BEYOND “INFORMAL POLITICS”
Approaching Electoral Competition in Africa

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Introduction

Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz in their recent book on African politics have introduced an idea of “instrumentalization of disorder”. According to them in Africa “political action operates… largely in the realms of the informal, uncodified and unpolic ed - that is, in a world that is not ordered in the sense we usually take our own politie s in the West to be.” As a contrast “[i]n an ordered, regulated polity, political opportunities and resources are defined explicitly and codified by legislation or precedent.” (1998, xix). Although this kind of “ordered” polity or even an idea that “usually” politics in the West is taken to be about resources that are “explicitly defined” is doubtful to say the least (with regard to the role of the modern media for instance)\(^1\) the point Chabal and Daloz are making that “formal politics” plays virtually no role in Africa, deserves a closer look. Is it true that lack of institutionalisation and disregard for the formal political rules is a dominant feature of African politics?

The purpose of this paper is to approach this question by looking at the institution of electoral competition and its different meanings in Africa. Experiences from Zimbabwe, which is one of the very few African states that has had a continuous multi-party system since majority rule in 1980, clarify many shortcomings of formal electoral competition currently apparent all over Africa\(^2\). To quote an editorial of the *Zimbabwe News*, an official organ of the ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front), ZANU(PF), before the last general elections in 1995 “[t]he holding of the elections is a Constitutional necessity but in reality it is just a formality under the present political realities” (*Zimbabwe News* 26(6), 1995, 2).\(^3\) But while it is true that elections in Zimbabwe as in many other African countries as well, do not fulfill the expectations of Western aid agencies, for instance, and that they might have very little to do with “democratisation”, does it follow that this institution would be a “superficial” one? Or are elections a significant institution in Africa and for reasons that are not so unique at all?

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1. Indeed, one is tempted to reconstruct the idea of a Western polity in Chabal’s and Daloz’s book. Simplistic clichés, claiming that the representative legislates in the parliament “in the national interest” (p. 54) or that individuals have “distinct opinions and free will” (p. 150), reveal an extremely idealistic understanding of liberal democracy.
2. Although the example of Zimbabwe is used below, many of my theoretical observations stem from a more extensive research project compiling elections in fourteen African countries. The results of the project, which was conducted by African and Nordic scholars, will be published in a volume *Multi-Party Elections in Africa*, edited by Michael Cowen and myself.
3. 55 seats out of 150 were uncontested. Because the president has a constitutional right to appoint 12 nonconstituency MPs in addition to eight governors and ten chiefs (all supporters of the ruling party), the ruling party had ensured majority of the seats already before the election.
What is “formal” politics?

The very distinction between “informal” and “formal” by Chabal and Daloz is obviously derived from economics. Formal economic activities refers to those registered within the state machinery. On the one hand, this means that these activities are subject to the direct regulations of the state; on the other hand, it empowers all the parties of the formal sector so that they can, at least in principle, negotiate with the state to promote their interests. Therefore in one way or another, the state has to respond to the demands arising from the formal sector through its administrative and legal machinery.

As a contrast the informal sector, which is outside the state control, lacks the direct means to bargain with the state. Besides a big size of the informal sector also diminishes the bargaining power of the parties in the formal sector and makes, for instance, the position of organised salaried labour very vulnerable. In this respect it is interesting to note that initially, in the early 1970s, the concept of informal economic sector was strongly connoted with illegitimacy reflecting perhaps the fact that at that time economic development was still primarily contextualised within national or state decision-making. The growing interest in privatisation, NGOs, integration into the world economy and most importantly the disillusionment with the post-colonial state has given a more positive content to informal economy since late 1980s.

Similarly Chabal’s and Daloz’s concept of “informal” politics is inherently negative and absorbs positive features only with respect to the failing or illegitimate state. Striking in this kind of “formal” “informal” division of politics is that politics by definition is a subject to state power, not an autonomous sphere producing state and state regulation. Narrow as this kind of conceptualisation of politics is and difficult to anchor into the political theory thinking (and therefore, I suggest, should be rejected), it reveals one important phenomenon in Africa: politics followed the creation of the state. Due to colonialism the state machinery was not politically created as far as political is understood in terms of the particular society or societies in question. Colonial state machinery was not only an imported one, it was a machinery of a conquest and as such inevitably inspired various kind of resistance whether passive or active. In the form of African nationalism and independence struggle this resistance became one (although by no means not the only) kernel of the political in these societies.

In Chabal’s and Daloz’s framework it would be tempting to label African nationalism as “informal politics” simply because it was against the colonial state machinery. Yet, as we will argue below, it was very “formal” what the nationalists were asking for: right to vote in free, universal and equal elections and a parliamentarian system of government accountability.

What the idea of “formal” politics then refers to are simply the political institutions and rules introduced by this conquest state and its indigenisation. According to my reading of Chabal and Daloz, “informal” has a much more limited meaning than just political outside these

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4 Daloz, in fact, answered to my wondering whether it makes sense to make a division between “formal” and “informal” politics, by saying that it is as useful as the division between “formal” and “informal economy” is (private conversation, November 1998).
5 The concept was introduced to the development discourse within ILO’s World Employment Programme. ILO’s study of Kenya in 1972 was a pioneering work.
political institutions: it refers to decision-making procedures which explicitly ignore or violate the legal political institutions and codified rules.

That such decision-making occurs in Africa is well-known. Yet institutions and rules have played an important role at least since the late colonial period. Although Chabal and Daloz claim that with a focus to the “informal” they are presenting nothing less but “a new paradigm”, the fact is that very little has been written about the meaning and functioning of the “formal” in African politics. Since the late 1960’s it seems to have become much more acceptable to criticise “the mainstream” election studies in Africa than to actually conduct them (for an overview of the elections studies in Africa see Cowen & Laakso, 1997).

The meaning of elections

With a few, although notable, exceptions elections in Africa have usually been studies in the framework of liberal democracy and regarded either as a measurement of political development i.e. modernisation (early 1960s) or democratisation (early 1990s). Today one can note that democracy after the early 1990s transition to multi-party systems was no more realistic a goal than linear development towards Western type of political systems was after independence. Although, of course, not misplaced as objects of study, the exclusive focus on political development and democracy have meant that the actual information of elections has been under-utilised - evident in the lack of interest in African elections soon after researchers concluded that what was expected or wished did not happen. Therefore, I suggest, that rather than a measurement of development or democracy, elections should be regarded as a general indicator of the political changes irrespective of their “direction”.

With this kind of approach it is also possible to go beyond the belief that elections in Africa (because they are not fulfilling the ideal of liberal democracy) ipso facto are very different from elections in the West. Chabal’s and Daloz’s analysis is one example of this belief. For example, they note that elections in Africa are primarily instruments of obtaining material resources and therefore “electoral contests would have to be understood in terms of material exchange rather than in terms of ideological rationality” (p. 154). But even in this regard, theorising African elections does not require any special “paradigm”. The theory of political business cycles developed (originally by Kalecki, 1943) to describe the Western governments’ tendency to manipulate national economy according to the timing of the elections, is precisely about “material exchange”. Many studies have found evidence of the attempts of the incumbent governments to increase the aggregate of real disposable income or general well-being of the voters just before the elections. This kind of theorising is useful in Africa also. By increasing the salaries of the civil servants, building roads and other infrastructure or simply by printing money before the elections the rulers have attempted to secure their victory in the elections whether in the framework of multi-party or competitive one-party system. For us it is significant to note that this kind of manipulation is not based on “informal” but actually on very “formal” powers of the state to make an economic intervention. As in the West also in Africa we can assume that economic manipulation is more probable if the governments have reasons to belief that the voters would not otherwise

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6 Hermet et al eds. 1978, Hayward ed. 1987 and Chazan’s 1979, Cohen 1983 are examples of studies on African elections during the one-party period.
7 Of course the growing industry of electoral observation in Africa has produced and is producing a lot of reports.
vote for them. It is, yet, expensive and, when the government’s economic policies are closely watched by the IMF and World Bank, increasingly difficult.\textsuperscript{8}

Institutional manipulation might prove to be a more useful means to the incumbent government to ensure support in the elections. Again this is not peculiar to Africa only. Critiques of gerrymandering of constituencies, manipulation of the registration process, direct or indirect control of media coverage of different parties, campaign funding etc. can be a reality in elections all over the world. In African multi-party systems the ruling parties have often been able to manipulate the electoral instruments to an extent which makes real party political competition impossible. Zimbabwe is an example of a country, where elections have been made “just a formality” by very “formal” design. Furthermore institutional manipulation is by no means restricted to inter-party competition only. The government has used and attempted to use delimitation to get rid of its individual critics, even though these have been members of the ruling party\textsuperscript{9}.

If we take as a starting point the observation that state preceded politics in Africa, then bringing the “formal” back to the analysis requires also going beyond the electoral law and its implementation. Issues such as the constitution, the separation of powers and human rights alongside control of the government over focal points in civil society, such as trade unions, universities and the media highlight the constraints inhibiting even the potential of the voters to check the power of the government in the elections. This approach, however, is not to deny the controversial character of liberal democracy in itself. Liberal democracy even in the West is saturated by emerging problems of legitimacy and is therefore at least as problematic as the notions of the nation, state and political authority in their different variations are. While liberal democracy concerns the instruments of state authority, it is also about the decisions constituting this authority and about possibilities to contest it. Bringing this controversiality to Africa, where states were created by conquest and colonialism only one hundred years ago, opens up difficult questions of state sovereignty.

**Sovereignty**

Perhaps the most important meaning of elections in contemporary world concerns state sovereignty. The ideological force behind this is that elections in a very simple way connect the idea of popular sovereignty to that of state sovereignty. Even some of the most repressive governments have tried to maintain the institution of elections in one way or another. States without any electoral institutions or at least promises to establish such institutions have been very rare throughout the post world war II period. For instance military governments have usually legitimated themselves by claiming to be only temporary. That this ideology has not changed since the independence of the African states is evident. To quote one observer during the withdrawal of colonial powers in Africa, in 1960,

\textsuperscript{8} It is not a coincidence that in Zimbabwe during the election year 1995 the government expenditures increased to 40 percent of GNP and caused a budget deficit of 15 percent, which then resulted in IMF’s and World Bank’s decisions to cut their balance of payments support with hazardous economic consequences.

\textsuperscript{9} In Harare, alone, during the ZANU primaries in 1995, four constituencies were contested by two MPs each, while six constituencies had no incumbent MPs contesting the election (\textit{The Herald}, March 9, 1995). The most significant case was the division of Margaret Dongo’s Sunningdale constituency, which led her to withdrew from the contest in the primaries altogether and to contest the seat as an independent.
there is seldom any native tradition of unified government that can be revived, each new state must create its own tradition of political authority. What ideological basis is available except that of free elections under a wide franchise? This is the principle accepted by the West as the true pattern of sovereignty within the state; those seeking independence aspire to it; Western opinion (in so far as the West is anxious to facilitate transition) thinks of new states as legitimate only if they are framed in this Western image. (MacKenzie 1960, 1)

In the late 1950s and early 1960 the interregnum elections in Africa were pivotal to their independence and full of contest. In Zimbabwe these elections took place two decades later after an intensive liberation struggle. The significance of the 1980 elections (that were held after the peace agreement but before formal independence) for the whole peace process can hardly be exaggerated. The nationalist struggle was very much centred around the question of a universal franchise and actually developed and became radicalised through difficult confrontations with the Rhodesian state, which introduced complicated electoral systems one after another and through careful design of the formal institutions was able to extend the franchise and co-opt moderate nationalists while keeping the government power effectively in the hands of the white minority. (This colonial heritage of manipulating the formal institutions needs to be kept in mind when the strategies of the contemporary governments in Africa are analysed.) It was only the 1980 elections, in which also the liberation movement participated, that made possible an international recognition of the emerging government and the lifting of sanctions.

For the international community in general, most profoundly the United Nations, nationalists’ cause, i.e. indigenisation of the colonial states via “free elections under a wide franchise” turned out to be the sole justification for independence. In practice this created political systems combining Western liberalism to the still uncompleted process of state building. This is why Jackson and Rosberg, for instance, speak about a lack of “empirical statehood” in Africa (Jackson & Rosberg, 1986), where “[c]itizenship means little, and carries few substantial rights or duties compared with membership in a family, clan, religious sect or ethnic community” (Jackson 1992, 1). The controversy, however, is not so much between this lack of “empirical” statehood and the international recognition of the state (“juridical statehood” in the vocabulary of Jackson and Rosberg), but in the fact that citizenship, including universal franchise, was instituted according to the Western liberal image, while the constitution of the new state was still contested. This constitution did not concern only the form of the state and the ideological foundations for its economic policy, i.e. strategies to respond to the development imperatives emerging of the vast need to generate welfare for the majority of the people, but also territorial and national questions.

Nationalism

The issue of nationalism and nation-building is a most important dimension of electoral practices all over Africa. One the one hand this is connected to the rhetoric of the political parties emphasising unity, on the other hand it has to do with state coercion towards this unity. In the long term the mere experience of voting in national elections is also one moment of “imaging” a nation-wide community (see Anderson, 1991). The importance of this experience for nationalism in many African countries has perhaps been underestimated when attention has been paid solely to the many divisions that have become visible during the electoral process.
In Zimbabwe majority rule extended effective franchise to about three million people. Even though the rhetoric of the nationalists had presented the Africans as one united group, in reality (as was the case in most other African countries also) the African voters could be divided into different political groups mainly according to their regional background. Much has been written about the political divide between the Ndebele and the Shona as well as the Zezuru, Manyika and Karanga subgroups in the latter, and indeed it is difficult to understand politics in Zimbabwe without these divides. Yet the mere recognition of them, like the fact that in 1980 and 1985 the Ndebele voted for Joshua Nkomo and Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) and the Shona voted for Robert Mugabe and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), does not imply that voters in Matabeleland would have been different than voters in Mashonaland. Neither does the mere existence of these divides explain why the internal factionalism in the ruling party in 1995 seemed to go along the Zezuru-Karanga-Manyanka divides (affecting even delimitation of the constituencies i.e. the allocation of the seats in parliament to the areas dominated by these groups) while the Ndebele-Shona divide did not play a role as far as the delimitation of the constituencies was concerned.

The dilemma that ethnic politics poses for any attempt to understand it, is precisely here. When voters vote according to their ethnic identities, they probably do so because they all vote for a member of their own community or region to represent their interests in the national politics “to bring development” to their own area. Therefore demands for political unity have much less to do with this politicisation of ethnicity as such (not to speak about “invented” or real ethnic differences), than with the actual character of the state power, which makes the political competition a zero-sum game. It is due to that competition that one-time allies can easily become enemies and the difficult balancing between different ethnic groups is so pivotal to the political stability.

In Zimbabwe, although the two liberation movements ZANU and ZAPU had united for the peace negotiations, ZANU decided to contest the 1980 elections alone - apparently in order to solve the question of the country’s leadership. To the surprise of many, ZANU won 57 seats out of the 80 seats reserved for the Africans, while ZAPU won only 20 seats. As expected, ZAPU’s stronghold was Matabeleland. After a short period of power-sharing in the government, ZANU’s repression of ZAPU activists and supporters became extensive. In the context of a hostile apartheid regime in South Africa, the ZANU government regarded it justified to keep the emergency powers in force and the antagonism between the two parties escalated into a war in Matabeleland. Thousands of civilians suffered from atrocities conducted on the one hand by the so called dissidents and on the other hand by the government security forces. In the 1985 elections ZANU campaign material claimed that ZAPU was disloyal and divisive. Therefore voting for it was tantamount to making war.

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10 In very general terms and with regard to the rural population that constitutes the overwhelming majority, it can be said that Midlands and Masvingo are the regions of the Karanga ethnic group; Mashonaland is the regions of the Zezuru; Manicaland is the region of the Manyika; and Matabeleland is the region of the Ndebele. But even these ethnic groups can be divided into subgroups and even the rural population is often mixed (see Sithole 1988, 222, 223). Definitions of ethnic identities in Zimbabwe as elsewhere in the world seem to be fluid and an object of more or less arbitrary divisions.

11 It was only in 1997, that a comprehensive study of the human rights violations between 1980 and 1988 was published (CCJP, 1997), although there were information and critical voices already at the very time these atrocities were perpetrated. The first report on security force atrocities was published by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJP) during April 1983. But even now the government and president Mugabe have systematically refused to give any comments on the matter.
Interestingly enough ZAPU refrained from accusing the ruling party of not implementing development programmes in “its regions” in Matabeleland. Yet the government had punished the dissident-affected areas during 1983 by deliberate withholding drought relief food thus indicating to the electorate the power which ZANU possessed. However, if uneven development was a punishment it was only an asset to the ruling party in elections, where the opposition could not seriously entertain the possibility of winning the elections. The point of “nation-building” via elections is precisely here. In African elections all parties typically emphasise the issue of unity and try to avoid being labelled as parties of ethnic or regional minorities. This is, of course, only rhetoric, but in politics rhetoric matters.

The idea of unity (before 1990) was, of course, connected to the one-party ideology all over Africa. As an anecdote one can quote the then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe’s appeal to ZANU’s party officials in 1982 to recruit all the people of Zimbabwe, including the members of ZAPU, to his ZANU. Mugabe said: “When all people carried party cards, the present national registration cards would be abolished, because they would serve no purpose. It would also be easier to identify the enemy” (The Herald, Harare, January 25, 1982). In its ideal form, being Zimbabwean means being ZANU, and citizenship as an idea that empowers individuals with a range of political and civil rights is replaced by one which arises from membership and loyalty towards one political organisation and, above all, one leader. Although de jure one-party state was never established in Zimbabwe, it is important to note that it was firmly on the agenda of the ruling party until 1990 and that it also reflected the desire of the government to safeguard its position by establishing formal rules to the political practice.

Politically the state response to the dissident problem in Matabeleland meant that ZAPU leadership was left with very few alternatives if it wanted to get a minimal share of state power for itself and if it wanted to safeguard the security of its constituency. Thus the party was violently forced to join ZANU.

Even on a more general level party politics is as much organisation as disorganisation. Voting brings an individuals into the political arena via the political party. In organising voters through the form of a national party organisation, the purpose of elections can also act to disorganise more spontaneous, autonomous or local forms of political mobilisation. Elections, thereby, can be politically demobilising (for the sake of nation-building).

The question of legitimacy

As already stated elections are an important means to legitimise government power. In this respect the need to represent the electoral process as “free and fair” is evident. In practice it might seem obvious that all national elections are organised in order to gain legitimacy for state authority, if not internally, then certainly internationally. Especially during the 1990s, the demand that elections should be “free and fair” carries with it the conviction that voters should be provided with an effective choice. In case such choice is not provided to the voters, and although state authorities claim that “voting is a duty of a citizen”, voters may exercise their right to choose by deciding not to vote. This is an explicit refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the government. Voters’ consciousness of this functionality of the elections seems evident throughout large parts of Africa, where voters apathy has been rampant towards the end of the 1990s. If elections would not really matter, one could assume that
governments would be very happy with elections that are “just a formality” irrespective of the level of voters participation, in reality, however, for instance the 1996 presidential elections in Zimbabwe were most embarrassing for the leadership, simply because the turnout did not reach even 32 percent.

On the other hand it is also possible that the electorate exercises its right to choose, as much due to its fear of violence, political instability or lack of development resources (monopolised by the state) that would follow from “free” choice and thus awards legitimacy to the ruling party by voting for it or by not voting against it (i.e. the opposition). In other words, voters can accommodate themselves to what they regard as illegitimate forms of state authority.

In Zimbabwe the 1990 elections saw the emergence of a new party, the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), which gained its strength from the disclosure of widespread corruption scandals, the deteriorating economy and increasing unemployment. The 1990 elections, with ZUM putting up candidates throughout the country, provided people with an opportunity to vote against the ruling party and its plans to establish a one-party state. According to many observers the campaign period was “one of the most viciously contested” in the country (Makumbe 1991, 1). Especially the urban areas were markedly politicised. However, the state response to opposition mobilisation was very repressive. The police did very little to stop the intimidation which was carried out by the Youth League and the Women’s League of ZANU. “Co-operation” between ZANU youth and the police was common. In addition ZANU ran television commercials saying that to vote for ZANU was to choose life but to vote for the opposition was a decision to die (Ncube 1991, 7). Finally as many as 14 seats were unopposed due to last minute withdrawals of ZUM candidates and ZANU won in 103 of the 106 contested constituencies.

Compensation

Finally elections provide opportunities for aspiring personalities to get recruited to the leadership and more generally to civil society groups to use the public arena in order to promote their particular cause or interests. Even in Africa and in the context of zero-sum political struggles elections do compensate those, who are outside the circles of government power, for their exclusion.

In Zimbabwe in the 1990 elections ZANU had to respond to substantial criticism against its government, including that from outside the opposition parties. According to Patrick Quantin, the very fact that there was a new opposition, however weak, challenging the ruling party encouraged many interest groups in the country to present their claims, “more or less openly bargaining their support for the party in power”. During the campaign period, the president had to face the complaints of the representatives of civil servants, nurses, teachers, churches, farmers and industrialists. Paradoxically ZUM’s existence also provided a chance for many of these organisations to express their loyalty to the government and which, although apparently strengthening the position of the ruling party, also meant that a new kind of interest-based and more horizontal political mobilisation became possible (Quantin 1992, 30, 43).

As in all the one-party states in Africa, which took steps towards multi-party systems, the role of civil society in Zimbabwe was prominent in the defence and support of multi-party democracy. As well as civic organisations like the Zimbabwean human rights organisation
(ZimRights) and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJP) the media, the universities and the labour unions became focal points for critical discussion about the one-party state. Of course, the state responded to this development as soon as it appeared. As was mentioned above the opposition politicians were harassed and prevented from holding meetings. But also the media, universities, and the trade unions were attacked.

Towards the 1995 elections the state repression had already blocked even a potential for serious opposition. There seems to be a general conviction that political and civil rights of the citizens in Zimbabwe have deteriorated since 1990 (see Makumbe & Compagnon [forthcoming]). By the same token, the many grievances of the ordinary people have had no party political channel through which to be expressed. It is not surprising that the deteriorating economic situation at the beginning of 1998 so easily translates into violent riots in Chitungwiza and Harare. In this context voters’ apathy reflects cynicism and frustration.

However, if obedience and apathy seem to be “a rational choice” for most of the Zimbabwean electorate, this does not imply a total absence of political and electoral competition. The locus of this competition is inside the ruling party. As argued by Makumbe and Compagnon, these tensions have become more open than before suggesting that they are not so easily managed by the leadership as they used to be (Makumbe & Compagnon [forthcoming]). Faction cleavages and flaws within the monolithic structure of the ruling party reflect an intense political struggle and explain also the emergence of the independents (mostly party members but not official party candidates) as the most remarkable “opposition group” in recent elections.

All party members have not been satisfied with the way in which the primaries were conducted, both before the 1990 and the 1995 elections. Allegations of irregularities, vote-buying and rigging have been frequent. In each constituency where the primaries were held, only a few hundred ZANU district officials and branch representatives were eligible to vote. This means that attempts to buy votes were possible and that, in many constituencies, the actual choice of an MP was made by only a small fraction of the registered voters there. Yet, many primary elections in 1995 brought unexpected results. Only half of the nominated candidates were sitting MPs. Soon after the primaries, the party’s deputy secretary for information and publicity, Chen Chimutengwende, revealed that it was worrying from the point of view of the party leadership that many sitting MPs lost the primary election, since in principle it would then be possible that the party leadership would not be in parliament. Very free primaries could become a “constitutional problem” for a party such as ZANU. On the other hand, according to Chimutengwende, the idea of primary elections is a useful mechanism for a mass-party, because it also provides the executive with the ability to safeguard party interest, when it is endangered by “members who have just joined to be elected MPs”.

Although the party had made it clear many times that all those standing as independents would be expelled from the party, it is most interesting that Central Committee decided to expel only four members, Dongo among them. Three other members were suspended from the Central Committee for five years but were able to keep their party cards. However

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12 In practice, this meant that the Politburo was able to revise the list of aspiring candidates in each constituency. Chimutengwende spoke on 30th of March in the Monthly Forum of the African Association of Political Science (AAPS) Zimbabwe National Chapter at Monomapata Hotel, in Harare, on the theme ‘Are Primary Elections Democratic?’.
constraint the electoral competition is, it still plays an important role by providing possibilities for individuals to challenge the power of the party hierarchy or at least to bargain with the party.

**Concluding notes**

It is well known from the history of the West and from Africa that “undemocracy” the distance between the “leaders” and the ordinary people can be very fatal - or experienced as such - even in the context of multi-party rule, majority rule and mass participation. Philip Gourevitch in his letter from Rwanda wrote:

> Apparently, to insure mass participation in murder it had been enough to issue the threat - kill or be killed - and to reward killers with bounty and status. Rwandans never tire of explaining the perfect machinery of this mass mentality, the intricate pyramidal pecking order of coercion and obedience, refined by the old, feudal colonial order and retooled under the post-independence Hutu dictatorship in an engine of genocide. One former refugee I talked with said, “There are superiors” - he turned his eyes skyward - “who concern themselves with politics and affairs of humanity. And there are the simple people like us” - his eyes rolled to stare at his feet - “who know nothing of politics and merely work with our hands to eat and live.” (Gourevitch, 1997, 46)

Democracy in its the classical meaning as popular power, people’s ability to participate peacefully in all decision-making affecting their lives, is a very challenging idea in the era of globalisation all over the world - as well in the West as in Africa. Although one should reject a restricted focus on democratisation when studying elections in Africa, it is, of course a most relevant question - not least due to its connection to peace and violence. Issues of sovereignty, nation-building, legitimacy of the government, recruitment to the leadership and compensation for political exclusion are most significant issues with respect to democratisation. From the point of view of democracy the development can as well tell about a decay than progress.

All over Africa experiences of the post-1990 multiparty period in Africa may be going through roughly similar phases of electoral participation as to what has happened in Zimbabwe. After the enthusiastic flush of the first multi-party elections, cases of massive voters’ apathy have become apparent undermining attempts to present elections as the source of state and governmental legitimacy.

Yet it is extremely important to note that the institution of elections even in cases of frustration and cynicism can contribute to a potential realisation of citizenship as empowering people to look at their governments critically. As a formal institute elections can reveal a lot of the political power and its character for the ordinary citizens and therefore they do matter and do not support Chabal’s and Daloz’ thesis on “informalization of politics” in Africa. In most African countries multi-party electoral competition, has created conditions for a degree or at least expectations of freedoms of speech and association. It is not surprising that electorates seem to have treasured these aspects of the political transition, much more than events of regularly held elections. Even apathy can be a choice to become politically ‘visible’. It is this critical mind towards the leaders that is more important for democracy than majority rule or mass participation as such.
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