Electoral Governance and Democratization in Francophone Africa: A Critical Appraisal

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The exhaustion of dictatorial powers and communist regimes ushered in the third wave of democratization in francophone Africa, through the emergence of democratic institutions essential to the holding of credible elections. This new democratic era, which redefines the stakes of power through peaceful political competition in the form of elections, marked the end, at least symbolically, of a time when a coup or popular insurrection seemed to be the only way to overthrow dictatorial regimes. The election thus appears as an instrument of regulation of political life. Through a constructivist perspective, this research aims to discuss the relationship between electoral governance and democratization in francophone Africa. It shows that even if democracy is taken as a tool of political civilization in francophone Africa, there is no institutional linking. It means that electoral must be the key for the regulation and the credibility of democratization and democracy.

Keywords: Cold War, Elections, Democratization, Democracy, Governance

Socio-historical Dimensions of Democracy and Electoral Issues in Francophone Africa

The 1990s, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the exhaustion of dictatorial powers and communist regimes, ushered in the third wave of democratization in French-speaking Africa, through the emergence of democratic institutions essential to the holding of credible elections. This new democratic era, which redefines the stakes of power through peaceful political competition in the form of elections, marked the end, at least symbolically, of a time when a coup or popular insurrection seemed to be the only way to overthrow dictatorial regimes (de Montclos, 2010). It is understood as a tool for appointing rulers and appears as “a substitute for the drawing of lots, chance or predictions of oracles, heredity or co-optation, a viable alternative to self-designation” (Dodzi, 2009, p. 19).

The election thus appears as an instrument of regulation of political life. It is even the symbol of democratic vitality. We cannot therefore think of a democracy without the organization of elections with regular deadlines. It is in this sense that independent electoral management bodies, non-partisan civil society electoral monitoring groups, and independent media have been set up in Africa in general and in francophone Africa in particular. Political parties frequently monitor the conduct of elections, deploying scrutineers to monitor the electoral process, while professional security services ensure that political candidates and their supporters freely campaign and vote in accordance with their constitutional rights.¹ Thus, the Durban

document of the African Union in 2002 and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance in 2007, which establishes elections as the basis of the authority of a government declares that, elections are the key element of good governance and place on the Member States of the AU, the responsibility to hold elections adhering to democratic electoral principles.

This operative backdrop, which the elections confer, attests to a political change and testifies to the growing evolution of democratization that francophone Africa has experienced in recent years. However, how can we understand the causal link between electoral governance and democratization in francophone Africa? This contribution aims to question democratization in francophone Africa in its relationship to the effective inking of the democratic spirit, in a context where electoral credibility is strongly debated. We will first try to establish the relationship between electoral governance and democratization in francophone Africa, through a debate of the theses different authors. Then, electoral governance in francophone Africa will be characterized as a guarantee of a credible democratic system. Finally, we will analyze the constraints and projections of electoral governance and democratization in francophone Africa.

**Debate on the Relationship Between Electoral Governance and Democratization in Francophone Africa: The Imperative of Democratic Civilization and the Absence of Institutional Inking**

Elections, while banal, have a turbulent history in francophone Africa. During the colonial period, very few elections were held, and they were limited to the European population and some African elites. After 1945, the independence agreement between European leaders and emerging African nationalist elites led to a rapid extension of the right to vote, and most African countries gained independence in the 1960s through competitive elections. Since then, competitive elections have been held regularly in long-standing democracies, both in English-speaking countries such as Botswana, Mauritius, and the Gambia until 1994, and in francophone countries such as Senegal since 1979 and Burkina Faso, which have seen alternating democratic governments and military regimes. While authoritarian regimes gradually replaced democratic governments on the continent in the 1970s, one-party regimes regularly held semi-competitive elections as in Côte d’Ivoire, while some military regimes held tightly controlled plebiscitary elections to ensure nominal legitimacy (Chazan, 1979).

Since 1989, however, the expansion of democracy in francophone Africa has given competitive elections particular importance. They have become the organized method of peaceful democratic transition, a salient indicator of democratic consolidation, and the main institutionalized means by which large numbers of people can peacefully participate in the formation and subsequent change of democratic government. Credible competitive elections have thus become a necessary, albeit insufficient, source of behavioural, if not attitudinal, legitimacy for Africa’s emerging democracies. This importance of competitive elections also underscores the empirical importance and analytical challenge of electoral governance in contemporary Africa (Diamond, 1999).

Empirically, effective electoral governance is obviously crucial to ensure credible elections. In Africa’s fragile democracies, however, the uncertainties characteristic of democratic transitions and the resulting strategic dilemma, namely the need to take into account the inherent tension in political life between legitimacy and control, amplify the importance of the usual causal link between the effectiveness of electoral governance and the credibility of democratic elections. Reinforcing this importance, international election observation
activities, and assessments documented in technical inputs, as well as the associated influx of large amounts of financial and technical assistance, generally rightly attest that weak electoral governance is an important cause of flawed elections and, therefore, that it is necessary to create effective systems of electoral governance in these democracies.

The institutional hallmark of authoritarian regimes in post-colonial Africa was neopatrimonialism, a system of governance based on the État’s monopoly of power and resources. Within this general framework of neo-patrimonial rule, African authoritarian regimes are distinguished by the institutional legacies of colonial domination. African authoritarian regimes, both in francophone and Portuguese-speaking countries (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997) have inherited the centralised institutional legacy inspired by Jacobin statist ideology. If the implementation of this ideology in the African colonies required pragmatic accommodations with local realities (Young, 1994), the central organizing principle is to maintain the integration of politics and administration through corporatist modes of mediation of interests, by which specific social groups and functional interests (workers, students, women, teachers, civil servants) were officially organised in state-sponsored high-tech associations as monopoly representation closely linked to the ruling parties. The primary responsibility for electoral governance in the many elections held in francophone Africa during decolonization generally rested with the Ministry of the Interior or the territorial administration. At the local level, multi-party electoral committees chaired by designated government officials oversaw routine activities such as the revision of voters’ lists, the distribution of voter cards, and election monitoring. Practically (Holleaux, 1956), all the countries of francophone Africa have benefited from this centralized institutional legacy.

Democratization rhymes with the creation of institutions and sets of rules that structure strategic interactions and shape political outcomes. In countries in the process of democratization, the choice of electoral rules is one of the most important institutional choices of political actors. This choice involves decisions concerning two conceptually distinct but empirically related sets of electoral rules. The first set defines, among others the electoral formulas, the size of the constituencies, the boundaries of the constituencies, and the size of the assemblies (Dipalma, 1990). These rules endogenously structure electoral competition by encouraging strategic coordination between voters, parties, and candidates to win votes and seats. The other sets define and configure the general institutional framework for electoral governance. This framework includes the structures and procedures that exogenously structure electoral competition by regulating, inter alia, the registration of voters, parties, and candidates, election observation, campaign finance, and access to the media, voting, counting, presentation of results, and settlement of electoral disputes (Cox, 1997).

As with all democratic institutions, the choice of electoral governance rules in francophone African countries presents the combined effects of the strategic calculations of key political actors, the structural social context that defines their power relations, and contingencies that shape the trajectories and outcomes of democratic transitions. Democratization confronts political actors with the strategic dilemma (Colomer, 2000) of establishing democracy as a system of organized uncertainty (Przeworski, 1991).

**Electoral Governance as a Guarantee of Regulation and Credibility of Democratization and Democracy**

Electoral governance is understood as the set of rules and strategies established to ensure the coherence, stability, and credibility of the electoral process, but also the democratic vitality of a State. It also presents itself
as a means of ensuring respect for civil and political liberties, putting an end to neo-colonial practices and pacifying the competition for power. In the early 1990s, the first attempts at democratization in Africa were greeted with general enthusiasm. Given the context of the 1980s characterized by the economic and political failure of African authoritarian regimes, democratization was presented as a “second independence of peoples”, after those of states in the 1960s. It was seen as a response to the challenges of governance (Genné, 1991).

Thus, to root electoral governance in francophone Africa is to a certain extent to present the election as the norm and not the exception in this part of the continent (Akindes, 1996). This routinization is at the basis of the construction of the state, which has supplanted other modes of social and political organization, has made it possible to value “legal-rational legitimacy” to the detriment of “traditional” and “charismatic” legitimacy, according to Max Weber’s conception. The strength of this legal-rational legitimacy is that it makes citizens exist as individuals freed from forms of social allegiance and capable of making a rational choice. The electoral period is therefore a moment of contact and exchange between citizens and those who aspire to represent them. It is also an opportunity for candidates to compete from their programs and invest public space to convince citizens, to confront their ideas, their vision of the City. Election campaigns are strong moments of discussion of public affairs. They strengthen the sense of national belonging and forge citizenship (Diallo, 2011).

Assessing the state of democratization in francophone Africa in the light of electoral governance depends above all on an understanding of the concept of democracy. Although there is no single recipe for democratization, it is the electoral management strategies that account for it. Electoral governance in francophone African countries is characterized by a normative hybridity. This normative mix is the product of the norms and procedures developed at both the continental and national levels, in order to ensure the credibility of the democratization process. Thus, at the AU level, this normative framework refers respectively to two key documents governing democratic rules and principles in African states. This is the case with the African Union’s Durban Document in 2002, which established elections as the basis for the authority of a government, declared that elections were the key element of good governance, and placed the responsibility on AU Member States to organize elections adhering to democratic electoral principles. Following this is the AU’s “African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance” adopted in January 2007, stressing the importance of credible democratic elections on the continent. From the preamble, the Charter stresses the need “to entrench in the continent a culture of political alternation based on the regular holding of transparent, free and fair elections, conducted by national, independent, competent and impartial electoral bodies”. Article 10 provides that “States Parties shall ensure that the process of amending or revising their Constitutions is based on a national consensus, including, where appropriate, recourse to a referendum” and that: “any amendment or revision of constitutions or legal instruments which undermines the principles of democratic alternation” constitutes an unconstitutional change of government and is punishable by appropriate sanctions by the Union (Art. 23 Para. 5). The Charter thus sets very ambitious objectives which, if pursued by African States, are capable of injecting real momentum into the construction of the rule of law in Africa and at the same time ensuring the sustainability of democratization through the establishment of credible and sustainable democratic institutions.

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**Flaws and Avatars Between Electoral Governance and Democratization in Francophone Africa**

In view of the above, it is important to remember that elections are one of the most important pillars of democratization, as long as they are reliable, free, and transparent. Although democracy is not limited to elections, they are the foundation of the social contract by which elected leaders acquire the legitimacy to govern granted to them by the voters. The fact remains that, in practice, free and fair elections seem to be denied in many francophone black African countries and justifies the question of whether the elections taking place in these countries are “elections like any other”, that is to say, credible means of promoting democratic and political alternations.

The elections contested since 1990 have carried an ambiguous momentum (du Bois de Gaudusson, 2002, p. 105). To a certain extent, they constitute a great step forward for democracy in francophone Africa. Political power becomes theoretically accessible, at least it opens up to a greater number of actors. The elections thus attest to the evolution of political behaviour and a new vision of politics. Of course, even if they cannot be a guarantee of democracy, they are nonetheless, whatever the limits, a necessary condition for democratic development (Dodzi, 2005). However, this greatness of the election celebrated by its constitutional consecration is quickly eclipsed in the face of the disappointments and regressions generated in practice. Indeed, the results of years of democratic or political transitions reveal elections marred by enormous irregularities, which are not only becoming widespread but also diversifying at all stages of the electoral process. These truncated elections unfortunately expose African democracies to serious crises, which has the effect of slowing down the democratization process.

Francophone Africa includes the majority of African states whose political and social practices seem far removed from the standards of free and competitive elections, this standard meter of representative democracy. Witness the example of these leaders from the era of single parties that the democratic wave of the 1990s wave wavered vaguely but who quickly regained control and some of (Quantin, 2002) whom abandoned the throne only very recently and others still in power: Denis Sassou Nguesso in Congo Brazzaville, Paul Biya in Cameroon, Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso; or those family dynasties which see the offspring succeed without a blow to their father: the Eyadéma in Togo, the Kabila in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Bongo in Gabon. In these elections, leaders or firmly established families may rely on their efforts to retain power on the means of the state, on its civil servants who become electoral agents of the ruling party, on its economic resources (or on those they have personally amassed by managing the state as their own property). With such a resource differential between candidates, a competitive election is not possible.

Many elections are also marred by major fraud which could jeopardise their credibility. Multiple, increasingly sophisticated skills are being developed by political operators and their “little hands” to “guide” the results of the elections: to have few polling stations in the areas acquired by the opposition, to distribute electoral cards, and to make the dead vote, to falsify the accounts of the polling stations, or simply to rewrite some figures on the computer system (Daracq, 2008). International election observation missions, as well as opposition parties and civil society organizations, are gradually developing parades to limit fraud. But the results of some elections are still questionable: we can think of the last presidential elections in Togo, where the victory of Faure Eyadéma was recognized only lip service by a European Union (EU) finally unwilling to openly question the results of an election that it had largely financed and organized. Ditto in Cameroon, where
the re-election of Paul Biya in 2018 was enamelled, according to the opposition parties, including the MRC, various rigging committed by the ruling party. This resulted in a post-electoral dispute and insurrectional movements, whose thinking head was the leader of the opposition party (MRC), but also by the anti-Sardinard brigade, a movement made up of some members of the Cameroonian diaspora, eager for political alternation in Cameroon.

The essence of democratic renewal lies in the adoption of a constitution as a means of limiting power and a guarantee of political alternatio (Ahadazi-Nonou, 1989) likely to propel the process of democratization in the States. This constitutional momentum is unfortunately diverted in francophone Africa through arbitrary revisions of constitutions, thus locking down the political game. This action has as a consequence, the abolition of the imitations of presidential mandates, with the effect of equating the States with a dynasty (Bayart, 1989), with the repercussions of crises, translated by coups d’état. As an example, we can mention the case of the coups d’état of February 18, 2010 in Niger, 2012 in Mali, 2012 in Guinea-Bissau, 2021 in Chad, and finally 2021 in Guinea-Conakry. These elements demonstrate the negation of the electoral principle as a political mode of participation and management of society. This widespread suspicion of elections, particularly in francophone Africa, is linked to the fact that they are often organized, “in conflictual contexts and dubious conditions of transparency, despite the existence of universal standards in terms of elections to which States have adhered” (Bussy, 2019, p. 21).

This assessment of the causal link between electoral governance and democratization reveals in fact that, the States of francophone Africa are in reality democracies (Frégosi, 2015, p. 5) in other words, dictatorships disguised as democracy by the organization of non-free, controlled, or fraudulent elections. In addition, francophone African states are also referred to as party states and test versions of democracy. These different qualifiers lead to the derision of politics in francophone Africa, drawing their foundations in the fact that elections do not necessarily go hand in hand with changes of power or political liberalization. As the notion of “electoral autocracy” expresses, they are indeed capable of founding any type of political regime. Thus, authoritarian regimes have perfectly been able to import and exploit the symbolism of elections by instrumentalizing them in biased procedures.

However, since the advent of pluralism, some of the francophone African countries have held an average of three elections, reflecting the real progress made in the wave of democratization. The regular organization of elections has been one of the greatest achievements of the democratization process, which has thus been able to consolidate itself. In the difficult socio-economic context experienced by most francophone African countries, the rise of democracy has defied pessimistic scenarios that doubted the possibility of positive political change. Democracy has flourished in countries where there has been alternation between the main political parties and where opposition parties have been able to come to power. These countries have also enjoyed high levels of confidence in the credibility of electoral rules and in the consolidation of institutions that complement and underpin healthy competition. Better yet, these countries have become models of viable democracy. By way of illustration, we can mention the case of Benin and Mali.

Undeniably, democracy is lived and legitimized through elections. These strengthen the democratic vitality of a State. And, in the case of francophone Africa, this democratic dynamism was observed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, thus paving the way for electoral competitions. Despite this democratic euphoria celebrated through the elections that consecrated the enchanting alternation and democratic horizon, there is a political passivity due to the negation of this decisive step in the march towards the consolidation of democracy. This
refusal is a blow to democratization in francophone Africa. Better still, democracy today faces a certain disenchantment which is manifested mainly by the mistrust of citizens towards institutions and political personnel, and which has been expressed, in recent years, by a growing disaffection with the electoral process. This argument has its roots in the lack of credibility of the elections.

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