

Chapter 6

Blogging under Behemoth: Does Communications Technology Make African Politics More Competitive?

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ABSTRACT

The solution to the fragility and instability that accompanied Africa's newly independent states was widely seen as the adoption of strong, unrivalled political leadership. Politics needed to be uncompetitive; there was to be none of the jockeying for power between rival parties witnessed in older, more well-established democracies. This path, however, soon proved disastrous. Time and time again, the absence of a viable political opposition allowed leaders to run roughshod over the public good. Real incomes fell as a tiny kleptocratic elite enriched themselves at the national expense. Since 1989, however, Africa has witnessed a remarkable liberalization of political competition. Opposition parties have in most places been granted newfound freedom to politick, and have on occasion won elections outright. Some argue this is at least in part the product of the diffusion of communications technology. They contend such devices facilitate political activism and organization, fostering political competition in its wake. To test this hypothesis, continent-wide data on the spread of landline telephones, wireless handsets, and Internet connections has been marshalled, then contrasted against the level of political competition in Africa throughout the post-colonial period. The findings in this chapter suggest that while communications technology may serve as a boon to the cause of political competition immediately following first introduction, its long-term effects are likely to be limited.

INTRODUCTION

The young states that dotted Africa's post-colonial landscape were almost universally authoritarian in nature. The continent's booming economy of the 1950s and early 1960s could not offset the

cold reality that the countries who stepped out from under the shadow of imperial rule remained desperately poor and politically fractured (Meredith, 2011). Nationalism was but a far-off hope. Ethnic rivalries simmered. At just 40 years, life expectancy was the lowest in the world. Rural

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villagers travelled dozens of kilometres to receive basic health care. The vast majority of children did not attend school and less than one-in-five adults were literate (Carter & O'Meara, 1985; Kyle, 1999; Scott, 1969; "World Development Indicators," 2013). Skilled labour was in short supply, a constraint that plagued business and government bureaucracy alike. A commercial class was glaringly absent: one could "count the number of effective African businessmen on two hands" (Ward, 1962). The region's decrepit transportation infrastructure rarely extended beyond the largest communities and key mines. In other words, the challenges that lay ahead were daunting. As Obafemi Awolowo lamented in 1947, "Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression" (Awolowo, 1947, p. 47).

Yet a spirit of 'can-do' optimism prevailed. Africa's economic potential was far too vast for hope to be abandoned. The simple solution to these problems, it seemed, was to create a political order governed by leaders of unparalleled strength. Only a powerful leader unencumbered by the raucousness of competitive democracy—a circumstance where rival parties had no real prospect of gaining power—could overcome the fractiousness that invariably followed borders drawn without regard for tribal, linguistic, and religious continuity. Opposition parties, proclaimed Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, were an "over-sophisticated pastime which we in Africa cannot afford to indulge in; our time is too short and there is too much serious work to be done" (cited in Meredith, 2011, p. 168). The call was instead for powerful, single-party executives, backed up by strong police powers and severe limits on the freedom to campaign against the government.

The idea proved wildly popular among those entrusted to lead upon Europe's colonial departure. Political competitiveness was subsequently curtailed in country after newly independent country (Strand, 2013). By 1989, practically the entire continent had evolved into a one-party state or military dictatorship. Organized political op-

position was declared outright illegal in 32 countries. In others, a de facto one-party arrangement reigned supreme; over the course of 150 elections in 29 countries between 1960 and 1989, opposition parties were never allowed to win a single seat. During this time only Senegal, Gambia, and Botswana held reasonably free and fair elections on a regular basis (Meredith, 2011). Remarkably, this radical evolution was greeted with tacit—and often enthusiastic—popular support. Few took to the streets to protest the demise of opposition groups. What prevailed instead was the norm of governmental authority bound up in a single, unquestioned individual. "I would like ministers, assistant ministers and others," declared Kenya's former president, Daniel arap Moi, "to sing like a parrot after me" (Winkler, 2004, p. 108).

Strong Leaders, Weak Results

Unfortunately, the more Africa's politicians sang in unison the further the continent fell behind. The impressive growth of the 1950s and early 1960s turned to stagnation in the 1970s, followed by outright calamity in the 1980s and 1990s. Mismanagement and kleptocratic rent-seeking became rife, with entrenched autocrats pilfering the very countries over which they ruled. Population growth raced ahead of economic expansion, causing real living standards to plunge. The World Food Council notes the region's per capita food production fell 7% in the 1960s and a shocking 15% in the subsequent decade (as cited in Meredith, 2011; "World Development Indicators," 2013). In the 1980s much of Africa underwent 'de-industrialization' as investors shifted their factories to more promising markets in Asia and Latin America. As foreign capital took flight fixed investment plummeted ("World Development Indicators," 2013). Factories rusted and closed, drying up what little remained of the continent's trade in manufactures. Tired of aid squandered on megalomaniacal white elephants, such as Mobutu's Gbadolite palaces and Mengistu's \$150 million anniversary celebra-

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