 12 he says: ‘I am using this term as a shorthand for whether rank- and -file members are interested mostly in cultivating party reputations (strong parties) or personal reputation (weak parties)’. He adds that ‘a strong party is ... capable of presenting a coherent face to the voters so that they can assess its collective fitness for government on the basis of its past and likely future performance in office’ but that this does not necessarily mean that it is organisationally strong. The problem with this approach seems to us to be illustrated by the fact that Shugart decides that Benin, characterised as an excellent example of the provisionary transition, has ‘strong’ political parties.
(from the old regime). This leaves four possible combinations, and in Shugart’s view it is only in cases of provisionary transitions that one can expect strong political parties, while countries following a decompressive mode dominated by insiders will result in weak parties.

A parallel reasoning is found in a review article by Foweraker\(^80\) on governability in Latin-American regimes. He calls attention to the need to incorporate information not only about party leaders’ ability to control nomination processes, but also their control of key procedural resources in the legislature. Although we in this paper can not subject his theory to an empirical test of African transitions, there seems to be support for his propositions. Transition to multi-party elections from single-party rule in states like Tanzania, Zambia and Kenya all correspond to an insider dominated transition. In Zambia it resulted in a peaceful change of government, but Zambia’s experience under Chiluba could lend some support to the Shugart thesis.

The combination of weak parliaments and a dominant political party makes it particularly problematic to develop horizontal accountability, and by implication reduces the impact of (other) political parties. In neither Botswana nor Zambia does the parliament control its own agenda or budget, or decide who should be the speaker. Good claims that the combination of one-party domination and a formally weak parliament, has meant that Botswana has developed a non-accountability of the elite, and that although the Namibian parliament on paper has more clout, the dominance of Swapo has had a similar pacifying impact.\(^81\) In contrast, in Ghana where the opposition showed a strong performance in the 1996 election, they were able to serve as a real check on the Rawling’s government’s behaviour.\(^82\)

Also, in the case of South Africa, the dominance of the ANC has raised concern among some scholars. Not because ANC is successful, but because of the combination


of ANC support with rules inside the ANC as well as the procedures in the legislature. Glaser, for example, argues that ‘The ANC cannot be “blamed” for winning as many votes as it does, but its dominance means that the fate of South Africa’s young democracy depends to an alarming extent on the party’s own democratic good behaviour’ 83. Her concern is about the combination of ANC dominance with a weakened role for the legislature in relation to the executive, as well as the strengthening of the federal level over the state (province). Kotze is of a similar opinion. He claims that in the immediate period after gaining power the ANC government contributed to a transparent political process but that more recently legislation has been rushed through parliament ‘without allowing the opposition parties a suitable opportunity for debate’. While Glaser credits the ANC for generally upholding institutions and procedures that are crucial to democratic polities, ‘it is in respect of internal party democracy…that the ANC’s record so far is most open to criticism’85. The nomination process in the ANC is in the hands of the central level, which means that internal opposition can easily be curbed by the threat of denying renomination. As in several legislatures, MPs that decide to ‘cross the floor’, loose their seat. Thus the combination of electoral domination, internal party rules, weak federalism and a weak legislature together reduces the potential impact of opposition- both inside the dominant party and outside of it.

Ake’s third recommended change has to do with decentralisation: ‘The democratisation of the state in Africa will benefit a great deal from a multi-tiered government structure, especially local governments which are not simply administrative units but a tier of government’. 86 Bratton87 shares this view.

82 Jeff Haynes (2000): “The possibility of democratic consolidation in Ghana”, in Burnell and Calvert op.cit., p. 117
Commenting on the first round of democratic elections in Africa, he finds that in perhaps half local elections were either held late or not at all, partly because of cost. ‘Obviously, until elected local governments are established or restored, the task of building democracy in Africa will remain seriously incomplete’. At the same time, there are limits to the democratic benefit of decentralisation if not combined with a more evenly balanced party system.

Conclusion
This paper has considered the contribution of political parties in tropical Africa to the process of democratic consolidation. Given that that process is itself widely perceived to be faltering, the analysis may seem to have been as much about what parties individually, and party systems, have not contributed - in terms of providing mechanisms of representation, conflict resolution, accountability and opposition, and for the institutionalisation of democratic behaviour and attitudes - and more fundamentally still, why. It could well be objected that such an approach tends to impose too western a model, through which to analyse and evaluate African experience. Thus Ake argues that ‘The political party system of liberal societies make little sense in societies where the development of associational life is rudimentary and interest groups remain essentially primary groups. In light of such differences, it will be very misleading to think of democratisation in Africa as multi-party electoral competition’. However, Ake in turn is comparing African parties with an idealised and homogenised version of parties and elections in Western societies. Western political parties have developed in a variety of contexts, socially, culturally, economically and politically. It is not difficult to find examples of how parties even in established democracies are also vehicles for ambitious politicians and how elective office is used to further the interests of the individual representative’s constituency.

Linz and Arturo Valenzuela (eds.): The failure of presidential democracy. Comparative perspectives. Vol. 1, Baltimore, Md. , Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 3-90
87 Bratton (1998) op cit, p39
Political parties may only be a part of the story of democracy in Africa but analysing them tells us much about its prospects and hazards.