

ISSUE BRIEF

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The missing piece: Political parties are critical to democracy in Africa

SANTIAGO STOCKER, PATRICK QUIRK,
AND DAN SCADUTO

In 2024, as many as seventeen countries across Africa, with a total population of nearly 300 million people, will hold national elections. These electoral processes are consequential because whether they are free, fair, and transparent will help determine if the troubling trend in several countries across the continent of democratic regression, military coups, or political instability worsens—or ebbs and begins to reverse, as was recently demonstrated in Senegal.

The stakes are clearly high in these contests, which will occur in the so-called year of elections wherein more than four billion people globally are eligible to cast ballots. While the elections are important to Africa's democratic trajectory, they are not single-handedly determinative of it.

Strong and institutionalized political parties are also key to the future of democracy on the continent; however, policymakers have not afforded this key institution much attention or associated resources. For example, the US National Security Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa does not reference strengthening political parties despite the document's emphasis on democracy promotion.¹ Further, the Biden administration's [Summits for Democracy](#)—the third of which took place in March 2024—have not included commitments from participating governments (the United States included) to strengthen political parties.²

The failure to focus on shoring of political parties is a grave mistake because robust political parties inform whether a political system delivers for citizens, provide a key link between citizens and their government, and foster measurable resilience against democratic erosion.³ For these and other reasons, therefore, political parties as a

The Freedom and Prosperity Center aims to increase the well-being of people everywhere and especially that of the poor and marginalized in developing countries through unbiased, data-based research on the relationship between prosperity and economic, political, and legal freedoms, in support of sound policy choices.

- 1 "U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa," The White House, August 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/U.S.-Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-Africa-FINAL.pdf>.
- 2 "The Summit for Democracy," U.S. Department of State, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/>.
- 3 Allen Hicken, "The Role of Political Parties in Making Democracy Work," University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, Briefing Papers Series, no. 3, May 2020, <https://v-dem.net/media/publications/brief3.pdf>.

core institution of democracy will help chart the continent's future, both in terms of freedom and prosperity.

This piece analyzes the state of political parties in sub-Saharan Africa and uses Atlantic Council Freedom and Prosperity Indexes data and other sources to show why parties are essential to democratic progress. It examines this argument through four case studies and concludes with a path forward for recentring democracy assistance work in Africa to shore up this critical component.

The state of political parties in sub-Saharan Africa

In the past five years, political party strength across Africa has declined in 60 percent of countries in the region, for example, falling from .89 to .63 in Botswana, from .56 to .35 in Gabon, and from .40 to .31 in Togo.⁴ This decrease coincides with significant democratic backsliding, increased instability, and a wave of military coups across the continent. Over the past decade, governing parties in liberal democracies in Africa have trended toward lower commitments to political pluralism—in other words, they have become less committed to democratic norms and processes.

The weakening of political parties in Africa has not been confined to one type of regime or one stage of the democratic consolidation process. Of the twenty-one countries that saw a significant decline in party strength from 2019 to 2023, ten were countries considered by the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index in 2022 to be “mostly free,” including democratic stalwarts like Senegal and South Africa, while eleven were countries considered to be “mostly unfree” or “unfree,” such as Republic of Congo and Rwanda.⁵ By other metrics, 82 percent of sub-Saharan Africans are now living under regimes considered electoral autocracies or closed autocracies: countries that lack free and fair elections, or where no elections for the chief executive or legislature are held at all.⁶

While strong political parties are not the only factor essential for democratic consolidation, they do play a critical role in

facilitating democratic growth and preventing democratic erosion. Political parties aggregate citizen views and grievances and translate them into policy. Where this mechanism is weak or nonexistent, democratic prospects are grim. Yet the United States has increasingly turned away from funding political party work in the region in favor of support for civil society and other advocacy-oriented programs: the reality is both are necessary to achieve democratic consolidation. The Biden administration's two Summits for Democracy made no mention of the important role parties play in democratic advancement.⁷

Why political parties matter for democracy in Africa

Political parties help to make democracy function, and enable it to deliver for citizens, by channeling citizen views and needs into policy change. Parties complement other key elements of democracy—elections, legislative constraints on the executive, and judicial independence—by directly connecting people to the halls of power and offering a mechanism by which governing bodies can serve their constituents.

Strong political parties remain a core and essential constant of consolidated democracy. Strong political parties and strong democracy, therefore, go hand in hand globally. Analysis of V-DEM data for 2023 shows that political party strength is highly correlated with the degree of liberal democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, and the strength of this relationship is growing (political party strength explained about 42 percent of the variance in liberal democracy in the region in 2023, compared to 26 percent in 2003).⁸ In other words, as goes the strength of a country's parties, so goes the strength of its democracy.

Countries with strong political parties generally also enjoy greater levels of freedom and economic prosperity. Analysis of the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Indexes shows a strong correlation between the strength of political parties and the levels of freedom and prosperity in sub-Saharan Africa.⁹ Empirical research also reveals benefits enjoyed by countries with strong political parties beyond the positive association with democratic consolidation. For example, countries with stronger

4 “The V-Dem Dataset,” University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, last modified March 2024, <https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>. Based on V-Dem's Party Institutionalization variable (v2xps_party), which “refers to various attributes of the political parties in a country, e.g., level and depth of organization, links to civil society, cadres of party activists, party supporters within the electorate, coherence of party platforms and ideologies, party-line voting among representatives within the legislature. A high score on these attributes generally indicates a more institutionalized party system. The variable is measured on a 0-1 scale.

5 Dan Negrea and Joseph Lemoine, “Prosperity that Lasts: The 2023 Freedom and Prosperity Indexes,” The Atlantic Council Freedom and Prosperity Center, Atlantic Council, June 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FP-2023.pdf>.

6 Staffan I. Lindberg ed., et al., “Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot,” University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, March 2024, https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf.

7 See, for example, the Biden administration readouts from the Summits, available here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/23/summit-for-democracy-summary-of-proceedings/>; and <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/29/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-abiding-commitment-to-democratic-renewal-at-home-and-abroad/>

8 “The V-Dem Dataset,” University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute. Note: Derived from IRI analysis of the correlation in sub-Saharan Africa between V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (v2x_libdem) and Party Institutionalization (v2xps_party) variables.

9 “Freedom and Prosperity Indexes,” Rankings, The Atlantic Council Freedom and Prosperity Center, Atlantic Council, last modified June 2023, <https://freedom-and-prosperity-indexes.atlanticcouncil.org/#rankings>.

political parties tend to experience greater economic growth,¹⁰ more inclusive welfare systems,¹¹ greater trust in and engagement with government,¹² and less election violence.¹³

Recent cases illustrate the importance of political party strength or weakness in driving democratic outcomes in the region. For example, political party weakness may be an early indicator of democratic deterioration, as was the case in Niger before the 2023 coup. In other cases, e.g., in Guinea, relatively strong parties could increase the chance of democratic transition from military rule. There are also instances where relatively weak parties may jeopardize otherwise notable democratic progress, as in Malawi, for example. And lastly, there are cases where strong parties point to opportunity for further democratic consolidation, such as in Kenya.

Party weakness as a contributing factor to instability: The case of Niger

In a region accustomed to violent coups and single-party autocracies, Niger gained the confidence of Western democracies following the country's return to a multiparty system in 2011. During the coming decade, Niger made progress on strengthening the rule of law, introducing efforts to mitigate corruption, and growing the economy. The government also successfully pursued more nuanced policies to address security concerns, and importantly did not abuse its citizens, challenging the encroachment of regional terrorist networks that plagued many of its neighbors. But despite Niger's steps toward full democratization, including the country's first peaceful transition of power in 2021, the democratically elected regime succumbed to a military coup in July 2023, when members of the presidential guard removed President Mohamed Bazoum from power and placed him under house arrest.

Cementing rules and building systems of checks and balances in a transitioning democracy requires adept political parties capable of addressing citizens' needs, enacting responsive policies, and strengthening foundational institutions. Since the transition, however, Niger's political parties have failed to develop internal capacities (for policy platform development or voter engagement, for example) or foster ideological cohesion, instead relying on individual personalities and clientelist practices to drive citizen support. Further, Nigerien parties suffered from rampant

fracturing and instability punctuated by ethnic and regional divides. Such tenuous splinters not only stifled interparty competition, but also hindered productive governance. As weak parties jockeyed for power and failed to meaningfully improve the lives of Nigeriens, trust in key political institutions eroded, leaving Niger's fragile democracy vulnerable to disruption.

By far the most nationally organized party, the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS), led by Bazoum, had held power since the 2011 transition. But during the 2020 electoral period, the PNDS-led government disqualified numerous opposing candidates, including opposition leader Hama Amadou on alleged claims of human trafficking.¹⁴ The opposition responded by questioning the impartiality of key democratic institutions, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) and the Constitutional Court.¹⁵ Rather than build reliable institutions to underwrite the future of Nigerien democracy, weak political parties and institutions were unable to prevent personal ambitions to disrupt a democratic progress. And though weak parties do not bear sole responsibility for motivating the coup, their shortcomings in cementing robust parties and capable institutions allowed space for an alternative power to both seize and maintain control.

By failing to institutionalize effective internal structures that contributed to productive governance, Niger's political parties never fortified their reborn democracy against the scourge of military rule. Instead of delivering on a future of democratic rule, Niger's political elite allowed their country to fall victim once again to a military coup.

Parties as a bulwark against military rule in Guinea

This year is pivotal for Guinea, as the governing military junta, per the transition road map it negotiated, has committed to holding presidential and parliamentary elections by December 2024. More than three years after the military coup which ousted Guinea's democratically elected President Alpha Condé and installed junta leader Colonel Mamady Doumbouya as interim president, pro-democracy observers hope to see Guinean citizens return to the polls before 2025.

Since Guinea gained independence from France in 1958, a string of autocrats has consistently stifled the country's democratic

10 Fernando Bizzarro et al., "Party Strength and Economic Growth," Working Paper Series 2015, no. 10, September 2015, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/v-dem_working_paper_2015_10_edited.pdf.

11 Magnus B. Rasmussen and Carl Henrik Knutsen, "Party Institutionalization and Welfare State Development," Working Paper Series 2017, no. 55, November 2017, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, https://v-dem.net/media/publications/v-dem_working_paper_2017_55.pdf.

12 Matthias Krönke, Sarah J. Lockwood, and Robert Mattes, "Party footprints in Africa: Measuring local party presence across the continent," Afrobarometer, Working Paper, no. 186, October 2020, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/wp186-party_footprints_in_africa-measuring_local_party_presence-afrobarometer_working_paper-v2-2oct20.pdf.

13 Hanne Fjælde, "Political party strength and electoral violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 1, (2020): 140-155, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319885177>.

14 "Freedom in the World 2021: Niger," Country Report, Freedom House, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/niger/freedom-world/2021>.

15 "Freedom in the World 2021," Freedom House.

aspirations by silencing the opposition, limiting the autonomy of institutions, and siphoning off the country's resource wealth. Observers hoped the country's first democratic elections, in 2010, would lead to sustainable democratic gains. However, these hopes were dashed when, in September 2021, the military junta deposed President Condé, established the National Committee of Reconciliation and Development (CNRD), suspended the National Assembly, and began restricting citizens' rights to assemble and protest.

In justifying its coup, the CNRD aligned itself with popular protests against the Condé government's controversial changes to Guinea's constitution in March 2020, which allowed him to gain a third term in office, thereby exceeding the previously mandated two-term limit.

However, unlike many military juntas in the region, the CNRD has engaged with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and provisionally agreed to a ten-point plan to restore democracy in Guinea, which includes steps toward holding elections in December. While the participants involved in developing timelines and ensuring adherence to the plan has been limited, Guinea's democratic-minded political parties and civil society groups have been active in pursuing a return to democracy.

In March 2023 several political parties, including a revision of Condé's Rally of the Guinean People (RPG) and its main opponent, the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea (UFDG), joined with the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (FNDC), a collection of civil society activists and groups, to form the Forces Vives de Guinée. Per a 2022 study, the coalition retains majority support (60.37 percent) of citizens living in Conakry, the capital.¹⁶

Having earned a combined 93 percent of votes during the 2020 Guinean presidential election, the RPG and UFDG represent a broad swath of the Guinean population and maintain significant mobilization capacity, encouraging citizens to demonstrate in protests organized by civil society groups despite harsh restrictions. Studies show that a "unified coalition of opposition actors in alliance with civil society seems to be a key element" in contributing to the reversal of democratic backsliding.¹⁷ Indeed, a similar coalition by the same name contributed to the restoration of democratic elections in Guinea in 2010, following a military coup in 2008.

While the outlook in Guinea is far from certain, shared aspirations among the country's political parties and civil society to return to democracy is a promising start. This joining of opposing parties

offers optimism that Guinea's collective political actors may in fact galvanize progress toward solidifying democratic institutions and creating a competitive, yet productive, multiparty system.

Weakening of party institutionalization could jeopardize democratic progress in Malawi

A consistent weakening of the political party systems in Malawi has contributed to a decline in democracy, and risks undercutting prior progress altogether.

Since roughly 2000, Malawian elections have largely been free and fair. In contrast to many peer countries, Malawi has not suffered from regular military coups and has executed peaceful transfers of power between political rivals. Today Malawi maintains more than forty registered political parties, including four primary competitors.

However, the most recent regularly scheduled general election of 2019 fueled concern that the sustainability of Malawi's democracy may be in jeopardy. When incumbent presidential candidate Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was declared the winner, his main opponent Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) disputed the results, accusing leading figures of the Malawi Electoral Commission of impropriety. Based on evidence of electoral irregularities, the Constitutional Court annulled the results of elections and set a new contest for June 2022, which resulted in victory for Chakwera and the MCP and its allies.

Even though Malawi has made progress in enhancing the integrity of electoral processes, and boasts a strong independent judiciary, which helped resolve the disputed 2022 election, the country's parties remain weak and volatile. Rather than build institutionalized structures better able to meet citizens' needs and encourage informed competition, political parties aim to attract popular figures in search of political expediency. Weak political parties, without an infrastructure to develop policy platforms or a clear identity to connect with voters and govern once in office, have consistently failed to improve life in Malawi. The country remains one of the poorest nations in Africa with approximately 74 percent of citizens reporting moderate to high instances of lived poverty in 2022—a sixteen-point increase since 2012.

The relative weakness of the country's political parties, even with continued free and fair elections, seems poised to further exacerbate negative popular sentiments on the state of Malawian democracy. Worsening economic and social conditions, coupled with pervasive corruption, nepotism, and division within

16 "Les manifestations politiques sous la transition: Ce qu'en pensent les citoyens de Conakry," Association Guinéenne de Sciences Politiques, June 2022, <https://www.agsp-guinee.org/media/Rapports/2022-06-22/17-39-40/f0a276aa-9a66-4d61-b305-d85b65ab0e60.pdf>.

17 Evie Papada and Staffan I. Lindberg, eds. et al., "Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization," University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, March 2023, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf.

political parties may push the limits of Malawian democracy. As Malawi moves toward elections in 2025, the democratic world waits to see whether the threads holding the country together will endure another contentious political contest.

Strong parties can create opportunity for further democratic consolidation: The case of Kenya

Political parties have played a central role in Kenya's democratization process. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Kenya's political parties, while oriented around specific ethnic groups, have formed coalitions that have helped to incrementally improve the country's democratization efforts. Parties were instrumental in Kenya abolishing Section 2A of its constitution, which had previously limited the country to single-party rule and paved the way for the East African nation's first multiparty election in 1992.

Kenyan political parties are generally well-organized during campaign cycles. They deliver cohesive political manifestos that articulate policy objectives in line with community needs. Such declarations allow citizens to evaluate parties based not only on their perception of a prominent leading individual but also on a given party's policy prescriptions. Following elections, however, parties regularly fall short of delivering on these promises in Kenya as they do everywhere.

Political parties in Kenya not only derive strength from institutionalized internal structures, but also from supporting more resilient external institutions, such as courts (e.g., accepting the courts' decisions in the last three electoral cycles), the press, and civil society, which offer reinforcing checks to uphold democratic norms and restrict the accumulation of power. While only 39 percent of Kenyans trust the government, 71 percent trust nongovernmental organizations and 57 percent trust the media. Although political parties should strive to build greater citizen trust in government, it's important to note that political parties have allowed other democratic institutions to thrive, thereby ensuring citizens have reliable outlets to freely voice criticism.

As Kenya continues the path to solidifying a resilient democracy, political parties stand positioned to play a key role. While issues concerning corruption and the manipulation of government institutions and state media by ruling parties and coalitions remain a problem, Kenya's political parties exist in an environment of relatively strong democratic institutions. The checks and balances carried out by these institutions are vital to ensuring parties within a multiparty system act on the best interests of those they represent.

The way forward

Weak political party systems spell trouble for African democracy and American interests alike. This risk is particularly pronounced in countries where one party rules, which is increasingly common: 72 percent of countries in sub-Saharan Africa are now considered electoral or closed autocracies (governing 82 percent of the population in the region), and most of these governments are ruled by de facto one-party regimes.

America's adversaries are exploiting this weakness. One-party rule is increasingly supported by foreign malign actors as they seek to fill a growing vacuum. The People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia are pursuing stronger ties with the continent's ruling parties,¹⁸ and building the ideological justification for continued one-party rule. Reinforcing one-party rule is antithetical to building consolidated democracy in Africa but is given oxygen by the international community's general neglect of political parties on the continent. As ruling parties consolidate one-party states with advice from authoritarian states, other political parties, lacking capacity, support, and investment, wither on the vine. Democracy suffers as a result.

The relative importance of political party strength to consolidated democracy is unfortunately not reflected in US funding or policy priorities. When it comes to funding, political party work is only a fraction of the dwindling US democracy and governance assistance to the region.

Democracy is a puzzle that requires many different pieces, all interlinked with one another. It would be an exaggeration to say that strong political parties are the single most important element. Yet it is undeniable that strong political parties are critically important for the functioning of democracy—as important as an independent judiciary, a civilian led military, or a free press, areas which tend to receive far more attention from the international community.

The inverse of strong political parties is the absence of an effective and legitimate mechanism to translate public interests into governance. In this vacuum, people are either unable to express themselves at all in the face of autocratic repression or must either take to the streets or take up arms to make their voices heard. These outcomes are not conducive to the growth of stability and democracy yet have become all too predictable in Africa. The cycle of democratic deterioration, political instability, and armed conflict repeats itself again and again across the continent. Such realities should refocus the attention of the international community on the mechanism that is fundamental for the translation of public interests into policy: effective and representative political parties.

18 Paul Nantulya, "China's First Political School in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, U.S. Department of Defense, November 7, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-first-political-school-africa/>.

About the authors

Dr. Patrick Quirk is a nonresident senior fellow with both the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Center and Scowcroft Strategy Initiative at the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. He also serves as vice president for strategy, innovation, and impact at the International Republican Institute (IRI), a nonpartisan organization dedicated to supporting democracy worldwide.

Santiago Stocker is resident program director for Sudan at IRI. He previously served as resident program director for Nigeria and as a director in the US Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.

Dan Scaduto is program manager for political party strengthening at IRI.

This paper is the first in the Freedom and Prosperity Center's "State of the Parties" series analyzing the strength of multi-party systems in different regions of the world.

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