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DEMOCRATIZATION, EQUITY AND STABILITY

AFRICAN POLITICS AND SOCIETIES IN THE 1990s

by Yusuf Bangura

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◆ Preface

The 1990s have witnessed remarkable changes in the way African societies are governed. A large number of military and one-party dictatorships have collapsed in the face of mass civil protests, and a new wave of democratization is sweeping the continent. One of the most interesting aspects of this process is the increasing attention granted to crafting political systems that reflect the plural character of African societies. But democratization has not followed a uniform pattern, and there have been major setbacks in some countries. Problems of political instability and violence have given rise to regional security initiatives that have ambiguous implications for democratization.

This Discussion Paper focuses on actual political reforms in various African countries. In it, the author stresses the need to analyse concrete political processes, rather than relying on broader discussion of the socio-economic preconditions for democracy in the region. According to Bangura, differences among countries in levels of industrialization, types of state formation, methods of public administration and the development of modern social classes do not seem to have been significant determinants of real patterns of political change. Instead, he argues, democratization has been the outgrowth of political phenomena — a function of the strength of opposition parties and groups in society to force incumbent governments to honour basic rules of political contestation, and to uphold the rule of law.

The first part of the paper discusses conceptual issues of democracy and representation, the second provides an overview of patterns of authoritarian rule, the third analyses the main issues of political reform, and the fourth focuses on patterns of democratization. The final section explores the problem of military security as perceived both by external powers and by African governments during their quest for stable political transitions.

The paper was prepared as a contribution to **Renewing Social and Economic Progress in Africa: Essays in Honour of Philip Ndegwa**, edited by Dharam Ghai, to be published by Macmillan. The author, Yusuf Bangura, is a Project Leader at UNRISD. He co-ordinated the Institute's research on **Crisis, Adjustment and Social Change** in Africa and is currently working on **Public Sector Reform and Crisis-Ridden States**, a new project that considers socio-economic and political constraints that affect public sector performance in countries that have experienced prolonged economic recession and ethnic conflict.

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◆ Abbreviations and Acronyms

BV	block vote
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FPTP	first-past-the-post
IMF	International Monetary Fund
PNDC	Provisional National Defence Council (Ghana)
SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
TRS	two round system
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

INTRODUCTION

The 1990s have witnessed remarkable changes in the way African societies are governed. What Samuel Huntington (1991) has described as "the third wave of democratization"[1] in the world system has been strongly felt in most African countries since 1990. A large number of military and one-party dictatorships have collapsed in the face of mass civil protests and demands for political change. An interesting aspect of the new wave of democratization is the increasing recognition of political equity as an important aspect of institution building. Significant steps have been taken to craft political systems that reflect the plural character of African societies. But democratization has not followed a uniform pattern and there have been major setbacks in some countries, which have raised questions about the viability of the democratic experiments. Problems of instability have thus forced issues of regional and political stability onto the agenda of democratic change.

This paper seeks to examine recent patterns of democratization by focusing on actual political reforms that have emerged in various countries. It stresses the need to analyse concrete political processes, rather than relying on standard socio-economic determinants of, or preconditions for, democracy, in order to understand the nature of the reforms that have been underway in the region. Standard theories of democratization, which often focus on levels of economic development, the nature of economic enterprises, formation of modern classes, civic values and social structures, are surely relevant in studying the experiences of individual countries, but they do not account for the location of countries in the patterns that have emerged.

African societies share many socio-economic and historical experiences: they are largely multi-ethnic and agrarian, with traditional smallholding family farms and informal economic enterprises providing the dominant forms of employment and livelihood for most people. As former European colonies, these societies are also heavily dependent upon the world economy for trade and financial capital. The differences that have emerged among countries in levels of industrialization, state formation, methods of public administration and the development of modern social classes have not been significant in determining the patterns of political change. Democratization should, largely, be seen as a political phenomenon: a function of the strength of opposition parties and groups in society to force incumbent governments to honour basic rules of political contestation and uphold the rule of law. The paper emphasizes the need for empirical studies of the political dynamics of each country in order to make sense of current trends in democratization. Such studies may help stimulate new ways of theorizing patterns of democratization in Africa.

The first part of the paper discusses conceptual issues of democracy and equity; the second provides an overview of the discourse and patterns of authoritarian rule; the third analyses the main issues of political reform; the fourth focuses on

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[1] The first wave refers to the pressures for democratization that started with the French and American revolutions of the eighteenth century. The second wave is associated with the decolonization and democratization movements that emerged after the Second World War.

patterns of democratization; and the fifth explores the different types of responses to the question of military security by both external powers and African governments in their quest for stable political transitions.

DEMOCRACY AND EQUITY: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

In its most fundamental sense, democracy is concerned with people's rule, or popular control and management of power in the public sphere. In short, it is a form or method of rule that embodies the popular will, or "people's power". In small city-state, pre-modern Athenian conditions or in pre-colonial African village republics, such power was exercised directly by free adult males. Direct democracy was possible under such conditions because of the homogeneity of the societies, the smallness of their population size, their limited division of labour, common patterns of time use and overlapping interests. Participation rates were thus likely to be high, and problems of "free riding"[2] and authoritarian rule, which may occur in more complex societies, minimized.

In contrast, large modern-day societies that are highly differentiated require the principle of representation to make democracy or "people's power" feasible. Not everyone may have the time, resources or interest to participate actively in public affairs. In other words, the "people" must delegate their power to professional politicians or interested élites if public policies are to be formulated and implemented. However, the principle of representation may approximate "people's power" when it is linked to another important principle — that of accountability. In short, a modern democratic system is one in which the "people" are able to hold their representatives accountable for the policies they pursue or the decisions they make in the public sphere.

Most students of modern democratic theory would agree that a representative and accountable government must have four important elements to qualify as a democratic polity. The first is the organization of *periodic, free and fair elections* in which all parties or candidates enjoy relatively equal access to the rules. The second is the existence of a *plural civic and political culture.* This refers to competitive political parties and civic or community organizations, which enjoy some degree of autonomy. A legislative organ that is made up of multiple parties, in which the leading party does not have a large majority, can be an important indicator of political plurality. The third element is the *separation of the state from ruling political parties.* In other words, the institutions of the state — parliament, the judiciary, the military and the civil service — should be relatively separate from the programmes and activities of the political parties in power. Such institutions must serve the governments in power in ways that do not make it difficult for them to relate constructively to the wider public and opposition parties.

The fourth element is the constitutional *guarantee of basic human and political rights.* This includes the protection of the fundamental rights of expression,

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[2] This refers to people not taking an interest in public policy issues (like voting, or petitioning public officials, for instance), but enjoying the benefits that may be associated with effective civic vigilance and activism from others.

assembly and organization — necessary for holding political representatives accountable. One may wish to add a fifth element, which may be important for countries that are in transition from authoritarian to democratic rule: the principle of *the alternation of power*. In order to preserve or develop the neutrality of the state in the exercise of public authority, as well as prevent the abuse of power by incumbent governments, it is important for power to alternate regularly between contending political parties. Indeed, respect for the principle of the alternation of power helps the development of three additional values that are central to the consolidation of democracy: the necessity for political parties to recognize *the limits of power*, including readiness to surrender power to democratically elected opponents without fear of the consequences; acceptance of the principle of *moderation and compromise* in political bargaining; and a commitment to live with and support *plurality* in social and political life.

These five elements deal essentially with the *forms* of a democratic polity. They do not directly address distributional issues, i.e., how power is allocated among groups in society. Formal democratic governance may indeed reproduce, even create, social and economic inequalities — in class, ethnic, racial or gender terms, for instance — and it may not necessarily produce the best leaders. The policies and programmes of political representatives may reflect the interests of ruling élites or powerful business oligarchies — which have more resources, networks and capacity to influence public policies — than those of workers, petty traders, artisans or smallholders, which may occupy the lower rungs of society. Similarly, in situations where a single ethnic or racial group enjoys an absolute demographic majority, it is very possible for formal democracy to produce all, or a disproportionate number, of its political representatives from the dominant ethnic or racial group (Horowitz, 1985). In such situations, the votes of minority groups may not carry the same weight as those of the majority. In other words, formal democratic systems of government, like markets, though non-discriminatory in the juridical sense, are not necessarily just or equitable.

Non-equity outcomes may affect the cohesion and stability of formal democracies, especially in developing countries that do not have the economic strength or state capacity to manage or control social differences and dissent. Excluded groups may opt out of the democratic process and seek redress through non-constitutional or violent means. These limitations explain why Marxists, or revolutionary movements, and minority rights groups often question the *democratic* character of formal democratic institutions: to the former, formal democracy appears as "bourgeois democracy"; and to the latter, democracy is seen as ethnic hegemony,