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Progress and Retreat in Africa

CHALLENGES OF A “FRONTIER” REGION

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From the Cape of Good Hope to the Sahara, and from the Gulf of Guinea to the shores of the Indian Ocean, political and economic life across the African continent today features an interplay of risk, reward, and uncertainty that is well captured by the term “frontier Africa.” This term’s relevance was suggested to me by the way in which international-finance experts speak of “frontier markets” to denote countries that lack the reliable operating structures of “emerging-market” countries, but which nonetheless yield high profits and show signs of sustained growth and improving economic governance.

Several countries in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, are now “frontier markets.” For the first time in decades, a positive flow of investment capital is entering these countries—and going to sectors other than those devoted to the extraction of natural resources. Where available, local stock markets are producing attractive returns, while annual growth rates of 5 to 7 percent are no longer a rarity. As a consequence, major international-finance companies that long shunned Africa are creating special instruments for equity investments.

Yet as the violence that broke out following Kenya’s disputed December 2007 presidential election so powerfully reminds us, the high potential rewards in Africa are counterbalanced by risks that can be just as high. The Kenyan tragedy caps a remarkable wave of change that began almost twenty years ago on the opposite side of the continent, in the small West African state of Benin. By the end of the 1980s, Benin had come to exemplify the economic and political bankruptcy of authoritarian single-party rule in postcolonial Africa. The system was so

thoroughly broken that no one wanted to try to fix it—not even France, the former colonial power which remained deeply involved in the politics of its former territories. International financial institutions eventually put aside their unwillingness to interfere in political matters and began pressing Benin's longtime military ruler, Mathieu Kérékou, to mend his ways. The system could not be reformed, however, and had to be jettisoned. For ten remarkable days in February 1990, representatives of civic, religious, and other interest groups met in a national conference that wrested sovereign authority away from Kérékou and initiated a democratic transition.

In the nearly two decades since these seminal events, the “awakening process”¹ has deepened in Benin and a handful of other African countries. Yet as the tragic aftermath of the December 2007 voting in Kenya has shown, governments facing the prospect of a peaceful dismissal by the people can allow the doors of democracy to open further, but such governments can also seek to slam them shut.² Since the transformative moment in Benin, systems of personal rule have continued to clash with institutions intended to give expression to the popular will. During the first decade of the *apertura* (opening), Africa matched the post-Soviet world in the rapidity with which liberalizing systems emerged. The following decade, the travails of democracy in Africa mirrored the stalling of democracy worldwide. As many have argued, after the democratic upsurge of the early 1990s, the play of political and socioeconomic forces became too complex to capture under the rubric of the “transition paradigm.” I suggested that the resumption of competitive party politics, and the shift from statist to market-oriented economic systems, heralded a “reconfiguration of power” whose outcomes could not be predicted.³ Today, although we know more about the contours of this reconfiguration, its evolution remains uncertain as illiberal regimes cling to power in economically liberalized systems and as new geopolitical forces come into play.⁴

Few countries illustrate the tortuous trajectory of democracy in Africa better than Benin's much larger and oil-rich eastern neighbor, Nigeria. From 1976 to 1979, the reformist military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo led a gradual transition to civilian rule in this most populous of all African countries. After the armed forces intervened to overthrow the Obasanjo regime's ineffectual civilian successor in December 1983, another fifteen years of military rule ensued, leaving the country in 1998 essentially where it had been two decades earlier. In a quasi-managed process, Obasanjo returned to power as a civilian president in 1999. He then became the first Nigerian president to serve two full constitutional terms and the first to hand power to a civilian successor.

With regard to neither of these Nigerian transitions, however, can we use the adjective “elected” without a host of qualifiers.⁵ The national

elections held over the last decade (in 1999, 2003, and 2007) became successively less fair, less efficient, and less credible. The 2007 vote kept the ruling People's Democratic Party dominant throughout the federation and elevated to the presidency Umaru Yar'Adua, a little-known former governor of the northern state of Katsina. Among the most hopeful local descriptions of this electoral event is that it could be a case of "muddling forward."⁶ What Nigeria and other quasi-democratic African countries greatly need instead of "muddling," however, is a decisive break from the "frontier" character of periodic elections.

Assessments of democracy's prospects in Africa should attend more closely to democracy as more than just a set of rules for managing power struggles among elites. In the context of the great material deprivation of the masses of the people, democracy is an avenue by which their legitimate aspirations for a better future can be expressed and claims for redress made. Abraham Lincoln saw democracy's central qualities as bound up with the principles of freedom, equality, and government by consent that the U.S. Declaration of Independence had laid before "a candid world" in 1776. In 1861, shortly after the beginning of the U.S. Civil War, Lincoln memorably highlighted these principles in his first presidential message to Congress. His words can be echoed in many struggles in Africa today:

This is essentially a people's contest. . . . it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government whose leading object is to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths for all—to afford all an even start and a fair chance, in the race of life.⁷

China Arrives

Democracy's prospects in Africa cannot be assessed without taking into account China's sweeping engagement across much of the continent over the past decade. At the root of China's involvement is its ever-growing need for natural resources, especially petroleum. With a speed and determination that recall the post-1884 European "scramble for Africa," Chinese state-owned companies have signed long-term contracts for African mineral exports. The Chinese have also quickly moved from refurbishing the statehouses and hometowns of African rulers to contracting to build roads, ports, railways, and even, in the case of Nigeria, a satellite system. China's president and premier have taken turns making high-profile visits to Africa and hosting meetings of African leaders, finance ministers, and development officials. Chinese products have also flowed into African markets, from open-air stalls to contemporary malls, along with thousands of Chinese laborers and small entrepreneurs. Nor has the process been one-way. African merchants hope not only to lure Chinese investment, but also to procure Chinese manu-

factured products for resale at home. Unhindered by commitments to democracy and human rights, and proceeding under an avowed policy of eschewing involvement in host-country politics, China's growing presence has been complicating prospects for further democratization in Africa.

This is not to say that China's respect for existing political systems has purely negative effects. Chinese officials are prepared to work with whatever political forces and systems exist in each country. In time, the Chinese can be expected to adjust their practices when their investments are criticized for reinforcing corrupt behaviors and exploiting weak legal systems and poorly paid domestic labor. The greater the stakes that China acquires in African countries, the greater the interest that it will take in crafting rules and procedures to safeguard those assets. Finally, China's participation in global institutions, and its accelerating role as an investor in (and not just a trader with) industrialized countries, will enable international and African civil society groups to press China toward compliance with international environmental, labor, and human rights norms.

"Frontier Africa" as a place of dynamic markets involving external actors has, of course, a long history behind it. Explorers, slave traders, imperialists, and colonialists succeeded one another over centuries. Lebanese and other Mediterranean peoples in West Africa, and South Asians in East and Southern Africa, have long conducted high-profit operations using family networks to prosper amid environments marked by weak laws and institutions. Once apartheid ended in 1994, South African businesspeople moved rapidly throughout the continent to buy languishing assets and invest capital in niche markets. These entrepreneurs are now thriving from coast to coast in telecommunications, security services, agriculture, and fast-food outlets.

What defines Africa as a "frontier market" even more today is that core entities of the global capitalist system—and not just mining companies or intrepid ethnic merchants—are bringing African economies into their orbit and generating wealth-creating opportunities for local entrepreneurs and investors. It is, of course, too early to predict the political implications of these rapid developments. At first glance, they appear to be bolstering autocratic rule. Yet that tendency might turn out to be transitory. Over the longer term, the strengthening of the laws, procedures, and institutions necessary for managing private-sector development; the reality of sustained economic growth; the rise of an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie; and the emergence of alternatives to neopatrimonial ways of getting rich could strengthen the bases for more robustly democratic systems.

Christopher Clapham has written insightfully of the "extraversion" of Africa, a continent that has consisted of frontier territories for much of its modern history. He stresses the extent to which African societ-

ies, although formally grouped into entities demarcated by international boundaries, continue to be shaped by external forces.⁸ These processes have yielded, after half a millennium, an African mosaic of “unfinished states,” recalcitrant autocracies, a handful of consolidating democracies,

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and a large “gray zone” of countries that display a mixture of authoritarian and liberal features.

On top of this, Africa’s brief post-Cold War respite from geostrategic machinations has ended. Preventive intervention to contain or forestall radical Islamism is now a major U.S. policy objective in the Horn of Africa and other areas. Since the vast African continent contains large swaths of lightly governed territory, dynamic and expanding Muslim communities, and tens of millions living in poverty, the scope for havoc is great. Counterinsurgency priorities have already had negative consequences for governance in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Uganda. As the United States implements a continental security strategy, including the activation in 2008 of the U.S. military’s Africa Command (AFRICOM), concerns about a reprise of the Cold War’s negative consequences for democracy have risen. Both African rulers and their opponents must now reckon with intensifying geostrategic considerations in their quest to keep or gain power.

Finally, “frontier Africa” as a term also evokes the weak states, persistent conflicts, and displaced populations that will require international and continental peacekeeping engagements over many years. Warfare, insecurity, and the need for complex, multinational security operations threaten to remain defining characteristics of African life for many years to come.⁹ Britain’s 2000 to 2002 military intervention in war-torn Sierra Leone was vital to preserving prospects for democracy there; and the UN’s assumption of responsibility for bringing peace to Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, eastern Congo (Kinshasa), and the Darfur region of Sudan likewise implies a series of difficult and prolonged missions. Chad, which has known intermittent warfare for decades, appeared certain to need greater international engagement after insurgent fighters reached the capital, N’Djamena, in early February 2008, and forces from the European Union poised to deploy along the Sudanese border in order to protect refugees.

Law, order, and reliable policing are often in short supply, even in Africa’s well-settled cities and countrysides. Frequently, local communities are obliged to take charge of their own safety and governance while holding at bay corrupt, predatory, and ineffective government officials and institutions.¹⁰ In this sense, “frontier Africa” can be found

far from lawless border areas between states.¹¹ Opportunities for the powerful to commit political mischief in these contexts are dismayingly abundant, as the Nigerian and Kenyan elections of 2007 demonstrate. Yet the determination to resist abuses—whether craftily as in the case of Nigeria or cataclysmically as in that of Kenya—is also undiminished.

Beyond Personal Rule?

Following the political openings of the 1990s, newly elected executives moved quickly to shift power away from the people and the other arms of government, and soon began to emulate the recently departed authoritarians when it came to the avid appropriation of public resources. According to the Afrobarometer surveys, sub-Saharan Africa is a place where demand for democracy exceeds supply. Speaking in late 2006 about the poorly prepared elections to be held in his country the following year, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka said presciently that “the Nigerian people have always approached democracy, and the elites have always pushed them back.”¹² The struggle for democracy reaches its highest pitch, as in other countries, at the time of national elections. Still unresolved in Africa is the contest between personal rule (typified by the “Big Man” syndrome) and institutions based on the rule of law. The Kenyan electoral tragedy showed, once again, how readily the scales can be tipped between these competing principles of governance.

Africa’s emerging democracies have gained ground or been side-tracked depending on whether a given country’s political system has evolved to permit the *demos* to act as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. As Robert A. Dahl has written, if “ordinary citizens” cannot “exert a relatively high degree of control over leaders,” then the minimal threshold of democracy has not been reached.¹³ This democratic promise was postponed in Zimbabwe after voters soundly defeated a February 2000 popular referendum that President Robert Mugabe had arranged for the purpose of extending his regime’s powers. Mugabe responded by unleashing land seizures, brutally repressing his opponents, and driving millions into penury and exile. In Kenya, a November 2005 referendum meant to expand the government’s powers was decisively defeated. President Mwai Kibaki calmly accepted “the people’s choice,” and Kenya’s economy and democratic system continued to advance rather than decline as in Zimbabwe. Yet just two years later, after the bitterly disputed presidential race between Kibaki and challenger Raila Odinga and its attendant intercommunal strife, Kenya has fallen further away from the threshold of popular control by the *demos* that Dahl identified. It will now take many years to recapture the lost ground, economically as well as politically.

The democratic promise survived attempts to institutionalize personal rule in Malawi and Zambia by elected presidents who sought to overturn constitutional term limits. In Uganda, by contrast, President Yoweri Museveni got away with just such a move, successfully pressing the legislature to eliminate constitutional restrictions on his continuation in power. Then Museveni, much like his former protégé Paul Kagame in Rwanda, began to treat his electoral opponents as traitors. Dismal echoes of these developments resounded in Ethiopia, where almost two-hundred citizens were killed following the 2005 elections, while others, having dared to protest against electoral malfeasance, found themselves jailed and facing treason charges.

Larry Diamond contends that “the political struggle in Africa remains very much a conflict between the rule of law and the rule of a person.”¹⁴ I agree, but would go further and describe this struggle as between two rival types of institutionalization. Daniel Posner and Daniel Young have called attention in these pages to the progress that Africa has made toward entrenching law-based governance and institutions.¹⁵ Yet they overstate the extent to which the battle against personal rule is being won. Indeed, evidence that the “big man” syndrome is not retreating can be found in the very same issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. There, Andrew Mwenda searingly indicts the autocratic rule that has warped Ugandan political life under Museveni.¹⁶ The battle between rival processes of institutionalization can also be found in other world regions where, as in Africa, the outcome of their duel will strongly affect the prospects for democratic progress.¹⁷

Posner and Young point to incumbents’ losses at the polls, plus failed attempts to erase term limits (most notably in Nigeria), to argue that personal rule is losing ground. “The formal rules of the game,” they claim, “are beginning to matter in ways that they previously have not.”¹⁸ While the holding of regular multiparty elections and the occasional defeat of incumbents are significant trends, the struggle to cross the frontier from personal rule to rule-based governance is still far from over in much of Africa.

Few African leaders, even in electoral democracies, govern today as committed democrats. Some, such as President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, spent many years in opposition sharply criticizing incumbents as undemocratic, only to behave nepotistically and autocratically once they themselves gained power. Contemporary African leaders may govern as autocrats (Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan, Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea) or as democrats (John Kufuor of Ghana, Amadou Toumani Touré of Mali, Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania)—or else may oscillate between these two models. Nigeria’s Obasanjo is a prime example of the last category. During his 1979 to 1999 stint in the political wilderness, including four years as a prisoner of brutal dictator Sani Abacha, Obasanjo built an international reputation as a strong promoter

of democracy. After he returned to power in the 1999 presidential election, however, whether he governed as an autocrat or democrat depended on his own, often opaque, political calculations.

A Big No to the Big Man

In Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, governments have shut the door on open and competitive democracy. Obasanjo was subtler. In 2005 and 2006, his administration conducted an elaborate constitutional-revision exercise that included amendments meant to allow executives at the state and federal levels to remain in office for more than two consecutive terms. The media challenged this scheme, and soon a coalition of professional and civic groups emerged to stop it. The climax came on 16 May 2006, when the Nigerian National Assembly dealt a strong blow for democracy by defeating the amendment package.

Posner and Young cite this event as evidence of how strong “the rules of the game” have become, and applaud the way in which both the Obasanjo administration and its foes “sought to achieve their goals by working through, not around, formal institutional channels.”¹⁹ Yet Posner and Young’s account fails to capture the complicated and uncertain interplay that takes place between formal and informal rules, practices, and institutions in Africa’s quasi-democracies, including Nigeria.²⁰ A careful look at each case is required to reveal the dynamics at work and the progress toward, or regress away from, law-based governance.

The crucial National Assembly vote in Nigeria, for instance, required both a huge miscalculation by the administration and a great display of courage by one critically placed individual. Obasanjo and his lieutenants had made a massive investment in the term-extension package, and felt so assured of its success that they permitted AIT, a private media company, to broadcast the expected triumphal vote on national television. Seizing on this mistake, intrepid Senate president Ken Nnamani told his colleagues “You will stand and vote in your father’s name!” Realizing as never before the costs that they might have to pay for backing the administration on what was widely feared would be a sellout of democracy, a decisive number of legislators switched to the “no” side, regardless of whatever informal commitments they might have made to the administration. More than formal rules, therefore, it was a combination of extensive civil society mobilization, “money politics” by administration foes, a timely media intervention, and Senator Nnamani’s courage that lay behind Nigeria’s big no to the “big man.”²¹

The Nigerian people won again a year later, when they resisted the temptation to rise up in mass protest over the mismanaged and fraudulent elections of April 2007. Had they done so, they might have provided the government with a sufficient pretext to push back the opposition in

a wave of bloody repression. One of the lessons here is that the struggle for democracy in countries where the door to it has not been systematically barricaded involves a complex collaboration among diverse political, civic, professional, and popular groups, as well as the strategic deployment of institutions of horizontal accountability. With a few exceptions such as Mugabe, African rulers today avoid denying democracy outright, and instead seek to outflank it by expanding their personal powers at the expense of institutions that might constrain them. In such situations, the risk remains that a powerful ruler, if directly threatened by a formal expression of democratic sovereignty at the polls, could drop such tactics in favor of blatant chicanery and physical force, with possibly dire consequences for whatever political and economic progress may have been made.

In the case of Nigeria, not to be overlooked is the judiciary's work in trying to curb electoral malpractice. After the 1999 and 2003 elections, election tribunals adjudicated challenges so slowly that dishonest results became *faits accomplis*. During the final months of Obasanjo's tenure, the courts issued rulings meant to block attempts by his camp to derail electoral challengers. Several of the 2007 gubernatorial elections have already been overturned, and even that of President Yar'Adua underwent judicial review before being confirmed in February 2008. This suggests that democracy advocates at home and abroad should make it a priority to strive for the preservation of constitutionally and institutionally protected arenas of political contestation in "frontier Africa."²²

It is to be expected that there will be advances and setbacks. With regard to few countries can we say that the institutions of law-based democratic governance are firmly consolidated. If prodemocratic forces are adept—as they have shown themselves to be in Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia—there are many battles that they will be able to win. Yet the continent's entrenched rulers are hardly lonely outliers: They include not only Afwerki of Eritrea, Zenawi of Ethiopia, Kagame of Rwanda, Wade of Senegal, al-Bashir of Sudan, Museveni of Uganda, and Mugabe of Zimbabwe, but also José Eduardo Dos Santos of Angola, Paul Biya of Cameroon, Denis Sassou-Nguesso of Congo (Brazzaville), Omar Bongo of Gabon, Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia, and Lansana Conté of Guinea. We should not expect that personal rule will be retired any day soon.

Good Governance and Institution-Building

The most daunting frontier still to be crossed in much of postcolonial Africa is the creation and maintenance of institutions that will uphold transparency and the rule of law. Speaking in Nairobi, Kenya, in August 2006, U.S. senator Barack Obama made this point clearly:

For all the progress that has been made, neither Kenya nor the African continent has yet fulfilled its potential. Like many nations across this continent, where Kenya is failing is in its ability to create a government that is transparent and accountable, one that serves its people and is free from corruption. We have to admit that here in Kenya it is a crisis. It is a crisis that is robbing honest people of the opportunities they fought for. Corruption erodes the state from the inside out, sickening the justice system until there is no justice to be found, poisoning the police forces until their presence becomes a source of insecurity rather than a source of security. In the end, if the people cannot trust their government to do the job for which it exists, to protect them and to promote their common welfare, all else is lost. This is why the struggle against corruption is one of the great struggles of our time.²³

Democracy will not flourish in Africa until public institutions perform their most fundamental duties in a reasonably efficient and predictable manner. In the early 1990s, observes Thomas Carothers, democracy promotion in Africa “ran squarely into the sobering reality of devastatingly weak states.”²⁴ Whatever progress may have occurred in state-building since then has been frustratingly sparse. Africans are still overwhelmingly denied basic public goods of health care, education, clean water, electrical power, physical security, a salutary environment, and decent transport infrastructure because the institutions required to provide them are, as Senator Obama complained, constantly being eroded from within. How can the chasm between the people’s fundamental aspirations and the enormous institutional debilities that spring from neopatrimonial and personal rule be bridged? Collaboratively, answers must be sought to this fundamental question.

Much of the writing on African politics over the past quarter-century has centered on institution-eroding practices. What will it take to overcome them? How can African countries build institutions that maximize the supplying rather than the pillaging of public goods? In our time we have seen tens of millions uplifted from poverty as a consequence of rapid capitalist growth in Asia, while the expansion of the European Union has improved governance, institutions, and livelihoods in all its member states. Attempts to engender this vital transformation in Africa are now reflected in numerous African and international initiatives.²⁵

Some of the boldest efforts to curb the systematic theft of public resources were conducted by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) of Nigeria under the redoubtable leadership of Nuhu Ribadu. He succeeded in bringing to justice many formerly “untouchable” barons of the Nigerian political system, especially state governors. These advances came to a sudden end on 28 December 2007, however, when the Yar’Adua administration unexpectedly sent Ribadu on “study leave.” The official explanation—that this was merely the reassignment of a senior police officer—met with incredulity. Although critics charged

the EFCC with partiality during Obasanjo's final years in power, it remains true that never before in the history of corruption-plagued Nigeria had anyone brought so many senior officials to book, or recovered so much stolen public money. Wole Soyinka spoke for many Nigerian activists when he decried this "dismal, contemptuous New Year gift to the nation,"²⁶ which came just weeks after the EFCC had obtained an indictment for grand theft and money-laundering against James Ibori, the former governor of Delta State.

Two decades ago, I published a study of the deadly embrace of politics and systemic corruption in Nigeria.²⁷ Some countries have shown that it is possible to build public institutions amid significant theft of national resources—but none so far in Africa. China and India continue to grow at phenomenal rates despite relatively high levels of corruption. When, as in Africa, the proceeds of corruption are siphoned off into nonproductive assets at home and abroad, what is left for domestic development are usually crumbs and crumbling institutions. The democratic awakening in Africa in the 1990s drew strength from the assumption that accountability, transparency, and the rule of law would steadily constrain prebendalist practices. Not even in better-performing emergent democracies such as Ghana, however, has that assumption been borne out. African citizens therefore face two daunting challenges: securing the right to elect those who will govern them in fair and honest elections, and ensuring that elected officials do not continue to treat state treasuries as their personal bank accounts. Aidan Hartley, in a searing commentary on the Kenyan crisis, contends that periodic elections have mainly bestowed "legitimacy on politicians to pillage until the next depressing cycle begins."²⁸ In Africa, the struggle to prevent the erosion of the state by corruption and the struggle to entrench democracy are deeply interwoven.

As 2007 drew to a close, another striking but precarious democratic advance was made, this time in South Africa. Just a week after Jacob Zuma dethroned President Thabo Mbeki as leader of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in an assembly of four-thousand party delegates, Zuma faced a formal indictment on corruption charges stemming from a longstanding case involving military procurement. His trial is expected to begin in August 2008. This probably means that South Africa will remain under a cloud of uncertainty, as Mbeki is due to step down from the presidency in 2009 and Zuma, as head of the politically dominant ANC, is his presumptive successor.

The Heavy Burden on Elections

During the long and corrupt reign of Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi (1978–2002), the people were often pushed away from democracy—and they resolutely pushed back. After Moi retired and his succes-

sor Mwai Kibaki won election to the presidency in December 2002, the scenario soon enough repeated itself. In December 2007, Kenya seemed on the cusp of a lawful and orderly alternation in power as Raila Odinga surged ahead of Kibaki in the presidential balloting while many senior government ministers went down to defeat along with more than half the parliamentarians. Yet as has happened on so many other occasions in Africa, a government that the voters had rejected chose to nullify their decision, unleashing state violence and provoking interethnic warfare at the cost of hundreds of lives and a significant setback to economic stability and growth.

Leaving aside small states such as Benin and Cape Verde, and those with single-party-dominant systems such as Botswana, Namibia, and (mainland) Tanzania, few African countries have established efficient and reliably honest electoral systems. "The only effective check on presidential power" in such countries, argues Nicolas van de Walle, "is through direct elections, if and when they are free and fair."²⁹ A great onus is therefore placed on competitive elections, in weak and fractious polities, to constrain leaders. So far, few African countries have met this test while staying on a peaceful course of nation-building and development. In this regard, I find particularly pertinent Niall Ferguson's identification of three thresholds that democratizing nations must pass: the nonviolent resolution of political competition, the acceptance of alternation in power, and the supremacy of the rule of law.³⁰

Ghana, where the Election Commission has overseen elections of increasing credibility, is a striking demonstration of the observance of these core principles. Even Senegal, which can boast an electoral history going all the way back to the colonial era, and where innovative reforms were introduced from the late 1980s to ensure greater fairness, has backslid under the pseudodemocratic rule of Abdoulaye Wade. In December 2008, Ghana will face a highly contested election in which the two dominant parties, which have traded the presidency back and forth for two terms each since 1992, will compete for power in a nation that is on the cusp of a breakthrough to sustained economic development. Will Ghanaians tumble into the pitfalls that ensnared Nigeria and Kenya in 2007, or will the road to democratic development continue to be widened via free and fair elections, the embrace of nonviolence, and respect for the constitution and rule of law?

Robert Mugabe, the tyrant who has driven Zimbabwe to the bottom of the abyss, is expected to run for a fifth term as president in March 2008. With an inflation rate that has reached more than 66,000 percent at the time of this writing in February 2008, and a quarter of its population huddling as refugees in neighboring countries, the notion of an electoral process in Zimbabwe with Mugabe at the controls can only be described as Orwellian. Angola, following calamitous 1992 elections that triggered an additional decade of civil war, is also expected to hold

elections in 2008. Will it register an advance after decades of nondemocratic rule and the corrupt appropriation of the nation's abundant petroleum-export revenues? Or will the risk of losing, or even sharing, power call forth another deplorable electoral exercise by state elites?

Despite the uncertainties and disappointments discussed in this essay, it still cannot be said that democracy in Africa, as in some other areas of the world, is in full retreat. Writing about Vladimir Putin's Russia, Sergei Kovalev laments that "the Byzantine system of power has triumphed for the foreseeable future," and that "democratic mechanisms have been liquidated" so thoroughly that "few of us will live to see the reinstatement of freedom and democracy in Russia."³¹ Few students of Africa's politics, I believe, would make such a conclusive statement about the defeat of democracy there. In many countries, "the struggle continues" in a variety of forms, as civil society becomes more robust, the independent media grow more diverse and inventive, human rights and social-justice activists learn new skills, communication technologies get cheaper and more widespread, and the masses of citizens take an ever more jaundiced view of attempts at political deception and manipulation.

Richard L. Sklar once praised African nations as "workshops" of democracy that are contributing to the "aggregate of democratic knowledge and practice."³² Political and civic activists, helped by international agencies, continue to forge fresh instruments to weaken the barriers to the rise of stable, constitutional, and development-friendly democracies. Africans may not have found definitive answers to the many challenges discussed in this essay, and in some countries their voices may have been temporarily silenced by the brutal exercise of state power. Nevertheless, there is no sign that the search for answers has slackened. While victory flags cannot yet be raised, neither should those of surrender be unfurled.

NOTES

1. I borrow this expression from Joseph J. Ellis, *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 56.

2. Richard Joseph, "Africa, 1990–1997: From *Abertura* to Closure," *Journal of Democracy* 9 (April 1998): 3–17. The central argument of this essay still holds true a decade later.

3. Richard Joseph, "The Reconfiguration of Power in Late Twentieth-Century Africa," in Richard Joseph, ed., *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

4. Thomas Carothers makes an impressive case for the "recalibration" of democracy promotion in the post-9/11 era. See his "U.S. Democracy Promotion During and After Bush," available at www.carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_after_bush_final.pdf.

5. The adjective "civilian" needs qualification too, since in Nigeria a military caste that

includes many retired officers made rich by oil continues to wield considerable power both inside and outside the formal institutions of government.

6. See also Rotimi Suberu, "Nigeria's Muddled Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 95–110.

7. Lincoln's 4 July 1861 message to Congress is available at www.millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/digitalarchive/speeches/spe_1861_0704_lincoln.

8. Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

9. Richard Joseph, "Africa: States in Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (July 2003): 159–70.

10. Still relevant for understanding African political dynamics are Peter Ekeh's notion of the "two publics" and Richard L. Sklar's of "dual majesty." See Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17 (January 1975): 91–112; and Sklar, "The African Frontier for Political Science," in Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds., *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 83–110.

11. Also relevant to this discussion is Jeffery Herbst's pathbreaking study, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

12. Soyinka's comment appears in a report entitled "Nigeria 2007: Political, Social and Economic Transitions," which is available at www.northwestern.edu/african-studies/Nigeria2007-ConferenceReport.pdf.

13. Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 3.

14. Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Times Books, 2008).

15. Daniel N. Posner and Daniel J. Young, "The Institutionalization of Political Power in Africa," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007): 126–40.

16. Andrew M. Mwenda, "Personalizing Power in Uganda," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007): 23–37.

17. See Steven A. Cook, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

18. Posner and Young, "Institutionalization of Political Power in Africa," 125.

19. Posner and Young, "Institutionalization of Political Power in Africa," 127.

20. Michael Bratton presents this duality more clearly in "Formal versus Informal Institutions in Africa," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007): 96–110.

21. In keeping with his ambivalent behavior and pronouncements, President Obasanjo described this decision as a victory for democracy, even though his administration had expended much time and national treasure trying to make it go the other way.

22. A fascinating aspect of this struggle in Africa is the need to compel election officers to count ballots correctly and to announce the actual tallies honestly. Often, activists and citizens must form human walls around quantities of completed ballots in order to pre-

vent tampering. After declaring Mwai Kibaki the victor of the 2007 presidential election and plunging Kenya into chaos and violence, Kenya's Electoral Commission head Samuel Kivuitu conceded that he did not really know who had won.

23. Barack Obama, "An Honest Government, A Hopeful Future," address delivered at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, 28 August 2006. Available at http://obama.senate.gov/speech/060828-an_honest_gover.

24. Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 16.

25. These include the African Peer Review Mechanism and the New Partnership for African Development; training programs of the Governance Institute of the World Bank and the UN Economic Commission for Africa; the African networks Publish What You Pay and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative; the U.S. Millennium Development Challenge Corporation; and the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategic Papers; as well as many national anticorruption agencies.

26. "Soyinka, Reps, Others Condemn Ribadu's Removal," *Vanguard* (Lagos), 20 December 2007.

27. Richard Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

28. Aidan Hartley, "Democracy by Other Means," *New York Times*, 11 January 2008.

29. Nicolas van de Walle, *Overcoming Stagnation in Aid-Dependent Countries* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development, 2005), 14.

30. Niall Ferguson, "Is Political Freedom in Retreat?" *Financial Times*, 26–27 January 2008.

31. Sergei Kovalev, "Why Putin Wins," *New York Review of Books*, 22 November 2007, 66.

32. Richard L. Sklar, "Democracy in Africa," in Toyin Falola, ed., *African Politics in Postimperial Times: The Essays of Richard L. Sklar* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2002), 16. This seminal essay was first published in *African Studies Review* 25 (September–December 1983).