

Building Democracy IN AFRICA'S WEAK STATES

If democracy is to thrive in Africa, democracy promoters must help the continent's weak states grow stronger.

by Michael Bratton

What are the prospects for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa? Due to the continent's diversity, the only sensible answer is "it depends." In any given African country, democracy's future depends significantly on whether citizens share a sense of national identity and whether the economy generates wealth that is distributed equitably.

But beyond these usual social and economic suspects, key features of African states influence their chances for achieving democracy. In this article, I draw attention to two political dimensions of African states: their size and their strength. In terms of population, Africa's diverse states range from giants to midgets; in terms of capacity, African states run the gamut from relatively strong to extremely weak. Putting these factors together, I argue that the biggest challenges for democracy building lie in the important states that are *both* large *and* weak. I conclude by offering policy makers advice as to how to incorporate these insights into democracy promotion.

Democracy in Africa

Some may doubt that democracy is feasible anywhere in Africa. But since 1990, civilian, constitutional systems have become common across the continent, effectively eclipsing the military and single party dictatorships that came before. These new regimes are founded and refreshed by elections that observers, monitors, and even losing candidates judge as fundamentally free and fair. Strikingly, in a few of Africa's leading democracies—like Benin, Ghana, Mali, Mauritius, and Senegal—post-transition elections have already brought about a peaceful turnover of ruling parties. Moreover, among the more than 23,000 ordinary Africans interviewed in the 15-country Afrobarometer survey, almost two thirds say they prefer democracy to other forms

of government.¹ In a few places, the rules of the democratic game are beginning to take root.

Having established the continent's democratic potential, however, it is essential to sound a note of caution. Amid fragile new democracies and despite high popular hopes, Africa still possesses more than its fair share of autocratic and hybrid regimes. Combining indicators of civil liberties and political rights, Freedom House's 2004 review of the "status of freedom" divides sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries as follows: 11 are "free," functioning democracies, 21 are "partly free," hybrid regimes, and 16 are unreformed, "not free" autocracies. The countries in each category are listed in Table 1.²

Democratic regimes are a minority, present in just 23% of sub-Saharan countries. Instead, the most common political arrangement (in 44% of countries) is a partially reformed semi-democracy or semi-autocracy. To be sure, such hybrid systems feature competitive elections, but these often involve a dominant political party that always wins (as in Tanzania and Mozambique) or occasionally no parties at all (as in Uganda). Elections are typically marred by dubious voter registers, intimidation or vote-buying, questionable ballot counts, and challenges to the

results by disillusioned losers. Limits are commonly placed on the independent press and, in the extreme, challengers may find that they are barred from electoral participation (as in Ivory Coast and Zambia). As Larry Diamond notes, "more regimes than ever before are adopting the *form* of electoral democracy...but fail to meet the substantive test."³

Finally, unreformed autocracies persist where governments make no pretence of seeking legitimacy through competitive elections. Some leaders still come to power through heredity (Swaziland), military coup (Togo), or armed insurgency (Eritrea or Rwanda). In other cases (Sudan), sham elections are held in the parts of the country that the government controls, but major segments of the electorate are excluded. These countries are often embroiled in extended internal conflicts that preoccupy governments and can lead to the collapse of central state authority

Table 1:
The Diversity of African Political Regimes, 2004

"Free" (Democracies)

Benin
Botswana
Cape Verde
Ghana
Lesotho
Mali
Mauritius
Namibia
Sao Tome
Senegal
South Africa

"Partly Free" (Hybrid Regimes)

Burkina Faso
Burundi
Comoros
Congo-Brazzaville
Djibouti
Ethiopia
Gabon
Gambia
Guinea-Bissau
Kenya
Liberia
Madagascar
Malawi
Mozambique
Niger
Nigeria
Seychelles
Sierra Leone
Tanzania
Uganda
Zambia

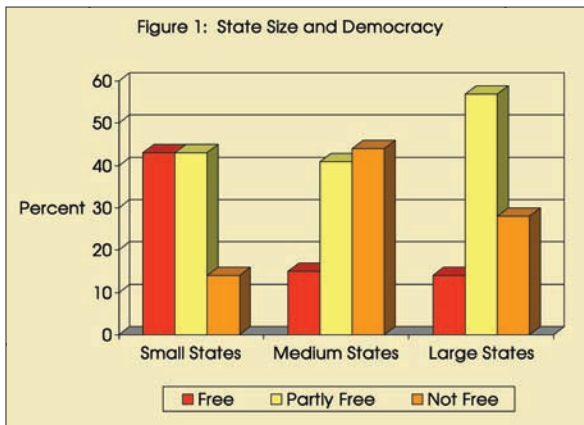
"Not Free" (Autocracies)

Angola
Central African Republic
Cameroon
Chad
Congo-Kinshasa
Equatorial Guinea
Eritrea
Guinea
Ivory Coast
Mauritania
Rwanda
Somalia
Sudan
Swaziland
Togo
Zimbabwe

(Somalia and Congo-Kinshasa). As weapons flood society, people are increasingly exposed to violence and extortion at the hands of local warlords and armed gangs. In these countries, political reform is rarely even attempted.

State size and democracy

What explains this variety of African political regimes? From the time of ancient Athens onwards, democracy has seemed to flourish best in small states. With reference to population, African countries range from super- to micro-states. At one end of the spectrum, Nigeria's 2004 population of 133 million accounts for one of every five Africans. At the opposite pole lie Cape Verde, Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, and São Tomé and Príncipe, each with populations of half a million or fewer. Indeed, the 48 sub-Saharan nation-states can be conveniently divided into three groups of 14 small countries (under 2 million), 27 medium countries (2 to 29 million), and 7 large countries (over 30 million).⁴



The great diversity of African countries—both in the size of their populations and the nature of their political regimes—offers an opportunity to explore whether state size matters for democracy. As Figure 1 indicates, small African states are three times more likely than medium or large ones to attain the status of a fully “free” democracy (43% versus 14%).⁵ Whereas six small states have achieved a democratic status (Botswana, Cape Verde, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia and São Tomé) just one large state (South Africa) has done so. Instead, most large states are either “partly free” (Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Nigeria) or “not free” at all (Congo-Kinshasa and Sudan).

The finding that democracy thrives in Africa's small states must be qualified. First, the record remains mixed: many small countries are still only “partly free”; and medium-sized states are most likely to be “not free.” Second, democracy in

contemporary Africa may be less widespread than originally thought. While 23% of the sub-continent's *countries* may be considered “free,” only 15% of its *people* (who live predominantly in small countries) enjoy the liberties associated with democracy. And if South Africa is excluded, which contains nearly half of the “free” people in Africa, then a mere 8% of Africans had won their freedom by 2004.

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Nevertheless, there are many reasons why small may be politically beautiful. Although no African state is as tiny as a Greek city-state, opportunities still exist there for direct communication between rulers and ruled. Thereby smallness not only helps leaders project authority, but it also helps citizens demand accountability. Moreover, small countries are likely to be socially and culturally homogenous (like Botswana and Lesotho), thus preempting ethnic conflict. Finally, half of Africa's small democracies are islands (Cape Verde, Mauritius, and São Tomé), a geographical advantage that affords protection from secessionists and irredentists.

Africa's large states suffer an inverse battery of shortcomings. The rulers of vast domains find it difficult to control all people and territory within their boundaries. Citizens on the far periphery regard state officials, and even elected representatives, as remote from their daily lives. In Africa, large states are also always multi-ethnic and, as such, are prey to communal political conflict. And because they share borders with many other countries (nine in Congo-Kinshasa!), large states are vulnerable to incursions from hostile neighbors.

The strength of African states

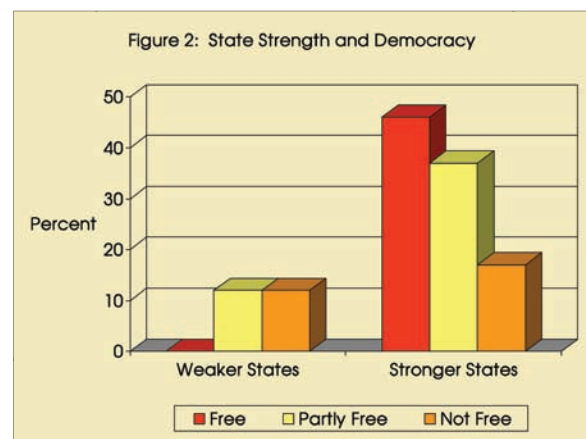
This discussion redirects our attention from the mere size of the state to the state's capacity for effective governance. As leading theorists argue, successful democratization requires a basic level of “state-ness.” Linz and Stepan stake out the definitive position: “No modern polity can become democratically consolidated unless it is first a state.”⁶ Yet,

as Rose and Shin suggest, new democracies are developing “backwards” by introducing mass elections without benefit of modern state institutions, including a rule of law and a working bureaucracy.⁷ Finally,

with attention to political accountability, Hadenius contends that democratization requires “an interactive state...(that) is open for intercourse in regulated ways with its citizens.”⁸

Fortunately, data have recently been collected that allow us to begin to measure state capacities in Africa and thereby to evaluate the claims of these theorists. The World Bank Institute's (WBI) governance indicators for 1996-2002 make estimates along five dimensions: political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. Taken together in an average scale, these indicators provide a quick glimpse of state strength across countries.⁹

Even though African states are generally weak, diversity again prevails. Compared with countries on other continents, the median African state (represented by Tanzania and Eritrea) scores negatively (-0.67) on the average scale of state capacity (+2.0 to -2.0) calculated from WBI data. But, within Africa, the range of state capacities is wide, from Somalia's -1.84 to Botswana's +0.78. At the top of the heap, Botswana stands out in terms of the effectiveness and probity of its civil service and Somalia brings up the rear with its extremely low performance on the rule of law and the displacement of economic policy by looting. For simplicity's sake, we can divide the African sample at the median and label the top half as “stronger” states and the bottom half as “weaker” states.



State strength and democracy

Is the strength of Africa's states related in any systematic way to their democratic achievements? Figure 2 provides a compelling answer. "Free" democracies have only arisen in Africa's stronger states.¹⁰ In other words, the continent's 11 current democracies, from Benin to South Africa, are all erected on the foundation of states that enjoy above average capacities to create political order, govern through legal means, and control corruption.

Note, however, that the possession of a "stronger" state is no ironclad guarantee that an African country will become politically "free." Take four counterexamples: by the end of 2004, Eritrea, Mauritania,

control its own people or territory is much more likely to crack down than to invite democratic accountability. At least at the outset, the outbreak of war—either with neighboring countries or, especially, civil war—prompts governments to try to forge authority with iron and steel. Faced with the choice between holding together a weak state or introducing democratic reforms, rulers usually choose the former.

Africa's weak giants

In Africa, autocratic regimes and weak states are especially likely to coincide in large countries. As Figure 3 shows, state size and state strength are negatively related.¹¹ Large countries are less than half as likely as small countries to be counted

among Africa's stronger states. Specifically, Africa's giants—like Nigeria, Sudan, Congo-Kinshasa, and Ethiopia—confront unstable societies with feeble administrations. Their political authorities are largely ineffective in the face of endemic conflict, lawlessness and corruption.

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Swaziland, and Togo—all relatively strong states—had failed to undertake any meaningful measure of democratic reform. Thus, while state capacity is a necessary requisite for democracy, it is not a sufficient condition.

On the other side of the coin, a functioning democracy has never emerged in any of Africa's weaker states. For their part, weaker states seem capable of nurturing only "partly free" or "un-free" political regimes, and then in roughly equal proportions. By odds of three to one, weaker states are more likely than stronger states to end up as autocratic or hybrid political systems.

Why might this be? Political disorder—whether from domestic social conflicts, armed intervention from abroad, or the unhappy conjunction of internal and external forces—invites political repression. An embattled government that cannot

In the first place, warfare has undermined Africa's large states. During the 1990s, Ethiopia's conventional inter-state war with Eritrea over a desert borderland eviscerated the government's development budget, leading to renewed threats of famine. The Nigerian civil war of 1967-70 denuded one of the most entrepreneurial regions of the country. The Sudanese civil war of 1983-2005 led to massive refugee outflows.

And the deadly combination of external interventions and regional insurgencies has rendered Congo-Kinshasa essentially ungovernable for the last five decades. The country's present official name—the Democratic Republic of the Congo—makes a mockery of the fact that, throughout its history, the central state has never succeeded in convening a free and fair election.

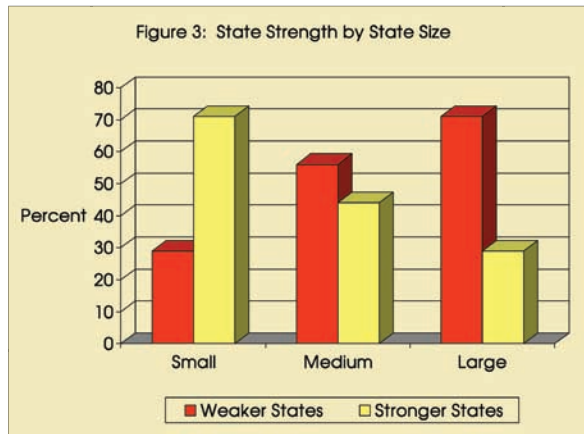
Second, without political order, it is difficult to establish a rule of law. While there has been a recent flurry of constitutional reform in Africa, most new laws remain untested (as in Sudan and Ethiopia) or circumvented (as in Nigeria and Congo-Kinshasa). It is unclear, for example, whether Ethiopia's constitution, which allows

for secession by regional minorities, will ameliorate or provoke future conflicts.

Third, in the absence of constitutionalism—that is, respect by leaders for the law of the land—corruption will continue to flourish. In 2004, Africa's three most populous countries ranked at the bottom of Transparency International's 145-country Corruption Perception Index: Ethiopia at 114, Congo-Kinshasa at 133, and Nigeria at 144.¹² In the absence of democratic accountability, a narrow political elite has been able to seize the state and turn it to private economic advantage.

There is one bright spot amid this woe-filled record. South Africa, with the sub-continent's fourth largest population, possesses the happy combination of a strong state and an emergent democracy. Since the historic transition election of 1994 that ended apartheid, the country has remained largely peaceful and resisted major foreign military entanglements. While corruption is apparently rising among some top leaders of the African National Congress, the country's Constitutional Court has protected the sanctity of the law and has occasionally ruled against the government. Offsetting this institutional progress, however, public opinion falls short on key democratic qualities. According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, more than half of all adult citizens (58%) would be willing to "give up

South African President Thabo Mbeki walks past the election results board during the April 2004 elections.



regular elections...if a non-elected leader could deliver houses and jobs."¹³

In its foreign policy, too, South Africa is no paragon. President Thabo Mbeki has served as a chief apologist for the autocratic regime in Zimbabwe. Comparing Africa's two wealthiest giants—South Africa and Nigeria—therefore reveals a paradox. On one hand, Nigeria's internal democracy falls far short of universal standards; yet the government of President Olusegun Obasanjo has intervened decisively on the side of democrats in the West African countries of Liberia and Togo. On the other hand, South Africa's democratic credentials far exceed those of Nigeria; yet it has been a less effective ambassador for democracy in its own region and in the rest of the continent.

Policy implications

I have argued that the extent of democracy in contemporary Africa is related in important ways to the size and the strength of its states. Between them, these two factors explain almost half of the variance in the extent of democracy attained by African countries in 2004.¹⁴ To improve the promotion of democracy in Africa, policy makers should therefore pay attention to the characteristics of African states.

But to clarify policy choice we need a final probe: Which matters more? Size or strength? Figure 4 clearly suggests the

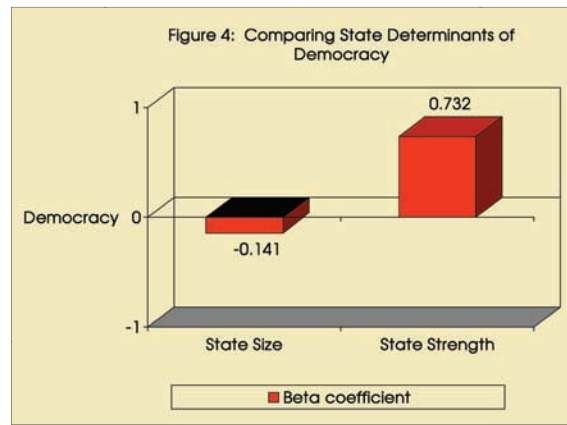
latter.¹⁵ Not only is a strong state a much more convincing predictor of the emergence of democracy, but when both size and strength are considered simultaneously the size of the state is not statistically significant.

This outcome is just as well. After all, there is little that policy makers can do—short of reconfiguring state boundaries or introducing punitive methods of birth control, neither of which are desirable—to change existing distributions of population. The tendency for democracy to work better in small entities, however, does suggest that greater attention should be paid to programs that decentralize power and breathe life into local governments.

But before power is divided and shared—a defining characteristic of democracy—policy makers must first ensure the consolidation of a state. In Africa, where states are generally weak, a good part of the challenge of democracy building is actually a matter of state construction. At the heart of the matter is the rehabilitation of Africa's run-down systems of civilian administration. What Africa's large states need—and what some of its small states like Botswana, Cape Verde and Mauritius have begun to achieve—are effective and egalitarian public bureaucracies.

One implication is that the Bush Administration's strategy to reward only "good performers" under the Millennium Challenge Account may be misplaced. Simply to prevent conflicts and humanitarian disasters, aid resources should be directed to shoring up weak states in Africa's partial democracies, especially those in large, strategic countries.

One helpful sequence of governance reforms would be the following: the constitutional enforcement of separation of powers (with special attention to the subordination of military forces to civilian legislative control); the education and training of a new generation of civil servants (including the recruitment of women); and the aggressive investigation and punishment of official corruption at all levels of the state. These are no small tasks, but



without the strengthening of the African state under a rule of law, democracy is unlikely to survive, let alone flourish. [\[15\]](#)

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Notes

- 1 Afrobarometer Network, "Afrobarometer Round 2: Compendium of Comparative Results," Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 34 (March 2004), www.afrobarometer.org
- 2 Arch Puddington and Ali Piano, "The 2004 Freedom House Survey: Worrisome Signs, Modest Shifts," *Journal of Democracy* 16:1 (January 2005), 103-8.
- 3 Larry Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13:2 (2002), 22.
- 4 All population figures are from World Bank, *African Development Indicators*, 2004 (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2004).
- 5 While not linear, this relationship is reasonably strong ($r = .249$).
- 6 Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.
- 7 Richard Rose and Doh Chull Shin, "Democratization Backwards: The Problem of Third-Wave Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 31 (2001), 336.
- 8 Axel Hadenius, *Institutions and Democratic Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 131.
- 9 Because I see "voice and accountability" as political regime characteristics, I drop this WBI indicator when analyzing the state. It is based centrally on Freedom House (FH) scores, which are usually taken as indicators of democracy, as in this article.
- 10 This relationship is very strong ($r = -.533$).
- 11 This roughly linear relationship is strong ($r = -.291$).
- 12 Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*, 2004, www.transparency.org
- 13 Robert Mattes, Annie Chikwana, and Alex Magezi, "South Africa: After a Decade of Democracy," March 2005, www.afrobarometer.org
- 14 In a simple regression analysis, adjusted r squared = .481
- 15 In an ordinary least squares regression, with FH scores inverted, state strength is strongly related to democracy ($b = .732$, $p < .001$) whereas state size is not ($b = -.141$, $p = .202$). Regression is an appropriate statistical test since raw source data, measured on interval scales, are used for all variables.

Electronic result board at the Independent Electoral Commission during



Howard Burditt / Reuters