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The Struggle Over Term Limits in Africa

HOW INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE CAN HELP

Brett L. Carter

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The “third wave” of democracy reached Africa in January 1989. Five years later, with the Cold War over and food prices soaring, Africa’s autocrats conceded to popular demands for reform. Some fell, others survived. But virtually all were thenceforth subjected to nominally democratic institutions: term limits, parliaments, and regular multiparty elections. In the decades since, African citizens have witnessed a contest between the autocrats and these institutions. The institutions scored some early victories quickly. Between 1986 and 2000, the number of autocracies in Africa fell dramatically, from 45 to 30. But since 2000, autocrats have proven more resilient. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Central Africa, where four presidents—Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi, Denis Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of Congo (henceforth Congo), Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Paul Kagame of Rwanda—are poised to extend their rule through constitutional revisions.¹ If successful, they will join Cameroon’s Paul Biya, Equatorial Guinea’s Teodoro Obiang, Angola’s José Eduardo dos Santos, and Gabon’s Bongo family in affirming the region’s status as Africa’s most illiberal.

Events in recent years offer cause for both hope and concern. In early October 2014, Burkina Faso’s President Blaise Compaoré, in office since 1987, announced that a constitutional referendum to lift term limits would be held later that month. Citizens poured into the streets, leading to five days of mass protests and the Burkinabé revolution of

November 2014. When mass protests broke out in Burundi on 26 April 2015, catalyzing a military coup attempt on May 13, it seemed as if Nkurunziza would fall as well. But he somehow managed to survive and on August 20 took the oath of office for the third time. The ceremony was announced just hours before.

The precedent set, Sassou-Nguesso and Kagame moved forward in tandem. On September 22, three days after the conclusion of the 11th African Games, which Brazzaville hosted, Sassou-Nguesso announced that a referendum would be held on a new constitution that would lift presidential term limits and allow candidates over the age of 70 to run. The regime ultimately claimed a turnout rate of some 73 percent in the October 25 vote, with 92 percent endorsing the new constitution. In reality, most polling stations in the capital were deserted until late in the afternoon, when the regime began busing in its supporters—many of whom had been paid for their trouble—to create the illusion of participation. Sassou-Nguesso's sophisticated media campaign employed similar language. "I decided to give voice directly to the people," he declared on Facebook and during one his rare press conferences. On October 8, Rwanda's Supreme Court ruled that term limits there could indeed be removed via constitutional referendum. "All depends on the opinions of the people," the Court declared. Rwanda's referendum took place on December 18, and 98 percent voted in favor of amending the constitution to allow Kagame to run again and potentially stay in power until 2034.

Citizens of both countries responded angrily. On September 27, only five days after Sassou-Nguesso announced his referendum, opposition leaders organized a protest of some thirty-thousand people, easily the largest since the president returned to power in 1997 and possibly larger than those that had forced him to convene the 1991 National Conference and ultimately forced him from power.

Congo's prodemocracy activists coordinated their efforts via social media, and days later the hashtag "#SassouFit"—a clever phonetic play on *ça suffit*, or "that's enough"—emerged as the rallying cry. And with good reason. Sassou-Nguesso has ruled Congo for all but five years since 1979 (he lost power in Congo's first multiparty elections in 1992 and returned to the presidency in 1997 after emerging victorious in the civil war that year) quietly amassing one of Africa's worst human-rights records. In May 1999, for instance, with Sassou-Nguesso's approval, the UN repatriated 1,500 citizens who had fled during the 1997 civil war. Of those, 353—all men, and all suspected of supporting the democratically elected government that Sassou-Nguesso had just overthrown—disappeared upon their arrival. The massacre was reportedly organized at the highest levels of government, and in 2004 Colonel Jean François Ndenquet, the national-police chief and a key presidential aide, was briefly arrested in France for crimes against humanity for his role in the mas-

sacre. After Ndenguet was released on grounds of diplomatic immunity, Sassou-Nguesso promptly made him a general. In 2014, when a local journalist publicly opposed the impending constitutional revision, he was forced to watch as his sister was sexually assaulted by plain-clothes security officers. After beating the reporter himself, the officers pillaged his house. The journalist who reported these assaults was banished to Mali.

Increasingly, scholars and policy makers must confront the possibility of a democratic recession across the globe. A host of prominent authoritarian regimes such as China, Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—however diverse their domestic arrangements—are undertaking a more assertive foreign policy. Indeed, the Chinese government, which justifies its engagement with Africa’s most repressive autocracies as a “principled” respect for sovereignty, has found no shortage of willing partners. As such regimes have grown more assertive abroad, so too have they at home. There are now more constraints on international NGOs than at any time since the end of the Cold War. And faced with ongoing crises in the Middle East, Western governments have come to doubt their ability to foster democratic change around the globe. Their citizens are increasingly preoccupied with genuine domestic crises such as growing inequality, political systems that appear to respond more to wealthy donors than to voters, and migration crises. One might reasonably conclude that the recent events in Central Africa provide strong evidence that the “authoritarian resurgence” is reaching fruition.

Seeking cause for hope amid gloom, scholars and policy makers rightly observe African citizens’ deepening attachment to democratic ideals, as reported in successive Afrobarometer surveys.² This attachment is driving courageous opposition in Congo and Burundi, just as it did in Burkina Faso and may soon do in Rwanda and the DRC. But as prodemocracy activists throughout Central Africa intuitively understand, the ongoing struggle between Africa’s autocrats and their countries’ democratic institutions is fundamentally a *rapport de force*, a question of the balance of power between them. As such, the struggle’s outcome will be determined less by the capacity of democratic institutions to respond to universal values and human aspirations than by the ability of democratic institutions—and the people, organizations, and governments that support them—to constrain Africa’s autocrats. In my view, the institutions will win, and all the sooner if the international community remains committed to the values that they share with African citizens themselves.

Elections as Focal Moments for Collective Action

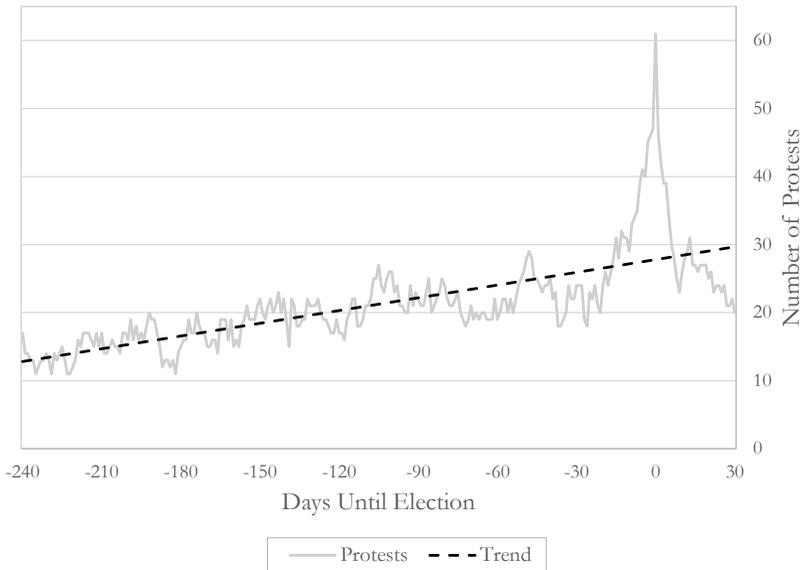
Just before the Berlin Wall fell, Gordon Tullock wrote about the difficulty of revolution. Drawing on Mancur Olson’s theory of collective action, Tullock concluded that a rational citizen should always stay

home. Given the immense risks of protest and the negligible effect that one's attendance has on the ultimate outcome, rational citizens should "free ride": They should let others assume the risks of protest, even as they privately hope for change. With all citizens reaching the same conclusion, mass protests should prove extremely uncommon. If this collective-action problem is ever to be surmounted, there must emerge some "political entrepreneur" who can coordinate protests, reward attendees, and perhaps sanction free riders.³

The regular elections occasioned by democratic institutions satisfy the Olsonian conditions for collective action in profound ways. During election seasons, citizens are more engaged in the political process and more aware of their neighbors' discontent. When all citizens experience electoral fraud simultaneously, Joshua Tucker writes, "people no longer have to choose whether to react alone. Especially as crowds grow, individuals know that they will only be one of many, many people protesting, and thus much less likely to be punished individually."⁴ Opposition leaders clearly know this and stand to benefit disproportionately if mass protests generate regime change or a new distribution of patronage. As a result, they have strong incentives to alert citizens to electoral irregularities and coordinate protest events. By affirming the possibility of a postregime future, elections also decrease the costs to frustrated regime elites of defecting from the coalition and joining the opposition. As a result, regular elections facilitate the splits between hard-liners and soft-liners that Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter wrote about nearly thirty years ago.⁵ For all these reasons, regular elections constitute "focal moments" for collective action.

By requiring regular elections in exchange for development aid and debt relief, Western creditors force Africa's autocrats into allowing recurrent opportunities for mass protest. Elections fostered mass protests during the "color revolutions" in Eastern Europe, and they have proven equally potent in Africa's post-Cold War autocracies. To demonstrate this, for each election across Africa's autocracies since 1989, I identify an election season that begins eight months prior to election day and ends thirty days after. By that time, results have been announced and newly elected officials inaugurated. I then sum the number of protests that occurred each day across each election season after 1989 in Africa's autocracies. The results appear in the Figure below. Eight months prior to election day, protests are relatively uncommon. But as election day approaches, the rate of popular protest rises steadily. When election day is but two weeks away, popular protests are between two and three times more likely than at any other point in the calendar year. The rate of protest spikes on election day itself, when collective action is some six times more likely than on any other day. The rate of protest declines only a month later.⁶

These protests vary in their leaders and their demands. In some cases,

FIGURE—ELECTION-RELATED PROTESTS IN AFRICA’S AUTOCRACIES

Note: The trajectory of popular protest during election season. For each election across Africa’s autocracies since 1989, I identify an election season that begins eight months prior to election day and ends 30 days after. I then index each day within the season as $t \in \{-240, 30\}$, and sum the number of protest events across Africa’s autocracies for each day t . Day $t = -240$ denotes the 240th day before the election, day $t = 0$ denotes election day itself, and day $t = 30$ denotes the thirtieth day after the election.

protests represent campaign rallies that are called by opposition leaders and then gather momentum, as in Congo’s 2009 presidential elections. In others, protests represent labor strikes, timed by union leaders to embarrass the regime and elicit concessions, as occurred just prior to Gabon’s 2005 legislative elections. Still others are campaigns opposing constitutional referendums, which are themselves focal moments even more powerful than presidential elections. For opposition leaders are far more likely to maintain a united front during anticonstitutional referendum campaigns than during presidential elections. Maintaining a united opposition front during a presidential election requires multiple party leaders to subordinate their personal ambitions. By contrast, the leaders of campaigns opposing constitutional referendums have but one nemesis: the autocrat’s proposed constitutional revision, which invariably benefits himself alone.

Notwithstanding these variations, the protests currently sweeping autocratic Africa are not aberrations, nor are they simply a function of country-specific characteristics. Rather, the dynamics that underlie these protests are common across countries, and consistent with the mechanisms described above. Compaoré’s referendum announcement constituted the focal moment around which frustrated citizens in Burkina

Faso coalesced. As protests grew in size and intensity, prescient elites sensed Compaoré's demise. Two days in, former defense minister General Kouamé Lougué joined the protest, along with dozens of soldiers. The regime fell within 36 hours.

In Burundi in May 2015, as popular frustration seethed over the upcoming elections, General Godefroid Niyombare, formerly the military chief of staff, announced a coup, with the support of several senior officers and a former defense minister. In Congo, Sassou-Nguesso has lost the support of a prominent militia leader from the 1997 war, a former defense minister, a nephew, and a handful of former government ministers who had helped to placate residents of Congo's densely populated south, a region that has never forgiven the strongman (who hails from the north) for his atrocities during and after the 1997 civil war. In Gabon, the 2016 presidential election, slated for August, has already brought diplomat Jean Ping's defection from the ruling coalition. Given Ping's long and intimate ties with the Bongo family, he alone among the Gabonese elite enjoys both the financial resources to mount a credible challenge and the personal connections with other elites to generate even more defections.

Western Leverage in Autocratic Africa

Of course, what good is collective action if citizens will ultimately be violently repressed by regime security forces? Admittedly, sustained protests often entail casualties. Opposition leaders in Burkina Faso claimed that Compaoré's presidential guard killed thirty citizens during the 2014 uprising. On 17 October 2015, eight days before Congo's constitutional referendum, three protesters were killed in Pointe-Noire, on the far southwestern coast, and another eleven wounded. Less than a week later, the death count had risen to thirty. In Burundi, meanwhile, between the April 26 protests and the failed coup of May 13, at least 25 people were killed and more than 105,000 fled the country. Given Kagame's record of brazen political assassinations and Rwanda's recent history of genocide, an outbreak of widespread antigovernment protests in Kigali could prove even more tragic. When threatened by popular-protest movements, Africa's autocrats often respond brutally.

Increasingly, Western policy makers doubt their ability to compel the world's autocrats to respect their citizens' human rights. In post-Cold War Africa, at least, this skepticism is misplaced. Demonstrating conclusively that Western financial pressure can limit repression is difficult. First, Western donors may allocate more development aid to autocrats who are least likely to abuse their citizens' human rights. As a result, a correlation between Western aid and respect for human rights may indicate not that Western donors prevent repression, but that

Western donors successfully target aid based on ethical concerns. Second, autocrats may abstain from repression not because they rely on Western aid, but because they have no need for it—their citizens know that their protests would be put down and therefore choose not to protest in the first place. Having no need for repression, the autocrat forgoes it, and hence avoids whatever costs—either from lost financial aid or a besmirched reputation—it would entail.

This is readily apparent in modern Africa. Teodoro Obiang Nguema has ruled Equatorial Guinea since ousting his uncle in a 1979 coup. A leading oil producer, Equatorial Guinea is among Africa's least aid-dependent autocracies. Few citizens doubt that Obiang would meet protest with brutal repression, and therefore few risk it. The absence of repression in Equatorial Guinea implies not that Obiang is constrained, but that he is unconstrained and that the people know it. Correlations—or the lack thereof—can be misleading.

Fortunately, when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank initiated the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt-relief initiative in 1996, they created something of a “natural experiment” that enables scholars to study the ability of Western donors to constrain Africa's autocrats. The HIPC program was designed to enable the world's poorest, most heavily indebted countries to direct scarce government resources to poverty reduction rather than debt service. Accordingly, the Bretton Woods institutions publicly stated that candidate governments must satisfy stringent “good governance” criteria, ostensibly designed to ensure that governments implement substantial poverty-reduction programs after debt relief.

In practice, the IMF and World Bank extended debt relief to virtually every country that met the criteria for poverty rates and indebtedness. Of the 34 qualifying African countries, only three have not yet received debt relief. The only countries that satisfy HIPC's economic criteria but are not currently being considered for debt relief are Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea. Somalia has not had a U.S. embassy since 1991. Sudan is registered as a state sponsor of terrorism and its president, Omar al-Bashir, is subject to an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court (ICC). President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea uses his country's compulsory, indefinite military-service requirement to maintain a pool of slave labor that the government contracts to international mining firms.

The list of autocrats whose countries have received debt relief is startling and shows that the Bretton Woods institutions have not selected countries for their records of “good governance.” The roll includes Compaoré, Biya, Sassou-Nguesso, and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, who cumulatively have ruled their impoverished countries for 130 years and whose human-rights violations are regularly decried by activists. The list also includes Nkurunziza and Kagame, whose human-rights

violations were overlooked in the years following the Rwandan genocide but increasingly generate international outrage. Even Yahya Jammeh's Gambia was granted debt relief. In power since a 1994 coup,

Western governments may not be able to force venal autocrats from power, but Western leverage can make human-rights violations costly for Africa's autocrats, and thereby diminish the rate at which abuses occur.

Jammeh announced in 2011 that he would rule for "one billion years, God willing."

These longtime autocrats had lengthy records of human-rights abuses that began well before debt relief was granted and continued afterward—hence, the "natural experiment": By comparing how each African autocrat behaved during the most intense period of debt-relief negotiations—when the Bretton Woods institutions enjoyed pro-

found leverage—with how the same autocrat behaved both prior to negotiations and after, we can ascertain whether Western donors have induced Africa's autocrats to respect the rights of their citizens.⁷ In addition, by considering whether Africa's autocrats employ repression the day after mass protests occurred, we can ensure that they forgo repression not because their citizens dare not protest in the first place, but because they are constrained by the leverage of the Bretton Woods institutions.

The results are striking.⁸ On any given day following a mass protest, African autocrats in the midst of HIPC debt-relief negotiations were only 20 percent as likely to employ repression as they were outside of debt-relief negotiations. This effect holds even when one controls statistically for a variety of factors such as proximity to an election, ongoing civil wars, weather conditions, economic conditions, and the like. These results should come as no surprise. Careful observers have long noted that Africa's autocrats make extraordinary concessions to Western donors when their financial interests require it.

Sassou-Nguesso's experience is particularly instructive. To qualify for debt relief, the IMF and World Bank required that Sassou-Nguesso satisfy two central conditions: 1) conduct quarterly financial audits of the state oil company, and 2) replace its head, the president's son Denis Christel, notorious for shopping sprees in London, Marbella, and Dubai. Sassou-Nguesso conceded to both. As a result, the proportion of oil revenue accounted for in the national budget increased by a third, from roughly 60 percent prior to debt-relief negotiations to some 80 percent during.⁹ After debt relief was granted, Sassou-Nguesso reverted to previous form: Quarterly financial audits ceased, Denis Christel returned to the state oil company, and the share of oil revenue accounted for in the national budget plummeted. Since Congo's debt had already been forgiven, the IMF and World Bank had no leverage to intervene.

Western governments may not be able to force venal autocrats from power, and they are justifiably skeptical about their ability to implant durable democratic institutions in postconflict settings. But Western leverage can make human-rights violations costly for Africa's autocrats, and thereby diminish the rate at which abuses occur.

Western Pressure Emboldens Citizens

If Western donors doubt the vulnerability of Africa's autocrats to financial pressure, they need only ask Africans themselves. Prodemocracy activists observe the great political charades that their leaders orchestrate to persuade Western governments of their commitment to democracy and human rights. These activists understand the myriad ways in which their leaders aim to undermine collective action in order to obviate the need for repression. Logically, then, we should expect Africa's prodemocracy activists to adjust their behavior accordingly—to be emboldened by Western pressure, knowing that they are less likely to face violent repression than they once were. This is exactly what has happened.

Determining whether citizens in Africa's aid-dependent autocracies protest at a higher rate than their counterparts elsewhere is challenging, and for the same reasons indicated above. Again, Western donors allocate aid strategically, and so autocrats who receive aid may be systematically different than those who do not. Fortunately, the HIPC debt-relief program enables us to study how citizens have responded when conditions on Western aid constrained their government's recourse to repression.¹⁰ On any given day, African citizens governed by an autocrat who was negotiating debt relief with the Bretton Woods institutions were some 50 percent more likely to protest than otherwise. When HIPC debt-relief negotiations occurred during election seasons, citizens of Africa's autocracies were more than twice as likely to protest. This is particularly noteworthy since, by all accounts, the quality of governance actually improved during debt-relief negotiations: Repression was less likely and governments managed their budgets more transparently.

So why does the rate of protest increase at such times? As members of the Congolese opposition have confirmed, it is because people believe their rulers to be constrained by Western pressure: "If we could just get one-thousand people in the streets," one civil society leader in Congo told me immediately following the 2009 HIPC debt-relief negotiations, Sassou-Nguesso "could never open fire on them all. He is too reliant on the West." Accordingly, Africa's prodemocracy activists look to Western embassies when their governments violate their human rights. In the days leading up to Congo's 25 October 2015 constitutional referendum, police in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire opened fire on mass protests against a third term for Sassou-Nguesso, killing some twenty

citizens, and the government shut down mobile Internet access, SMS text messaging, and Radio France Internationale. In response to the state violence and repression, one Congolese citizen publicly appealed to the U.S. Embassy in Brazzaville, writing on its Facebook page: “The United States has a moral responsibility to protect the people of the Republic of Congo. Madame Ambassador [Stephanie] Sullivan, where are you???”

Of course, Western governments too often disappoint the expectations of Africa’s prodemocracy activists. In these cases, the activists respond with a profound sense of betrayal. This was the case on October 20, when the Congolese diaspora in Paris, infuriated by the hypocrisy of French president François Hollande, blocked traffic at the Arc de Triomphe during the evening commute. Demonstrators called upon France to “assume its responsibilities.” Less than a year earlier, as the Burkinabé revolution unfolded, Hollande had declared in Dakar: “Wherever constitutional rules are abused, wherever freedom is violated, wherever democratic transitions of power are prevented, I declare here and now that citizens will always find in the Francophone world the support necessary to ensure that justice, rights, and democracy prevail.” On October 21, however, Hollande abandoned his commitments to Africa’s prodemocracy activists:

We respect the choices, always, of the legitimate state authorities. And when there are coups, the position of France is clear: Always call for elections. In Congo, President Sassou-Nguesso may consult his people [in a constitutional referendum]: This is among his rights [as head of state] and the people must respond. Then, once the people have been consulted—and this goes for all heads of state around the planet—we must always be careful to unite, to respect, and to make peace.¹¹

Sassou-Nguesso’s propaganda newspaper, *Les Dépêches de Brazzaville*, trumpeted the announcement with an enthusiasm usually reserved for Sassou-Nguesso himself. Enraged, Congolese citizens declared it a “knife to the back.” “By prostrating himself before Sassou-Nguesso,” one democracy activist told me, “François Hollande has weakened the word and the moral authority of France.” Even the French daily *Le Monde*, normally friendly to Hollande’s Socialist government, led with the headline “The African press denounces the ‘complicit’ support of François Hollande to President Sassou-Nguesso.”¹² Indeed, the outcry was so great, that the Élysée Palace issued a press release the very next day reaffirming Hollande’s 2014 Dakar proclamation.

Because they rationally calculate that the expected costs of protest will be lower, prodemocracy activists in aid-dependent Africa are emboldened. In reality, this simply confirms what most observers intuit. Election seasons in Teodoro Obiang’s Equatorial Guinea and Mamadou Tandja’s Niger are not so different. Elections are blatantly fraudulent. They are organized by dictators who seized power in coups—or, more

precisely for Tandja, were installed by the coup plotters—and abide nominally democratic institutions only insofar as they must. They are boycotted by opposition parties and subject to media bias. The vast majority of voters are crushingly poor. Rather, the salient difference between Equatorial Guinea and Niger lies in their respective autocrats' vulnerability to Western leverage: his autonomy to employ repression and, therefore, the expected costs of protest to ordinary citizens. Foreign aid accounts for some 80 percent of the Nigerien government's annual operating budget. Obiang, meanwhile, presides over a country that is technically "high income," but in which some 60 percent of the population subsists below the poverty line and the average annual income is less than US\$1,000.

This distinction was sharply apparent in 2009, when the leaders of both countries made clear their intention to stay in power. In May 2009, with his second term set to expire in December, Niger's president announced a constitutional referendum to abolish the two-term limit. "The people have demanded I remain," Tandja declared. "I cannot ignore their call." In reality, Nigerien citizens were furious, and they protested accordingly. Niger's 2009 constitutional referendum registered one of the continent's highest rates of protest. When subsequent talks between Tandja and the opposition reached a stalemate, more than ten-thousand protesters flooded the streets of Niamey on 14 February 2010 to protest Tandja's continued rule and demand that the constitutional changes, approved by the fraudulent referendum, be reversed. Although the government dispatched riot police, it chose not to repress protesters. The February 14 protests provided the foundation for a military coup only four days later, on February 18. So popular was the coup that another ten-thousand citizens marched in support of it two days later. Under pressure from the West, the coup plotters organized elections within a year, and Tandja's chief rival, Mahamadou Issoufou, was voted into office.

In Equatorial Guinea, by contrast, Obiang won his fourth presidential term on 29 November 2009, claiming some 95.4 percent of the vote, a slight decline from 2002, when he claimed 97.1 percent. There were no protests, for Obiang employs repression freely, and thus his citizens dare not challenge him. "Equatorial Guineans," John Heilbrunn writes, "live in fear of arbitrary detention, harassment, beatings, and the seizure of personal property."¹³ More recently, on 17 March 2015, with the next presidential elections scheduled for 2016, the Obiang government arrested Guillermo Nguema, an opposition leader, forced him onto a plane to Mongomo, a small village far from the capital of Malabo, and ordered him never to return. One citizen dared to protest the abduction by distributing leaflets in the streets of Malabo. Days later, he too was removed to Mongomo and instructed to remain there indefinitely. The U.S. government and Amnesty International harshly condemned these human-rights violations, of course, but they had no leverage to force a

change. The people of Equatorial Guinea knew this as well, and so they refrained from protest.

For some two decades, Western governments have signaled to Africa's autocrats that human-rights violations and endemic corruption would be costly. Africa's autocrats watched the fall of Saddam Hussein and Muammar al-Qadhafi, who had supplied many of them with weapons. They watched as Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin—two autocrats with vastly more resources and weapons at their disposal, and more leverage over the West—suffered the weight of financial sanctions. They watched as Laurent Gbagbo was arrested and handed over to the ICC for “crimes against humanity”—indeed, for crimes no greater than those that many of them had committed themselves in order to seize power in the first place. They also watched as three among them—Omar Bongo (1935–2009), Obiang, and Sassou-Nguesso—were targeted by anticorruption prosecutors in France and the United States, and had residential properties in those countries seized. And virtually all of Africa's autocrats, threatened with disqualification from debt relief, had already been forced into significant “good governance” concessions by the Bretton Woods institutions.

Africa's prodemocracy activists watched their rulers buckle under Western pressure, and in ways that Western donors perhaps failed to appreciate. By sanctioning human-rights violations and endemic corruption, Western governments may have simply sought “good governance” in Africa's autocracies. But in so doing, Western governments also shaped the beliefs of Africa's citizens. Where African citizens believed their rulers were constrained by Western pressure, they grew emboldened. Confronted with elections that were similarly flawed and standards of living that were similarly impoverished, citizens in Africa's aid-dependent autocracies are now far more likely to protest their rulers' malfeasance than their counterparts in Africa's aid-independent autocracies.

Political Instability and Political Change

Western creditors have helped to create focal moments for collective action and have limited African autocrats' ability to defend themselves. In so doing, Western creditors have also empowered Africa's long-suffering citizens. But perhaps the most important question is this: Has this *rapport de force* generated political change in Africa's autocracies?

From Western capitals, the answer may be unclear. Political transitions are rare events; they occur only once or twice per year, and sometimes less. Moreover, Africa's autocrats frequently leave power only at the end of long transition periods—well after having been stripped of effective sovereignty—which may obscure the temporal relationship of protest and political change. As a result, the relationship between protests and political change is difficult to observe. For their part, quantitative social scientists have provided relatively few insights. Customarily,

these scholars search for a relationship between protests and political change by focusing on the years in which both occur. And indeed, there is some evidence that a country's Polity democracy score rises in years when protests are more common.¹⁴ This measure is blunt, however, and it remains possible that protests actually followed political change rather than stimulated it.

More precise data, however, shows that the relationship between popular protests and political change in autocratic Africa is strong. Since 1989, when popular protests have emerged on a given day t , the probability that an autocrat will lose power on day $t + 1$ rises by some 50 percent. For every additional protest that occurs within the preceding week, the probability that an autocrat will fall from power—as occurred so often during the National Conferences in the early 1990s—rises by some 10 percent. This effect holds even when excluding the transitions between 1989 and 1994, when the third wave was sweeping Africa, as well as those of the “Arab Spring.” Even when Africa's autocrats survived an initial wave of protests, they frequently lost power to senior military officers, whose interventions were catalyzed by protesters and who, under Western pressure, quickly transferred political power to civilian transitional governments that organized free and fair elections.

These dynamics account for a substantial share of recent political change in autocratic Africa. The list of deposed autocrats includes Côte d'Ivoire's Robert Gueï (1999–2000) and Laurent Gbagbo (2000–11), Niger's Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara (1996–99) and Mamadou Tandja (1999–2010), and, most recently, Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaoré. In 2015, mass protests helped to force Togo's President Faure Gnassingbé to resign the presidency, which he had claimed immediately after his father's death in 2005, and subject himself to a fiercely contested presidential election two months later. And although he ultimately claimed victory—with 60 percent of the vote—popular protests managed to put the final outcome in at least some doubt.

To be sure, these protest movements have not always yielded genuinely democratic governments. Indeed, the mass protest that toppled Gueï left Côte d'Ivoire with Gbagbo, just as Tandja was elected soon after Maïnassara was forced from power. But both Gbagbo's successor, Alassane Ouattara, and Tandja's successor, Mahamadou Issoufou, have so far served reasonably well, and the Burkinabé revolution of 2014 may yet result in genuine democracy.

When Francis Fukuyama pronounced the “end of history” in 1991, he observed simply that liberal democracy alone both protects man's universal right to freedom and exists with his consent. Twenty-five years removed, democratic transitions no longer seem inevitable. China and Russia, more assertive abroad, have quickly gained allies among the world's autocrats. Ongoing crises in the Middle East have called into question the very idea of democracy promotion. And the world's established democ-

racies are themselves in crisis. Democracy promotion is neither popular with Western voters nor welcomed by Africa's autocrats.

Still, policymakers and activists must not lose hope. In the current struggle between the institutions of democracy and Africa's autocrats, the power of the institutions extends in ways beyond the universal values and human aspirations that underlie them. The regular elections occasioned by democratic institutions, however marred by fraud and irregularities, provide focal moments for popular protest. They enable citizens to coordinate their efforts and organize for change. Moreover, democratic institutions possess crucial allies, who are more powerful than perhaps they recognize. Western governments may not be able to force Africa's autocrats from power. But by credibly threatening sanctions in response to human-rights violations, Western donors render repression more costly. In short, democratic institutions foster collective action, while credible threats of financial sanctions remove a key policy tool—repression—on which Africa's autocrats have long relied to defend themselves. These new dynamics have shaped the beliefs of Africa's prodemocracy activists, who have regularly seen their rulers yield to Western pressure. African citizens are emboldened, and their collective efforts have repeatedly brought about political change.

These dynamics may be a distinctive product of the post-Cold War international order. As China courts African allies with low-interest loans free of political conditions, Africa's autocrats increasingly are forgoing Western development aid in favor of Chinese support. In the competition to provide development aid—which, after all, is the only *raison d'être* for many bilateral government agencies and multilateral institutions—Western sources are increasingly losing. In the medium term, this may force Western donors to abandon political and human-rights conditions on their assistance. If so, or if China continues its generous engagement, then the constraining effects of dependence on Western aid may prove to have been a fleeting feature of the immediate post-Cold War international order.

This possibility demands Western engagement now. The year 2016 will prove to be among the most significant in recent African history. African citizens are organizing themselves for change, inspired partly by the commitments of the international community. If the international community stands by these commitments, Africa's democratic recession will be brief.

NOTES

1. Or, in the case of Burundi, a very questionable interpretation of when President Nkurunziza's term actually started.

2. E. Gyimah-Boadi, "Africa's Waning Democratic Commitment," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (January 2015): 101–13; and Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (January 2015): 141–55.

3. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Gordon Tullock, *The Social Dilemma: The Economics of War and Revolution* (Blacksburg, Va.: University Publications, 1974); and Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (New York: Springer, 1987).

4. Joshua A. Tucker, "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (September 2007): 541.

5. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

6. For more, see Brett Carter, "Elections, Protests, and Focal Moments: Day-Level Evidence from Post-Cold War Africa," 5 May 2016, <http://brettlogancarter.com/May%202016/ElectionsProtestsV8.pdf>. I employ the roster of autocracies from Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), along with their start and end dates. The National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset records the dates of every election around the world between 1960 and 2010; see Susan D. Hyde and Nikolay Marinov, "Which Elections Can Be Lost?" *Political Analysis* 20 (Spring 2012): 191–201. I draw data on protests from the Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD), which provides the most detailed and complete record yet assembled; see Idean Salehyan et al., "Social Conflict in Africa: A New Database," *International Interactions* 38, no. 4 (2012): 503–11.

7. The debt-relief process begins with a "decision point." Qualification for this first stage is generally straightforward. Governments must have an ongoing relationship with the IMF and World Bank, as well as a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The "decision point" document signals the applicant government's entry into the second, final phase of the debt relief process, known as the "completion point" phase. The "decision point" document identifies a set of conditions that must be satisfied for debt relief. Once governments satisfy these conditions, they reach the "completion point," when debt relief is full and irrevocable. The years between the "decision point" and the "completion point" determine whether a government is granted debt relief, and hence constitute the more consequential period of negotiations.

8. Brett L. Carter, "Repression and Foreign Aid in Autocracies: Exploiting Debt Relief Negotiations in Post-Cold War Africa," *CDDRL Working Paper*, October 2015, <http://cd-drl.fsi.stanford.edu/publication/repression-and-foreign-aid-autocracies-exploiting-debt-relief-negotiations-post-cold-war>.

9. Interviews with senior IMF official in December 2012.

10. Brett L. Carter, "Foreign Aid, Beliefs, and Protest: Evidence from Post-Cold War Africa," <http://brettlogancarter.com/May%202016/BeliefsProtestsV1.pdf>, 5 May 2016.

11. "Propos de François Hollande sur le Référendum de la République du Congo," 22 October 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JtKs6w1OmM>.

12. Elise Barthet, "Congo: La presse africaine dénonce le soutien 'complice' de François Hollande au président Sassou-Nguesso," *Le Monde*, 22 October, www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/10/22/congo-la-presse-africaine-denonce-le-soutien-complice-de-francois-hollande-au-president-sassou-nguessou_4795198_3212.html#s52BrJuZ5FDm3GrV.99.

13. John R. Heilbrunn, "Equatorial Guinea and Togo: What Price Repression?" in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Worst of the Worst: Dealing with Repressive and Rogue Nations* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2007), 170.

14. See, for instance, Toke S. Aidt and Gabriel Leon, "The Democratic Window of Opportunity: Evidence from Riots in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, published online, 6 January 2015.