Review of Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention

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The temptation in reading this detailed review of democratic progress and failures in sub-Saharan Africa over the past several decades is to overlook the question mark in the title and assume the worst — that democracy is on an irreversible downward spiral. It is not, the authors contend; but, they argue, the struggle for expanded freedoms is running up against new forms of resistance from the top. Violence is still a tool for incumbent regimes; but the dynamics of incumbent regimes are changing.

Across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, political leaders are trying new types of resistance to keep would-be reformists in check. Sometimes these new methods of control are implemented with the connivance of ambitious parliamentarians and others who would like to assume power themselves - without further concessions to pro-democracy forces. Through creative, anti-democratic laws and regulations and continued currying of donor support, incumbents have engineered a ‘backsliding’ of democracy, the authors argue (p. 14).

But the story is mixed.

Some African cases are moving in a direction consistent with the global story of democratic backsliding, just as others continue to make progressive liberalizing gains, all while the modal tendency among countries remains to instigate no change at all (p.18).

In the six country case studies, each with several authors, (Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe), the struggle for democracy is less about violent repression than manipulation of the political system and new strategies to curry donor support. Incumbent regimes are trying new ways to curb pro-democracy activism at home while attempting to deflect international criticism by promoting equality for women and other donor-attractive initiatives.

In Kenya, the authors argue that only twice in contemporary years has the opposition come together enough to impact major political change: in 1990-1991 to win a switch back to multi-party government, and 2008-2010 to achieve a new constitution. Yet while the new constitution initiated a system of local governments and set high human rights standards:

[The executive remains able to manipulate legal mechanisms to control if not undermine further reform…to stymie liberalizing reforms through lawfare¹ (constitutional, legislative, and administrative) by using their political and institutional influence to induce opposition defections from broad-based reformist coalitions.

¹Lawfare is a term coined by the authors to describe the legal strategies used by incumbent regimes to stymie reform efforts.
While political protests have continued today in Kenya, including a grassroots campaign against police violence, only a few of the former middle-class activists from the 1990-1991 still politically engaged have shown interest in supporting their efforts (Press, 2022). This leaves human rights groups struggling on their own for funds from local organizations and international sources. Meanwhile basic survival issues, include cost of food and basic services.

African regimes’ efforts to check civil society groups are not the only challenge slowing growth in democracy. Donors carry some of the blame, the authors contend. In Zambia, another of the book’s case studies, declining donor interest in conditionality has hurt the growth of democracy in two ways. First, the donors progressively ceased to act as an “agency of restraint” (p. 198) on the government’s policymaking: the quality of governance declined as a result. Second, the donor withdrawal resulted in the weakening of the political influence of civil society.

While this work’s impressive scholarship, suitable for advanced students of African politics, details the forces working against expansion of democratic freedoms, there is much less on the grassroots efforts to bolster democracy – and to meet essential human needs, including food and employment.

Perhaps it is too much to expect a single work to cover both sides, and the authors do give a few examples of pro-democracy initiatives. But without examining both sides, students and scholars will have to rely on additional sources to understand change in Africa today.

The other side of the story shows continent-wide campaigns for human rights, dignity, and legal protection from government abuses – and includes the courage, stubbornness, and insistence of activists for a better, more democratic life. The authors acknowledge this while providing insights into the obstacles such reformists face against a still-evolving panoply of controls from the top.

**Endnotes**

1 Gloppen, S. 2018. “Conceptualizing lawfare: A typology and theoretical framework.” Working Paper, Centre on Law and Social Transformation, Bergen. The concept is that heads of state can use and are using powers of the executive to manipulate the various branches of government in a way that strengthens the executive’s political strength and works against citizen efforts to expand democracy.

**References**
