

The Retreat of African Democracy

The Autocratic Threat Is Growing

By [Nic Cheeseman](#) and [Jeffrey Smith](#)

In the decade following the Cold War, Africa saw many democratic success stories. In 1991, Benin and Zambia became the first former dictatorships to hold multiparty elections after the fall of the Soviet Union. In both countries, the opposition beat the incumbents. In 1994, South Africa replaced apartheid with majority rule, and soon after that, Nelson Mandela was elected president. Later that decade, Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi also held elections and saw power change hands. All told, by the middle of the first decade of this century, every major peaceful state in Africa except Eritrea and Swaziland, the continent's last absolute monarchy, was, at least in principle, committed to holding competitive elections.

But in recent years, Africa's political trajectory has begun moving in the opposite direction. In Tanzania, [President John Magufuli](#) has clamped down on the opposition and censored the media. His Zambian counterpart, President Edgar Lungu, recently [arrested the main opposition leader](#) on trumped-up charges of treason and is seeking to extend his stay in power to a third term. This reflects a broader trend. According to Freedom House, a think tank, just 11 percent of the continent is [politically "free."](#) and the average level of democracy, understood as respect for political rights and civil liberties, fell in each of the last 14 years. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance shows that democratic progress [lags](#) far behind citizens' expectations. The vast majority of Africans want to live in a democracy, but the proportion who believe they actually do falls almost every year.

Many of the woes of Africa's developing democracies are not new, but old authoritarians are [learning new tricks](#). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), President Joseph Kabila may have become the first leader on the continent to preserve his influence by [rigging the presidential election](#) in favor of an opposition candidate, Felix Tshisekedi. Forced to step down because of constitutional term limits, and unable to anoint his chosen successor thanks to his unpopularity, Kabila had to move to Plan B: manipulate the polls to ensure the victory of an opposition leader he hopes will be weak and pliant, empowering him to [govern from the shadows](#).

Elsewhere, democracy is threatened by sophisticated politicians who subvert the rule of law for their own interests; the corrupting influence of oil, gas, and minerals; growing debt burdens; spreading Chinese influence; and autocrats who promise economic success in exchange for political repression. Underlying them all are Western indifference and, sometimes, hostility.

RULE BY LAW

A good test for the health of a democracy, in Africa and elsewhere, is whether leaders leave office when the law says their time is up. So far, term limits in Africa have been respected more times than they have been disregarded. But a growing number of leaders—and their enablers—have removed such restrictions or given themselves longer terms through “constitutional coups,” which rewrite the rule books to effectively make the incumbent president for life. Since 2000, at least 30 African presidents have tried to extend their rule,

and [18 of them have succeeded](#). In 2018 alone, four presidents made such attempts, in Burundi, Uganda, Sudan, and Togo.

Killing off term limits is part of a worrying trend. Many African leaders, afraid of an international backlash if they openly defy their laws, have taken to changing, rather than breaking, them. International donors are often quick to censure governments that flout the rules but far slower to cut off relations with those that change the law through due process, even if they are brazenly rigging the system in their favor. This helps explain Kabila's innovative strategy in the DRC; knowing that his own people and the international community expected a transfer of power, he is trying to retain control by faking one.

Unsurprisingly, countries without term limits tend to be more [unstable](#) than those with them. If politicians don't respect term limits, the rule of law loses its meaning and citizens' faith in the democratic process erodes. According to a recent Afrobarometer [survey](#) covering 36 countries, just 40 percent of Africans believe that their last elections were "free and fair." If citizens are [disillusioned with the electoral process](#), deliberately shut out of politics, or unable to speak and protest freely, they will grow apathetic and frustrated. The proportion of citizens saying that democracy is the best political system for their country increased from 63 percent in 2003 to 75 percent in 2013, but by 2018, it had fallen back to 68 percent. That should be a wake-up call for democracy's advocates. African leaders and their supporters should worry, too. After all, research shows that in the long term, democracy contributes to good governance, human development, and economic growth.

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The legal chicanery goes beyond term limits. Africa's counterfeit democrats have passed bills through pliant legislatures to enable them to restrict freedom of speech and suppress the opposition. Inspired by autocratic countries such as China, Russia, and, [in some instances](#), North Korea, leaders often justify these restrictions under the dubious guises of maintaining public order and combating terrorism and "[fake news](#)." Authoritarian politicians in [Tanzania](#) and Uganda, [for example](#), no longer have to rely primarily on baton-wielding security forces to muzzle dissent. This rule-by-law approach allows leaders to manipulate the legal process for their own purposes while avoiding the bad press that often results from state violence.

TO THE VICTOR, THE SPOILS

Almost everywhere, oil and democracy mix about as well as [oil and water](#). Valuable natural resources insulate governments from domestic and international pressure to reform and lead to high levels of corruption and more intense political—but not necessarily democratic—competition, since holding power can generate such [high returns](#). In Africa, just one petrostate, Ghana, is also a full democracy, and it discovered oil only after a stable and competitive political system had been firmly established. Every other major African oil producer, with the possible exception of Nigeria, holds deeply problematic elections.

This correlation is particularly troubling because several African countries have recently discovered oil and natural gas reserves. Uganda expects its first oil to flow [in 2021](#). Kenya is pledging to get there even sooner. Tanzania is finalizing deals to exploit one of the [biggest gas finds](#) in recent years. And Mozambique hopes to begin construction on a new liquefied natural gas export plant in 2019, making use of the [huge deposits](#) prospectors found in 2010. Although natural resources could conceivably empower these governments and provide for their citizens, they are more likely to further entrench authoritarian and kleptocratic rule.

African democracies face more economic problems than abundant oil and gas. Growing national debts have left governments vulnerable and prompted spending cuts that threaten to destabilize democratic systems, including success stories such as Ghana. Although the role

of China is often overstated—it holds only 20 percent of African debt—the influence of nondemocratic foreign powers is growing. In Djibouti, Beijing has converted its [vast loans](#) into political influence and pressured the government into allowing it to build an enormous [military base](#), China's first in Africa.

China claims that it does not attach strings to foreign aid and state loans, but using its influence to prop up deeply unpopular authoritarian governments is an intervention, whatever its leaders claim to the contrary. That meddling could yet prompt a backlash across Africa. One is already under way in Zambia, where rumors that the country is about to hand [over prize assets](#) such as the national electricity supplier because it can no longer fulfill debt repayments have led to protests and rising anti-Chinese sentiment. But it may already be too late: public demonstrations will struggle to reshape the deeply unequal relationship that already exists between a growing number of African governments and China.

STRONGMEN

Ideas can play as important a role as policies in undermining democracy. The most dangerous idea for democracy today is the misguided belief in the “developmental autocrat”—a leader who will sacrifice human rights to spur economic growth. All the rage in the 1970s, this idea has recently experienced a revival among African leaders and a number of media commentators and [policy advisers](#), driven by the apparent economic success of authoritarian Rwanda. Under President Paul Kagame, the country's highly repressive political system has delivered seemingly impressive economic results, with growth rates estimated to be around eight percent from 2001 to 2013 (although many academics and critics of the regime [dispute](#) these figures).

In Kenya, a close ally of President Uhuru Kenyatta's has pointed to Kagame's success to justify weakening opposition parties. And in Zimbabwe, the new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, is clearly fashioning himself in Kagame's image, resulting in the brutal repression of protests just this week. But copying Kagame makes for poor economics and worse politics. Kagame's perceived economic successes are based on tight control over a centralized system of patronage that does not exist—and would be [extremely difficult to construct](#)—in the vast majority of African states. Moreover, Rwanda has achieved its so-called progress on the back of abuses that, if they carry on unchecked, will very likely destabilize the political system and undermine the [country's economic gains](#).

However incompetent they prove in the long run, developmental autocrats are also bad news for political freedom and human rights in the short term. [According](#) to the Committee to Protect Journalists, the past three years have set annual records for the numbers of journalists jailed worldwide, and at least five journalists were killed in Africa in 2018 alone. The top jailers in Africa last year were all authoritarian states: Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, and Rwanda.

AMERICA FIRST, AFRICA LAST

On top of their internal problems, African democracies occupy a less friendly world than they did a few years ago. The Trump administration has made no secret of its disdain for the democratic ideals that anchor the modern international system. Trump's transactional worldview has pushed democracy promotion off the U.S. government's list of priorities. His administration's Africa [policy](#), unveiled in December, does not contain a single mention of democracy, free and fair elections, political and civil rights, or civil society. The position of assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor—the United States' highest human rights official—remains [vacant](#). The State Department's top Africa post remained unfilled for 15 months after Trump took office, until June 2018, when the Senate confirmed Tibor Nagy, a well-respected veteran of the U.S. diplomatic corps.

Little wonder, then, that some of Africa's longest-ruling despots have expressed an affinity for Trump. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who busies himself charging his political opponents with treason and then [torturing](#) them, says he "loves" Trump. The decline in U.S. funding for pro-democracy movements in Africa, combined with U.S. diplomatic support for bloody autocrats, including Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—a "[fantastic guy](#)" in Trump's estimation—does not bode well for the continent's brave but battered democratic activists.

THE YEAR AHEAD

There are some bright democratic spots on the African horizon. Ethiopia's new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, has launched the most radical political liberalization in the country's history. Over the next year, South Africa should make progress against corruption as the ruling African National Congress recovers from the Zuma years. Across the continent, young political leaders, such as [Robert Kyagulanyi](#) in Uganda, have emerged with the potential to transform their countries. In some places, civil society and opposition leaders will manage to halt the process of democratic decline. But these high points are more likely to prove the exception than the rule.

In February, Nigeria will hold elections in which President Muhammadu Buhari will attempt to defy illness, [waning popular support](#), and the fragmentation of his party to stay in power. Expect fireworks. Whoever wins, the election will probably be close, triggering accusations of vote rigging. Mauritanian President Ould Abdel Aziz has promised not to run in this year's presidential election, but few expect the contest to be a credible one, since the government has already [jailed](#) high-profile opposition leaders, including the renowned antislavery activist Biram Dah Abeid, on trumped-up charges. The fallout from the DRC's flawed election is also likely to loom over the continent for the rest of the year. There is a real danger that instead of standing up for democracy, foreign countries will allow the result to stand. Already, the [Southern African Development Community](#) has proposed a power-sharing arrangement that would allow Tshisekedi to retain the presidency, riding roughshod over the likely will of the people. The evidence from similar deals in [Kenya and Zimbabwe](#) in 2008 is that such quiet diplomacy benefits only those who rigged the elections—and the people who get the best positions—while stunting the growth of a genuinely independent opposition. A level playing field is vital for democracy to flourish. In many countries across Africa, it is alarmingly tilted.

Of course, sham elections are nothing new in Africa, but for a while things were going in the right direction. Today, however, democracy is in danger of collapsing in places where it has until recently been fairly secure. Senegal, long one of Africa's most free and open societies, will hold a presidential election this year amid growing government [repression](#) of the opposition. The political temperature is also rising in Malawi, where in May, the 78-year-old president will face both a former head of state and his current vice president, who broke ranks with the ruling party over unresolved corruption and governance-related issues. African democracy is in for a bumpy 2019. The only thing necessary for authoritarianism to triumph over democracy is for people of conscience—in Africa and worldwide—to do nothing about it.