



## Between democratic aspirations and authoritarian resilience: A political economy analysis of elections and regime dynamics in Africa, 1991-2024

Gbensuglo Alidu Bukari<sup>1</sup>  
 Mathew Lobnibe Arah<sup>2</sup>  
 Musah Ibrahim Mordzeh-Ekpampo<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>[gbukari@uds.edu.gh](mailto:gbukari@uds.edu.gh)  
<sup>2</sup>[mlarah@uew.edu.gh](mailto:mlarah@uew.edu.gh)  
<sup>3</sup>[mmibrahim@uds.edu.gh](mailto:mmibrahim@uds.edu.gh)

<sup>1,3</sup> University for Development Studies, <sup>2</sup>University of Education

<https://doi.org/10.51867/scimundi.6.2.12>

### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a political economy analysis of democracy and electoral politics in Africa from the post-Cold War democratisation wave of 1991 to 2024. It contends that the continent's political trajectory is best understood not as a linear transition toward liberal democracy but as a persistent tension between democratic aspirations and authoritarian resilience. Over three decades, democratisation waves have given way to stagnation and reversal, producing uneven political landscapes. Contextual within the framework of political economy, the paper interrogates the resurgence of democratic backsliding, manifested in military coups, constitutional manipulation, and the erosion of term limits, situating these within a broader framework of reconfigured power and popular disillusionment. Coups in West and Central Africa, alongside third-term bids by long-serving presidents, exemplify this retreat from earlier democratic gains. Drawing on comparative case study design, the analysis demonstrates that Africa's political landscape has evolved into a spectrum of hybrid regimes, marked by the coexistence of electoral competition and autocratic practices ranging from flawed democracies to competitive authoritarian systems where elections legitimise incumbents. Also, the analysis shows that resource management, elite competition, and the weakness of programmatic political parties' shape developmental outcomes across regime types. Specifically, natural resource wealth often fuels patronage, elite fragmentation can either enable democratic openings or trigger conflict, and non-programmatic parties hinder coherent policy formulation. The paper concludes that the strength of democratic institutions, especially accountability mechanisms and genuine electoral competitiveness, remains a more decisive determinant of Africa's developmental trajectory than natural resource endowments or the mere occurrence of elections. It recommends that fostering institutional quality, rather than routine elections, should be the priority for advancing democracy and development in Africa.

**Keywords:** Accountability, Africa, Authoritarianism, Democracy, Elections, Economics, Hybrid-Regimes, Politics, Resources

### I. INTRODUCTION

The paradox of Africa's democratic evolution since the early 1990s continues to occupy a central place in comparative political economy and democratic theory. Following the collapse of the Cold War bipolar order and the global ascendancy of liberal democratic norms, the continent witnessed an unprecedented wave of political transitions that promised to dismantle entrenched authoritarian rule and usher in competitive multiparty systems (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). This period, often termed the 'Third Wave' of African democratisation, brought about formal political liberalisation, constitutional reforms, and increased electoral participation across sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1990 and 2000 alone, over forty African states held multiparty elections, marking a decisive break from the single-party and military regimes that characterised much of the post-independence era (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). However, the trajectory of these democratic transitions has been uneven, and in many cases, deeply paradoxical. Despite the institutionalisation of elections, the continent remains beset by persistent authoritarian practices, weak accountability mechanisms, neopatrimonial governance, and limited elite circulation. The persistence of authoritarian resilience within nominally democratic frameworks poses fundamental questions about the relationship between elections, political power, and regime transformation in Africa. Indeed, the very instruments intended to foster accountability have often been repurposed as tools of control, creating a distinctive political formation where the ritual of voting substitutes for the substance of governance.

The early optimism that accompanied democratisation in Africa was grounded in the assumption that multiparty elections would naturally produce competitive politics, accountable leadership, and institutional renewal. Yet, the empirical reality since the 1990s reveals that the diffusion of electoral institutions has not necessarily translated into substantive democratic consolidation. Instead, what has emerged is a hybrid political order where the formal structures



of democracy coexist with illiberal practices, which scholars variously describe as electoral authoritarianism, competitive clientelism, or illiberal democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Cheeseman, 2015). Across Africa, regimes have mastered the art of manipulating democratic procedures to reproduce authoritarian outcomes, often through patronage networks, constitutional engineering, and the strategic use of state resources to maintain incumbency. The political economy of elections thus becomes a central site for analysing the durability of authoritarian power and the fragility of democratic accountability. Furthermore, this hybridity is not a transitional stage but an enduring equilibrium, one that offers incumbents the legitimacy of democratic mandates without the risks of genuine power sharing.

Sub-regional dynamics further illustrate the complexity of this paradox. In West Africa, countries like Ghana and Nigeria provide contrasting but instructive experiences. Ghana, often celebrated as a model of democratic endurance, has conducted eight successive competitive elections since 1992, achieving peaceful alternations of power between major parties. Yet beneath this stability lies the deep entrenchment of clientelism and monetised politics, which threaten the quality of democratic governance (Boafo-Arthur, 2008; Osei, 2021). Nigeria's experience, on the other hand, underscores the intersection between oil rents, elite fragmentation, and state capture. Despite regular elections, its political economy remains dominated by patrimonial networks that subvert institutional autonomy and entrench prebendal politics (Joseph, 1987). In East Africa, the cases of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania reveal a different dimension of the democratic-authoritarian dialectic. Kenya's political reforms since the 2010 Constitution have expanded civil liberties and judicial independence, yet the shadow of ethnic polarisation and electoral violence continues to undermine democratic legitimacy. Uganda under Yoweri Museveni and Tanzania under the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) exhibit the endurance of electoral autocracies, where incumbents manipulate electoral processes to maintain near-total control, using legal reforms, coercion, and patronage to constrain opposition space (Makara et al., 2009; Paget, 2020). These examples highlight that the resilience of authoritarianism in Africa cannot be understood solely through institutional design but must be examined through the structural logic of political economy, specifically, how access to state resources mediates political competition and regime survival. The variation across these cases, from relatively competitive Ghana to deeply entrenched Ugandan authoritarianism, suggests that the degree of elite fragmentation and the availability of independent economic resources are key variables explaining regime outcomes.

The political economy perspective offers a robust analytical lens for understanding these enduring contradictions. It situates electoral politics within the broader context of economic dependency, elite interests, and state-society relations. The liberalisation of African economies under structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with political liberalisation, producing what some scholars have termed the 'dual transition.' Yet, this convergence of economic and political reform often entrenched new forms of inequality and elite capture. The privatisation of state assets and the retrenchment of public welfare created fertile ground for patron-client networks to dominate both the political and economic spheres (van de Walle, 2001). In such contexts, elections function less as mechanisms of democratic accountability and more as instruments for redistributing rents among competing elites. These dynamics blur the boundaries between democratic competition and authoritarian consolidation, as political elites adapt to the formal demands of democracy while retaining the informal logics of control. Consequently, the endurance of authoritarianism in democratic guise is not merely a political phenomenon but a structural outcome of Africa's dependent capitalist development trajectory. This perspective challenges conventional transition theory, which assumed a linear movement from authoritarian rule to democracy, by demonstrating that regimes can absorb democratic reforms without fundamentally altering power relations.

Moreover, the international dimension of Africa's democratic trajectory cannot be ignored. The post-Cold War liberal order, dominated by Western aid conditionalities and democracy promotion programs, initially provided incentives for regime liberalisation. However, the strategic interests of both African elites and external actors have often diluted these normative commitments. Donors' prioritisation of stability and counterterrorism over democratic deepening has inadvertently reinforced authoritarian tendencies, while emerging powers such as China have introduced alternative development partnerships that privilege regime sovereignty over political conditionality (Narlikar, 2020). This shifting geopolitical landscape has enabled African regimes to diversify their external alliances and resist democratic pressures. The result is a new equilibrium where authoritarian incumbents can maintain international legitimacy through electoral rituals, even as they suppress dissent and manipulate institutions domestically. The resurgence of military coups in the Sahel since 2020, coupled with the muted international response, further signals the declining leverage of Western democracy promotion and the rise of a more permissive global environment for authoritarian consolidation.

The period from 1991 to 2024 thus presents a complex narrative of democratic aspiration entangled with authoritarian resilience. While the formal architecture of democracy constitutions, parliaments, and electoral commissions has expanded across the continent, the substantive content of democracy remains contested. The persistence of 'strong men' politics, militarised security apparatuses, and the instrumentalisation of ethnicity and religion in political mobilisation reflect the deeper structural and cultural impediments to democratic consolidation. Yet, it would be simplistic to conclude that Africa's democratic experiment has failed. Rather, what emerges is a hybrid and evolving



political order, shaped by the interplay of historical legacies, institutional adaptations, and economic imperatives. Elections remain the most visible symbol of democratic aspiration, but they also serve as arenas for the reproduction of authoritarian power. This paper, therefore, interrogates the intersection between democratic aspirations and authoritarian resilience in Africa through a political economy framework. It argues that the persistence of authoritarian resilience within electoral democracies is not an aberration but a systemic feature of Africa's political economy, one that reveals the deep interdependence between economic power, political control, and institutional survival.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Since the early 1990s, Africa has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of multiparty elections, yet this procedural democratisation has often failed to produce consolidated democratic governance, instead fostering hybrid regimes where authoritarian resilience adapts to and co-opts electoral processes. The central problem this paper addresses is the persistent paradox wherein elections, intended as instruments of democratic accountability, have become institutionalised mechanisms for legitimising and entrenching incumbent power across the continent. Despite a vast body of literature on democratisation and authoritarianism, there remains a critical gap in understanding the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between political economy factors, such as resource rents, foreign aid dependency, and elite economic networks, and the strategic manipulation of electoral and constitutional frameworks over time. The study, therefore, asks: why have elections, which symbolise democratic renewal, become mechanisms for authoritarian continuity? How do economic structures, elite incentives, and international dynamics sustain hybrid regimes? and what do these patterns imply for the future of democratic governance on the continent? The paper answers the above study questions, and thereby contributes to filling the knowledge gaps and the growing literature on hybrid regimes and seeks to illuminate the underlying forces that continue to shape the trajectory of democracy and development in contemporary Africa. In doing so, the analysis moves beyond static regime typologies to provide a more nuanced, historically grounded, and politically informed explanation of why democratic aspirations so often produce authoritarian outcomes in contemporary Africa, particularly in an era of renewed coup cycles and contestations over constitutional term limits.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To analyse the evolution of regime typologies in Africa from 1991 to 2024, examining the transition from authoritarian rule to hybrid political systems and the persistence of authoritarian resilience within democratic frameworks.
- ii. To examine the political economy dynamics, particularly resource management, elite competition, and institutional adaptation, that shape the relationship between electoral processes and democratic accountability in African states.
- iii. To interrogate the contemporary challenges of democratic backsliding, including military coups, constitutional manipulation, and the erosion of term limits, and to assess their implications for governance and development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

This paper adopts a political economy framework to explain the persistence of hybrid regimes and the tension between democratic aspirations and authoritarian resilience in Africa between 1991 and 2024. The political economy approach emphasizes the interaction between political institutions, economic structures, and elite incentives in shaping regime trajectories. Unlike normative democratisation theories that treat elections as independent drivers of political transformation, the political economy perspective posits that democratic institutions are embedded in broader networks of material interests, power asymmetries, and historical legacies. In the African context, where state formation, economic dependency, and elite patronage systems have deep historical roots, this framework is particularly apt for understanding why democratisation often produces limited institutional change.

#### 2.1.1 Theoretical Pillars

The theoretical framework is constructed around three interconnected pillars:

*State Formation, Rentier Politics, and Elite Survival:* The first analytical pillar draws from theories of state formation and rentier politics. Herbst (2000) and Bayart (2009) argue that the African state evolved under conditions of external dependency and weak territorial control, creating ruling coalitions that rely on distributive rather than productive strategies of legitimacy. In rentier political systems, the state becomes the principal source of wealth, and political power is maintained through the allocation of economic rents to loyal elites. This dynamic generates what van de Walle (2001) terms 'neopatrimonialism', the coexistence of formal bureaucratic institutions with informal patronage networks. The durability of authoritarian regimes in Africa thus stems from the state's role as the central node of



economic accumulation. Elections, in this context, serve not as mechanisms of accountability but as periodic contests over the redistribution of rents.

Elite survival theory further illuminates this relationship. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) theorise that elites consent to democratisation only when the costs of repression exceed the risks of political competition. In Africa, democratization was often externally induced rather than internally negotiated, leading to shallow institutionalisation. Once international pressure waned, ruling elites recalibrated, embedding electoral institutions within existing patron-client structures. This adaptation produced what Levitsky and Way (2010) describe as 'competitive authoritarianism,' where formal democratic mechanisms coexist with informal practices of authoritarian control. Thus, the first dimension of this framework posits that regime dynamics are shaped by elite strategies of rent distribution and survival, conditioned by both domestic political economy and international incentives.

*Institutional Adaptation and the Logic of Hybrid Regimes:* The second pillar concerns institutional adaptation, the capacity of authoritarian incumbents to co-opt democratic institutions for regime preservation. North et al. (2009) theory of 'limited access orders' provides a useful conceptual foundation. In limited-access orders, political and economic privileges are restricted to coalition members who maintain the stability of the system. These coalitions may selectively adopt democratic forms, such as elections and constitutions, to manage elite competition and confer legitimacy, while preventing the full institutionalization of open access to political participation. African regimes have excelled at institutional mimicry, constructing formal democratic frameworks that conceal informal networks of control. This duality, what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) calls 'dual majesty,' explains the coexistence of constitutional democracy with authoritarian practice.

This logic is evident across various regime types. In Ghana, institutions have gradually strengthened because elite competition has become structured around credible electoral rules. By contrast, in Uganda and Rwanda, political elites have instrumentalised elections to sustain long-term incumbency. The theoretical implication is that institutions in hybrid regimes are not simply weak; they are strategically designed to balance domestic legitimacy, elite accommodation, and external approval. This view aligns with O'Donnell's (1994) concept of 'delegative democracy,' where presidents accumulate disproportionate power under the pretext of electoral legitimacy.

*Accountability, Resource Dependence, and the Developmental State:* The final component of the framework integrates the political economy of resources and accountability. Ross (2001) and Basedau and Lay (2009) demonstrate that resource abundance can undermine democracy by reducing the state's dependence on taxation, thereby weakening citizen leverage over rulers. However, the relationship between resources and regime type is mediated by institutional quality. Where democratic institutions constrain executive discretion and promote transparency, as in Botswana, resource rents can be converted into developmental outcomes. Conversely, where institutions are personalised and opaque, as in Equatorial Guinea or Angola, resource wealth entrenches authoritarianism. The framework, therefore, conceptualizes the political economy of accountability as a spectrum: at one end, resource-dependent authoritarian regimes use rents to buy elite loyalty; at the other, institutionalized democracies rely on taxation and competitive elections to sustain legitimacy.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

### 2.2.1 Democratisation and Democratic Consolidation in Africa

The initial wave of scholarship on democratisation in Africa during the 1990s was characterised by optimism and a teleological belief in democratic convergence. Influenced by the 'Third Wave' thesis of Huntington (1991), early analysts viewed the collapse of authoritarian regimes and the introduction of multiparty politics as indicators of a global democratic shift. African political scientists such as Gyimah-Boadi (1994) and Bratton and van de Walle (1997) framed democratisation as a process of regime transition driven by both internal societal pressures and external normative diffusion. According to these scholars, the introduction of competitive elections and constitutional reforms represented the institutional foundations of democratic consolidation. The expectation was that repeated elections would create 'democratic learning,' enhance accountability, and gradually delegitimise authoritarian practices.

However, by the early 2000s, this optimism waned as empirical realities revealed the persistence of authoritarian practices within ostensibly democratic systems. Diamond (2002) and Lindberg (2006) observed that while elections became universalised across Africa, many regimes failed to meet the substantive thresholds of liberal democracy, such as respect for civil liberties, independence of the judiciary, and alternation of power. In other words, the procedural spread of democracy did not translate into its substantive deepening. Subsequent works emphasised that the sustainability of democracy in Africa depended not merely on electoral frequency but on the strength of political institutions, civic culture, and economic equity (Posner & Young, 2007). The weakness of these foundations left room for authoritarian incumbents to manipulate electoral processes and institutions without overtly dismantling the democratic façade.



### 2.2.2 Hybrid Regimes and Competitive Authoritarianism

In response to the inadequacies of the democratisation paradigm, the hybrid regime framework emerged as a more nuanced analytical tool. Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of 'competitive authoritarianism' provided a theoretical breakthrough by describing regimes that combine formal democratic institutions with authoritarian governance practices. In these systems, elections are regular and ostensibly competitive, but the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents through control over media, finance, coercive institutions, and legal frameworks. This framework has proven particularly applicable to the African context, where political elites have mastered the art of maintaining authoritarian control under the guise of democratic legitimacy.

Cheeseman (2015) further refines this argument by introducing the notion of electoral authoritarianism, emphasizing how incumbents manipulate not only institutions but also the symbolic dimensions of democracy. Through rituals of voting, public consultations, and political rallies, regimes project democratic images while hollowing out the substance of competition. In East Africa, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni and Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) exemplify this dynamic. Both regimes sustain multiparty elections but deploy legal restrictions, intimidation, and patronage networks to preempt genuine alternation of power (Makara et al., 2009; Paget, 2020). In West Africa, similar tendencies are observed in Togo and Cameroon, where dynastic authoritarianism coexists with periodic elections that serve to legitimise long-term incumbency. These empirical realities underscore the durability of hybrid regimes and challenge linear models of democratic progression. A key insight from this literature is that hybrid regimes are not transitional anomalies but stable political systems with their own logic of survival. They thrive on the institutional ambiguity between democracy and autocracy, exploiting the legitimacy conferred by elections while neutralising mechanisms of accountability. This conceptual shift reoriented African political analysis from regime transition to regime resilience, prompting scholars to explore the economic and structural bases of authoritarian durability.

### 2.2.3 The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience

The political economy literature situates Africa's democratic and authoritarian outcomes within the broader context of economic structures, class interests, and global capitalism. Van de Walle (2001) argues that neopatrimonialism remains the defining feature of African political systems. In such systems, political survival depends on the distribution of state resources to loyal elites, rather than on policy performance or ideological appeal. Elections, therefore, function as mechanisms for resource redistribution and elite bargaining rather than as instruments of accountability. These dynamics transform democracy into a competitive clientelist system in which political actors vie for access to state rents rather than for policy reform (Lindberg, 2010; Resnick & van de Walle, 2013). This framework explains why electoral competition in many African states coexists with the persistence of authoritarian tendencies. In Ghana, for example, despite regular alternation of power between the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), politics remains heavily monetized, and voter behavior is shaped more by patronage and ethnic alignment than by ideological conviction (Osei, 2021). In Nigeria, the oil-dependent economy amplifies these distortions, as political elites rely on resource rents to finance electoral campaigns and sustain patronage networks (Joseph, 1987; Watts, 2004). Similarly, in Uganda and Kenya, political competition revolves around ethnic alliances and access to state contracts, leading to what Booth and Cammack (2013) describe as 'developmental patrimonialism,' a system that seeks to reconcile rent-seeking with limited institutional performance.

Beyond domestic structures, the international political economy also reinforces authoritarian resilience. Donor-driven governance reforms in the 1990s imposed technocratic conditionalities that prioritised macroeconomic stability and neoliberal efficiency over participatory governance. While such reforms curtailed overt state intervention, they also weakened the redistributive capacity of African states and deepened social inequality (Mkandawire, 2015). Moreover, the emergence of China and other non-Western partners has provided alternative sources of finance and legitimacy for African regimes, enabling them to bypass Western democracy promotion frameworks (Narlikar, 2020). This diversification of external alliances has further entrenched regime survival strategies that combine electoral rituals with authoritarian control.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a comparative case study design to examine the evolution of democratic and authoritarian regime dynamics in Africa between 1991 and 2024. The methodological design is anchored in the political economy tradition, which seeks to understand how economic structures, elite incentives, and institutional arrangements interact to shape political outcomes. It integrates comparative analysis with historical process-tracing and provides a nuanced understanding of how Africa's post-Cold War democratisation wave produced diverse regime trajectories ranging from liberal democracy to entrenched authoritarianism.

The comparative case study design is particularly appropriate for analysing long-term regime evolution because it allows for contextualised, temporally sensitive interpretation. As Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003) argue,



comparative-historical analysis is essential for uncovering causal mechanisms that operate over extended periods and across diverse contexts. The periodisation from 1991 to 2024 captures the full arc of Africa's 'Third Wave' democratisation: the early 1990s liberalisation moment, the institutional experimentation of the 2000s, and the democratic stagnation and backsliding witnessed since the 2010s. This design enables the identification of both continuities and ruptures in regime dynamics over three decades. It employs a 'most-different systems design' (Przeworski & Teune, 1970), selecting cases that vary significantly in geography, colonial legacy, and economic structure but share exposure to similar global democratisation pressures. This design helps isolate common political economy mechanisms that underpin regime resilience despite contextual diversity. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical; it focuses on pattern recognition, causal narratives, and the interplay of structural and agency-based factors.

The analysis relies on triangulation of multiple data sources. Primary materials include archival records, electoral commission reports, and official government publications. Secondary data encompass scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on African politics, democracy, and political economy; policy reports from international organisations such as Freedom House, Afrobarometer, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project; and regional think-tank analyses. These sources provide both quantitative indicators of political rights and qualitative accounts of institutional behaviour and elite strategies. The analysis takes the form of process tracing to identify how democratisation initiatives, resource management practices, and elite bargaining evolve to produce specific regime outcomes. It also draws on thematic coding to categorise patterns of accountability, legitimacy, and institutional adaptation. The study juxtaposes cases across time and regime type; the analysis uncovers the recurring political economy mechanisms, such as rent distribution, electoral manipulation, and institutional co-optation, that explain authoritarian resilience amid democratic institutions.

However, as a qualitative political economy analysis, the paper does not seek to establish statistical generalisations but to generate theoretically grounded insights. The selection of illustrative cases necessarily limits the generalisability of findings but enhances depth and contextual understanding. Besides, the analysis prioritises institutional and elite-level factors, recognising that future study could complement this with micro-level studies of citizen behaviour and political socialisation. Thus, the methodology provides an interpretive and comparative lens to examine Africa's complex regime dynamics. It situates democratisation and authoritarian resilience within the broader political economy of resource dependence, elite competition, and institutional adaptation, thereby setting the stage for the analytical discussion that follows.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings

#### 4.1 The Evolution of Regime Typologies: From Liberalisation to Hybrid Resilience

The early 1990s marked the crest of Africa's 'Third Wave' of democratisation. In response to global ideological shifts, international pressure, and domestic demands for reform, nearly every African country adopted multiparty constitutions and conducted competitive elections. Yet, as Bratton and van de Walle (1997) observed, the collapse of single-party and military regimes did not uniformly translate into liberal democracy. Instead, a range of regime types emerged, reflecting differing degrees of commitment to pluralism and accountability. This section directly addresses Objective 1 of the paper: to analyse the evolution of regime typologies in Africa from 1991 to 2024.

A small but resilient cluster of African states, most notably Ghana, Botswana, Mauritius, and Cabo Verde, has achieved relative democratic stability. These cases are characterised by regular alternation of power, institutionalised electoral commissions, independent judiciaries, and active civil societies. Ghana's political evolution since 1992 exemplifies the consolidation of democratic norms through repeated electoral turnover and the routinisation of constitutionalism. The peaceful transfer of power in 2000, 2008, and 2016 reinforced public trust in democratic processes, making Ghana a paradigmatic example of electoral legitimacy (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). Botswana, by contrast, demonstrates how long-term incumbency within a dominant-party system can coexist with substantive democratic governance. The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has maintained power since independence, yet its adherence to the rule of law, transparent resource management, and meritocratic civil service has ensured sustained legitimacy and developmental success (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2003).

The majority of African states occupy a hybrid middle ground, combining formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices. These 'competitive authoritarian' regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010) retain electoral procedures but manipulate them through patronage, coercion, and control of information. In Uganda, for instance, Yoweri Museveni's regime institutionalised periodic elections while systematically constraining opposition through legal amendments, selective repression, and economic co-optation (Carbone, 2007; Makara et al., 2009). Similarly, Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) has preserved its hegemonic dominance through a mix of institutional continuity and electoral control. Such regimes blur the distinction between democracy and autocracy, sustaining legitimacy through



the symbolic performance of elections rather than genuine competition. Kenya's experience after the 2007-2008 electoral crisis illustrates how hybrid regimes can recalibrate under pressure: constitutional reform in 2010 introduced devolution and judicial independence, yet persistent elite capture has limited the transformative potential of these institutions (Cheeseman, 2015).

Since 2020, Africa has witnessed a resurgence of military interventions in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, and Chad. These coups signify both the fragility of democratic institutions and the depth of popular disillusionment with civilian governments. The Sahelian coups in particular reveal how governance failures, corruption, and insecurity have eroded the legitimacy of electoral democracy. Unlike the coups of the 1970s and 1980s, which sought ideological or personal power, these contemporary takeovers often claim to restore 'national sovereignty' and security. Nevertheless, their consolidation risks entrenching new forms of militarized authoritarianism. The persistence of coup regimes suggests that democratic fatigue has merged with populist militarism, producing a hybridized rejection of both Western liberalism and domestic corruption (Freedom House, 2023).

This typology reveals that while democratic institutions have become widespread, their quality varies profoundly across contexts. The durability of authoritarianism under democratic facades reflects not the failure of elections per se, but their instrumentalisation within Africa's neopatrimonial political economies. The evidence demonstrates that the initial promise of democratisation has given way to a stable hybrid equilibrium where regimes have learned to manage political competition through strategic deployment of both repression and co-optation.

#### 4.1.2 The Political Economy of Accountability and Development

The second analytical dimension concerns the interaction between resource management, institutional design, and accountability mechanisms, directly addressing Objective 2: to examine the political economy dynamics that shape the relationship between electoral processes and democratic accountability. The political economy of democracy in Africa demonstrates that the presence of natural resources alone does not determine regime type; rather, the critical variable is how institutions mediate the relationship between rents and political power.

In countries like Botswana and Ghana, economic governance is embedded within frameworks of institutional accountability. Botswana's success in converting diamond wealth into developmental outcomes lies in its transparent fiscal management and depoliticised bureaucracy (Acemoglu, et al., 2003). The state's dependence on taxation, combined with a tradition of consultative politics, fosters a reciprocal relationship between citizens and the government. In Ghana, competitive elections serve as a disciplining mechanism, compelling incumbents to pursue macroeconomic stability and respond to public grievances. Although patronage remains pervasive, the threat of electoral turnover limits elite impunity. These cases demonstrate that where democratic institutions constrain executive discretion and promote transparency, resource rents can be converted into developmental outcomes.

By contrast, in Nigeria and Kenya, political competition revolves around the distribution of state rents rather than policy innovation. The reliance on oil revenues in Nigeria has entrenched patronage politics, enabling ruling elites to finance electoral campaigns and reward supporters while neglecting public goods. The political class's control over the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) has made oil rents the currency of political survival (Watts, 2004). In Kenya, resource competition intersects with ethnic mobilization, producing what Kanyinga (2014) describes as 'ethno-political rent-seeking.' These dynamics reinforce a vicious cycle: elections stimulate rent distribution, which in turn sustains elite dominance and weakens accountability.

Hybrid regimes face a structural 'accountability deficit' whereby elections generate legitimacy without enforcing genuine responsiveness. Electoral competition in these contexts is intense but primarily focused on patronage allocation rather than programmatic governance. As Lindberg (2010) notes, repeated elections under conditions of weak institutionalisation may entrench clientelism rather than deepen democracy. The paradox, therefore, is that electoral proliferation without institutional reform can exacerbate corruption and elite capture. The consequence is developmental stagnation, where economic growth coexists with high inequality and persistent governance deficits.

The findings confirm that the institutionalisation of accountability, rather than the mere existence of elections, determines democratic quality and developmental outcomes. Where state resources and international rents enable incumbents to sustain patronage without broad-based legitimacy, authoritarian resilience thrives. The evidence from both resource-rich and resource-poor states indicates that democratic consolidation requires the construction of institutions that can constrain executive discretion, ensure transparent resource management, and foster programmatic politics.

#### 4.1.3 Contemporary Challenges: Democratic Backsliding, Coups, and Reconfigured Power

Since the mid-2010s, Africa has experienced an observable wave of democratic backsliding, characterised by constitutional manipulation, civic repression, and declining public trust. This regression is not a simple reversal of democratization but a process of 'reconfigured power' in which incumbents adapt to democratic pressures while preserving authoritarian control. The phenomenon is continent-wide, affecting both previously celebrated democracies



and long-standing autocracies, suggesting a systemic rather than a localized crisis. This section directly addresses Objective 3: to interrogate contemporary challenges of democratic backsliding and assess their implications for governance and development.

Several leaders have extended their tenure through constitutional revisions or judicial reinterpretations. Côte d'Ivoire's Alassane Ouattara and Comoros's Azali Assoumani are notable examples. Such maneuvers reflect a broader pattern of executive aggrandizement that erodes the credibility of constitutionalism (V-Dem Institute, 2024). Even in relatively stable democracies, incumbents have tested institutional boundaries, revealing the fragility of elite commitment to democratic norms. In Senegal, for instance, the unprecedented decision to delay the 2024 presidential election sparked a constitutional crisis, demonstrating that even reputedly stable democracies are vulnerable to executive overreach. The subsequent popular mobilization that forced a reversal, however, also highlights the continued agency of civil society.

Hybrid regimes increasingly rely on legal instruments such as public order acts, media regulations, and anti-terrorism laws to suppress dissent. Rwanda's and Uganda's use of surveillance, cybercrime legislation, and NGO restrictions demonstrate how legal frameworks can be weaponised to constrain civil society under the guise of national security. This phenomenon aligns with Ginsburg and Huq's (2018) concept of 'abusive constitutionalism,' where constitutional mechanisms are manipulated to entrench authoritarian control. The result is a legalised authoritarianism where repression operates within the formal bounds of law, complicating external critique and internal resistance.

The resurgence of coups in the Sahel reflects not merely military opportunism but a deeper legitimacy crisis in the post-1991 democratic order. Civilian governments have often failed to deliver security, justice, and inclusive development, leading citizens to perceive democracy as an empty procedural exercise. Afrobarometer data from 2022 show declining faith in elections and increasing tolerance for non-democratic alternatives in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These attitudes suggest that authoritarian resilience is sustained not only by elite coercion but also by societal disillusionment, a form of 'demand-side authoritarianism.' The juntas in these countries have skillfully harnessed anti-French sentiment and promises of restoring sovereignty, creating a populist militarism that resonates with populations exhausted by both corruption and insecurity (Freedom House, 2023).

The enduring coexistence of democratic institutions and authoritarian practices is best explained by the concept of 'reconfigured power' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Postcolonial African states have reconstituted autocratic authority within the framework of democratic legitimacy. Elections, parliaments, and constitutions are not dismantled but appropriated as instruments of control. This hybridisation has produced a resilient political order where formal democracy coexists with informal authoritarianism, ensuring the survival of ruling elites across electoral cycles. The coup belt of West and Central Africa, therefore, does not represent a rejection of democracy per se, but rather a rejection of the specific liberal-democratic model associated with former colonial powers, a distinction with profound implications for international engagement.

#### 4.4 Synthesis: The Logic of Resilient Authoritarianism

The comparative analysis across regime types and cases yields three key insights that respond to the paper's overarching research questions: First, democratisation in Africa has been primarily elite-driven rather than mass-driven, resulting in institutions that reflect elite interests more than societal preferences. The evidence from both relatively democratic states (Ghana, Botswana) and hybrid regimes (Uganda, Tanzania) demonstrates that the initial impetus for political liberalisation came from external pressures and elite calculations rather than organic popular movements. This elite-driven character has produced shallow institutionalisation, leaving democratic institutions vulnerable to manipulation by incumbents.

Second, the institutionalisation of accountability, rather than the mere existence of elections, determines democratic quality and developmental outcomes. The contrast between resource-rich but poorly governed states (Nigeria, Angola) and resource-managed but accountable states (Botswana) underscores that resource endowments alone do not determine developmental trajectories. What matters is the capacity of institutions to constrain executive discretion, ensure transparent resource management, and foster programmatic politics.

Third, authoritarian resilience thrives where state resources and international rents enable incumbents to sustain patronage without broad-based legitimacy. The interaction between domestic clientelism, weak institutions, and global neoliberalism produces a self-reinforcing cycle where democratic aspirations coexist with authoritarian resilience. The persistence of hybrid regimes across Africa reveals that democracy cannot be transplanted as a set of institutions; it must be internalised as a political culture anchored in accountability, justice, and public service. In essence, Africa's democratic experience since 1991 represents a process of controlled liberalisation, a calibrated balance between external legitimacy and domestic dominance. The endurance of this equilibrium demonstrates that the challenge for Africa is not democratisation as an event but the consolidation of accountability as a systemic norm. The findings suggest that meaningful democratic consolidation will require not merely institutional tinkering but a fundamental restructuring of the economic incentives that sustain neopatrimonial rule.



## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

The trajectory of Africa's political evolution since the onset of the Third Wave of democratisation reveals a paradoxical duality: while democratic institutions have proliferated, substantive democracy remains elusive. Elections, constitutions, and political pluralism have become nearly universal. Yet, these formal institutions often coexist with entrenched authoritarian logics rooted in the colonial legacy of state centralisation and the postcolonial politics of patronage. The interplay between democratic aspirations and authoritarian resilience thus defines the central dilemma of Africa's governance architecture, a dilemma that has been the central focus of this paper.

This paper reveals that Africa's democratic experience has not been entirely pessimistic. Countries such as Ghana, Botswana, and Mauritius demonstrate that democratic consolidation is attainable when institutions are designed to disperse power and when political elites internalise the norm of alternation. The study shows that in these countries, electoral management bodies, civil society organisations, and independent media have played pivotal roles in sustaining these gains. Also, the resilience of popular mobilisation in Sudan, Senegal, and Nigeria's EndSARS movement attests to the enduring strength of democratic aspirations among African citizens. The challenge, therefore, is not the absence of democratic desire but the institutional constraints that inhibit its realisation.

The analysis has demonstrated that the evolution of regime typologies in Africa from 1991 to 2024 has produced a spectrum of political systems ranging from relatively consolidated democracies (Ghana, Botswana, Mauritius) to competitive authoritarian regimes (Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya) and, most recently, to military-led governments in the Sahel. What has emerged across much of the continent is a stable hybrid equilibrium, neither full autocracy nor functioning liberal democracy, where regimes have learned to manage political competition through the strategic deployment of both repression and co-optation. The initial democratisation wave has given way to a process of controlled liberalisation where democratic institutions have been appropriated as instruments of authoritarian survival.

Also, the study revealed that the relationship between electoral processes and democratic accountability is mediated by institutional quality and elite incentives. Where institutions constrain executive discretion and promote transparency, as in Botswana and to a lesser extent Ghana, resource rents can be converted into developmental outcomes. Conversely, where institutions are personalised and opaque, as in Nigeria and Angola, resource wealth entrenches authoritarianism. The durability of hybrid regimes reflects elites' rational adaptation to shifting domestic and international incentives. The neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s further deepened this pattern by integrating African states into global markets without dismantling neopatrimonial structures. Consequently, democracy in Africa often operates within the logic of what Bayart terms the 'politics of the belly'—a system where material accumulation and political survival are intertwined.

Finally, the study identified the contemporary challenges of democratic backsliding, including constitutional manipulation, civic repression, and the resurgence of military coups. The phenomenon of 'reconfigured power' explains how postcolonial African states have reconstituted autocratic authority within the framework of democratic legitimacy. Elections, parliaments, and constitutions are not dismantled but appropriated as instruments of control. This hybridisation has produced a resilient political order where formal democracy coexists with informal authoritarianism, ensuring the survival of ruling elites across electoral cycles. The coup belt of West and Central Africa does not represent a rejection of democracy per se, but rather a rejection of the specific liberal-democratic model associated with former colonial powers, a distinction with profound implications for international engagement.

In a nutshell, the consolidation of democracy in Africa requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both institutional design and the political economy of governance. The evidence from three decades of democratic experimentation suggests that electoral proceduralism alone is insufficient; what is required is the construction of accountable institutions, the diversification of economic structures, and the cultivation of democratic political culture. The reimagining of democracy in Africa demands a synthesis of indigenous governance traditions and modern constitutional principles a democratic order rooted not merely in electoral legitimacy but in the moral economy of accountability.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on findings and analysis, consolidation of democracy in Africa requires a reconfiguration of both domestic and international approaches to governance. Five key policy implications emerge from the findings as follows: First, electoral cycles must be complemented by robust checks on executive power. Strengthening parliamentary oversight, judicial independence, and anti-corruption agencies is essential to translate procedural democracy into substantive accountability. Development partners should reorient their democracy assistance from electoral logistics toward institutional capacity-building and rule-of-law reforms. The experience of Ghana and Botswana demonstrates that institutional quality, rather than electoral frequency, is the critical variable in democratic consolidation.



Second, devolution of power, as seen in Kenya's 2010 Constitution, can reduce ethnic polarisation and enhance local accountability. However, decentralisation must be accompanied by fiscal autonomy and transparent intergovernmental transfers to prevent the reproduction of central-level patronage at local levels. Without these safeguards, decentralization can simply create new sites of clientelist competition at the subnational level. The evidence from Kenya suggests that while devolution has expanded political participation, it has not fully addressed the underlying dynamics of elite capture. Third, the political economy of authoritarian resilience is sustained by resource dependency and rent distribution. Diversifying economic structures, promoting domestic taxation, and reducing the discretionary control of executives over natural resource revenues can alter elite incentives toward greater accountability. A shift from aid dependency to domestic revenue mobilization, in particular, has the potential to strengthen the bargaining relationship between states and citizens, creating demand-side pressures for good governance. The Botswana model of transparent resource management provides a compelling template, though its replication requires political will and institutional capacity.

Fourth, a vibrant civil society, independent media, and access to information laws are critical in constraining authoritarian tendencies. Digital activism and social media have already expanded civic space, but regulatory protections against surveillance and repression remain necessary. The digital public square is a double-edged sword, however, as governments have become adept at deploying cyber surveillance and disinformation to counter activist gains. Strengthening legal protections for civil society and media independence is essential for sustaining democratic accountability. Fifth, external actors, particularly the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], and international donors, must prioritise consistent enforcement of democratic norms. The selective tolerance of unconstitutional power grabs and electoral malpractice undermines credibility. Regional organisations should operationalise sanctions and peer review mechanisms not as punitive tools but as frameworks for collective accountability. The inconsistent responses to coups' harsh sanctions in some cases, quiet accommodation in others, have weakened the credibility of regional norms and encouraged opportunistic authoritarian reversals.

## REFERENCES

- Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., & Robinson, J. A. (2003). *An African success story: Botswana*. In D. Rodrik (Ed.), *In search of prosperity: Analytic narratives on economic growth* (pp. 80–119). Princeton University Press.
- Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2006). *Economic origins of dictatorship and democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Basedau, M., & Lay, J. (2009). Resource curse or rentier peace? The ambiguous effects of oil wealth and oil dependence on violent conflict. *Journal of Peace Research*, 46(6), 757–776. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343309340500>
- Bayart, J. F. (2009). *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Boafo-Arthur, K. (2008). *Democracy and stability in West Africa: The Ghanaian experience*. CODESRIA.
- Booth, D., & Cammack, D. (2013). *Governance for development in Africa: Building on what works*. Zed Books.
- Bratton, M., & van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa: Regime transitions in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Carbone, G. (2007). *No-party democracy? Ugandan politics in comparative perspective*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Cheeseman, N. (2015). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures, and the struggle for political reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- Diamond, L. (2002). Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0025>
- Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom in the World 2023: The annual report on political rights and civil liberties*. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>
- Ginsburg, T., & Huq, A. Z. (2018). *How to save a constitutional democracy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (1994). Ghana's uncertain political opening. *Journal of Democracy*, 5(2), 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1994.0033>
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2015). Africa's waning democratic commitment. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1), 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0010>
- Herbst, J. (2000). *States and power in Africa: Comparative lessons in authority and control*. Princeton University Press.
- Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kanyinga, K. (2014). Kenya's 2013 elections and the politics of devolution. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 8(2), 284–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.891731>
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.



- Lindberg, S. I. (2006). *Democracy and elections in Africa*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lindberg, S. I. (2010). What accountability pressures do MPs in Africa face, and how do they respond? Evidence from Ghana. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 48(1), 117–142. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X09990202>
- Mahoney, J., & Rueschemeyer, D. (2003). *Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Makara, S., Rakner, L., & Svåsand, L. (2009). Turnaround: The National Resistance Movement and the reintroduction of a multiparty system in Uganda. *International Political Science Review*, 30(2), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512109102437>
- Mkandawire, T. (2015). Neopatrimonialism and the political economy of economic performance in Africa: Critical reflections. *World Politics*, 67(3), 563–612. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004388711500009X>
- Narlikar, A. (2020). *China and the future of global governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Myths of decolonization*. CODESRIA.
- North, D. C., Wallis, J. J., & Weingast, B. R. (2009). *Violence and social orders: A conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Donnell, G. (1994). Delegative democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 5(1), 55–69. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1994.0010>
- Osei, A. (2021). Ghana's 2020 election: A peaceful contest in a competitive authoritarian context. *African Affairs*, 120(480), 475–495. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adab018>
- Paget, D. (2020). Tanzania: The ruling party's resilience. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(2), 142–156. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0030>
- Posner, D. N., & Young, D. J. (2007). The institutionalization of political power in Africa. *Journal of Democracy*, 18(3), 126–140. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0042>
- Przeworski, A., & Teune, H. (1970). *The logic of comparative social inquiry*. Wiley-Interscience.
- Resnick, D., & van de Walle, N. (2013). *Democratic trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the impact of foreign aid*. Oxford University Press.
- Ross, M. L. (2001). Does oil hinder democracy? *World Politics*, 53(3), 325–361. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2001.0011>
- Van de Walle, N. (2001). *African economies and the politics of permanent crisis, 1979–1999*. Cambridge University Press.
- V-Dem Institute. (2024). *Democracy report 2024: Autocratization turns viral*. University of Gothenburg. <https://www.v-dem.net>
- Watts, M. (2004). Resource curse? Governmentality, oil, and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Geopolitics*, 9(1), 50–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040412331307832>