

South Africa in the Regional Context The Elusiveness of Democratic Consolidation

Ursula van Beek and Nicola de Jager

Abstract

The first part of this introductory essay sets in context the analyses and findings of an all-African team of researchers dedicated to studying the hurdles standing in the way of the consolidation of democracy in the southern part of the African continent. The key conditions, which according to literature on the subject are necessary for the consolidation of a democracy, are reviewed below with reference to each of the relevant topics explored in this edition of the journal. Collectively, the contributions bring to the fore the similarities and differences between South Africa and three of the country's neighbors: Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. The second part of this essay presents an outline of the shared theoretical framework within which the analyses were conducted.

Keywords: Democratic consolidation, path dependency, political culture, political institutions, South Africa, southern Africa.

The Consolidation Dilemma

There are many definitions of democratic consolidation. Some refer to electoral issues, especially the importance of the alternation of power.¹ Others contend that what matters more is the deepening of democracy beyond the “fallacy of electoralism.”² Commentators representing the latter school of thought

Ursula van Beek is Director of the Transformation Research Unit (TRU): Democracy Globally, based in the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch University in Stellenbosch, South Africa. <uvb@sun.ac.za>

Nicola de Jager is a Senior Lecturer in the same department at Stellenbosch University. <ndejager@sun.ac.za>

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), and Guillermo O'Donnell, “Illusions about Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 34-51.

² Richard Rose and Doh Chull Shin, “Democratisation Backwards: The Problem of Third Wave Democracies,” *British Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 2 (2001): 331-354.

point out that in new democracies elections, even if free and fair, subsequently often fail to assure the introduction of such basic requirements of democracy as accountability, responsiveness, or respect for the rule of law.³ This is true for many young democracies, especially in Africa. However, Botswana—the showcase of African democracy presented in the current collection of essays—suggests that alternation of power might still remain a valid indicator of the degree to which a country has consolidated its democracy.

Another academic doctrine holds that good economic performance is the key determinant to enhancing the prospects of democratic consolidation. It is said that democracy is likely to persist in countries where economic growth exceeds 5 percent and where income inequality declines over time.⁴ Both economic performance and the narrowing of the inequality gap are highly dependent on good governance. Such governance is understood as the exercise of political power based on impartiality in a context in which state institutions act for the broad public good rather than for narrow partisan interests. Good governance prioritizes economic growth, domestic security, and social security, and is concerned with solving the fundamental problems of a society by assuring a minimum standard of living for all citizens.⁵

Two essays on South Africa in this volume illustrate what happens when good governance is not the case. They show the detrimental effects on the process of democratic consolidation by governance that has been damaged by corruption and political rivalries among the top leadership echelon. The consequent deployment of ill-qualified loyal cadres to key political positions and throughout the civil service results in inadequate service delivery. Adding to the problem is South Africa's closed party-list electoral system, which does not provide direct accountability of the representatives to the electorate. The overall outcome is a poorly managed development-related socio-economic policy that fails to meet citizens' expectations. The public response is widespread frustration and disappointment, which in the case of South Africa is often expressed by means of highly undemocratic modes of societal behavior in the form of violent protests.

Formal political institutions also have been assigned a role as good predictors of democratic consolidation. Their function is to enable a system of checks and balances for the purposes of keeping the executive in check and protecting ordinary citizens from arbitrary action and state neglect. Efficient and well-

³ Larry Diamond, "Development, Democracy and Civil Society," Working Paper (Madrid: Instituto Juan March, June 1996), and Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁴ Adam Przeworski et al., "What Makes Democracies Endure?" *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 1 (1996): 39-55.

⁵ Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell, "What Is Quality of Government? A Theory of Impartial Government Institutions," *Governance: An International Journal of Policy Administration and Institutions* 21, no. 2 (2008): 165-190.

performing political institutions thus have a positive influence on the process of democratic consolidation. One such watchdog institution in a democracy is the legislature's control of the public finance system to make certain that available resources are used to fund public goods. As the essay exploring the "power of the purse" makes clear, the four countries considered in this volume are wanting in that area, as in all these cases the fiscal responsibilities of the legislature have been dominated by the executive. In South Africa, the case has been powerfully demonstrated twice in as many years: in December 2015, and again in March 2017, the country's president dismissed two different finance ministers, both of whom had fought for fiscal discipline. These politically motivated moves have damaged the country severely. The latter dismissal led to the downgrade of South Africa's bond rating to junk status, thereby raising the costs of borrowing and increasing government debt, which will further reduce the government's ability to fund public goods.

The structure, functionality, and performance of political institutions, however well designed, will not suffice alone to consolidate a democracy. What is required for these institutions to function effectively is good governance and congruence with mass values. Ronald Inglehart goes as far as to propose that the causal arrow flows primarily from culture to democracy, rather than the other way around. He maintains that societal values have the stronger causal effect on sustaining democracy because values such as trust and tolerance create civic virtues that enable democratic regimes to function properly.⁶

The project of consolidating a democracy depends heavily on good governance, which may refer to systemic or democratic performance. Sound systemic performance prioritizes economic growth, domestic security, and social security, while the government is genuinely concerned with solving fundamental problems of the society by assuring a minimum standard of living for all citizens.⁷ Whereas sound systemic performance tends to lead to a satisfactory management of the fundamental socio-economic problems of a society, sound democratic performance ought to be concerned with the promotion of democratic values. This task is related to both the nature of the preceding autocratic regime from which countries transit to democracy, as each type has a specific identity that creates a specific set of problems after transition,⁸ and the nature of traditional values, which is not always congruent with democratic values. Colonial subjugation of African societies, especially

⁶ Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷ Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

⁸ Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115-144, and Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972-2006* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

apartheid's categorization by race, left a legacy of deep mistrust between people belonging to different cultural groups. At the same time, traditional African culture prioritizes patriarchy over equality and favors conformity to authority over autonomy.

Additionally, in societies in which the majority of the people are relatively poor, values are shaped by needs rather than ideals, with material sustenance and physical security becoming requirements for survival.⁹ This latter condition tends to be reflected in political culture, which views democracy instrumentally, not intrinsically. In other words, democracy is understood as a means to an end, which is material benefit, rather than as a regime that provides the institutions and procedures to promote civil and political liberties. An instrumental political culture places the expectation on the state to deliver a broad range of socio-economic benefits, rather than on the state's creation of an environment conducive to deriving socio-economic benefits through individual and societal efforts. The concern about an instrumental understanding of democracy is that transitional states often are still in the process of building democratic institutions and have weak economies. They therefore are not yet positioned to meet the material expectations of their citizenry. Furthermore, since political parties realize that these "bread and butter" issues return rich dividends in terms of voter support, they are inclined to perpetuate these material expectations. When such expectations are not met, democracy is blamed and its future stability becomes tenuous, with chances for democratic consolidation diminished, as the essays on South Africa in this volume make clear.

Under such overall conditions, the highest priority is to uplift the poor. But there is the concurrent need to have the democratic values of equality, trust, and tolerance inculcated not only through education and socialization, but also by enlightened elites. In short, changes in behavioral attitudes to foster democratic consolidation are much more likely to be affected by the political elites than by the preferences of the masses. South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela, understood this imperative and proceeded to make a concerted effort to mold the disparate cultural groups into a unified democratic political community based on trust and tolerance. The paradigmatic South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission had a similar mandate. It aimed to deal with the past in a way that would open a new and common future in South Africa for all who lived in it. The first project has been largely abandoned, and the second one forgotten or disparaged, to the great detriment of developing a democratic political culture based on civic virtues and thus capable of contributing to democratic consolidation.

Instead, low levels of trust and tolerance prevail among the various cultural

⁹ Ronald Inglehart, "The Renaissance of Political Culture," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 4 (1988): 1203-1230.

groups that make up the political community of South Africa. These negative attitudes are not confined to intergroup enmity but extend to a hostile, and often deadly, treatment of people from other parts of the continent who regard South Africa as a top migration destination in search of a better life. Xenophobia is an ongoing concern and it seems to be worsening.¹⁰ The essay analyzing this topic in the collection shows how serious the problem has become and how little is being done about it by the ruling party, even in terms of its rhetoric.

Path dependency also comes strongly into play with regard to another strand of history, that represented by the erstwhile liberation movements in South Africa (the African National Congress: ANC), Namibia (South West African People's Organization: SWAPO), and Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front: Zanu PF). All three movements were structured hierarchically, with decision making left in the hands of a few and dissent forbidden for fear of fracturing the movement and thus weakening it in the process. The liberation movements operated in conditions under which trust in, and loyalty to, members of the anticolonial and antiapartheid struggle-related networks superseded all other values, promoting an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. While necessary for survival in the hostile political and social environments of the time, in a democratic dispensation, mistrust and exclusive forms of loyalty undermine the prospects for the expansion of mutual tolerance and compromise and for building bridges across entrenched division lines. As the essays in this volume indicate, the cultures of the former liberation movements have been brought to bear on the cultures of the ruling political parties that supplanted them. The governments lack internal transparency and accountability, which might explain their failure to promote these core values at the broader political level with the intention to conform to the requirements of a democratic dispensation.

There are many other commonalities among the three regimes established in the wake of the former liberation movements, as the essays in the collection show. All three movements have become ruling parties embedded in dominant-party systems; all three have established party-controlled states; all three disparage opposition; and all three have derived support and political legitimacy from their historical role as liberators. But while in South Africa and Namibia the formal and legal aspects of a democratic state are still in operation, Zimbabwe can no longer pretend to be a democracy. Also, in contrast to Zimbabwe, where growing public discontent with the autocratic tendencies of the ruling party has been gaining momentum, deep psychological attachments to the parties of liberation among the majority of the population remains and continues to garner electoral loyalty in Namibia. In South Africa, the loss of some thirty municipalities by the ANC in the municipal elections

¹⁰ Solomon Hussein and Kosaka Hitomi, “Xenophobia in South Africa: Reflections, Narratives and Recommendations,” *Southern African Peace and Security Studies* 2, no. 3 (2014): 5-30.

of 2016 indicates a lessening of the psychological pull, suggesting that future electoral victory for the ruling party might no longer be assured and taken for granted.

When the topic of democracy in the southern African region or even in the whole of Africa is pondered, the country that is readily mentioned as an example of a successful democratic state is Botswana. If there are comparative lessons to be learned, as has been the intention of the project whose findings are presented in this volume, the first question to ask is whether Botswana is a unique case, or whether it might share some characteristics with its neighbors.

The essay on Botswana shows that, indeed, there are some similarities. The ruling Botswana Democracy Party (BDP) also has held a dominant political position since the country's independence in 1966, and has yet to undergo the "two turnover test."¹¹ The longevity of a dominant party need not, of course, have negative connotations, as the extended political rule of the Social Democratic Party in the model Swedish democracy has demonstrated. But in the case of Botswana, a high level of executive power, flaws in electoral competition, and the party's low level of tolerance for criticism have been highlighted and reflect some of the traits displayed by the three parties that have emerged from the liberation movements.

Yet, Botswana stands apart from its southern African neighbors in other respects. The country was not a British colony but a formal British protectorate called the Bechuanaland Protectorate. The establishment of the Protectorate is attributed to a missionary of the London Missionary Society, John Mackenzie, who realized that the only way to protect Tswana tribal lands from European settlers was to establish a protectorate guaranteeing indigenous land rights. Mackenzie, together with Tswana chiefs, successfully lobbied for such rights. Consequently, there was no subsequent armed struggle. Instead, Sereste Khama (chief of the largest Tswana tribe) astutely negotiated for the peaceful transfer of power and independence of Bechuanaland in the 1960s. Botswana thus escaped the full extent of the pathologies associated with liberation movements that became governments. The elites who formed the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) were more tolerant and accommodating of different ethnic and racial groups than neighboring counterparts, as well as more pragmatic than ideological in their governance.

Botswana is also different from the other three cases by virtue of the distinctive traditional values of the Tswana people. The characteristic openness to public discussions and to building consensus, a tendency toward moderation, and an aversion to violence are all in congruence with the traits of a desirable democratic political culture. As the relevant essay proposes, these traits might explain the survival of democracy in the country for nearly fifty years. However, in some measure, the democratic persistence might also be

¹¹ Huntington, *The Third Wave*.

attributed to the underlying common African tendency to defer to authority.

Political culture occupies a central position in the process of democratic consolidation. This is attributed to the fact that the general attitudes, values, and beliefs predominating among members of a given society are used as a lens through which to view the political system and to find one's own place in that system. To express it differently, political culture is an aggregate form of the psychological and subjective dimensions of politics rooted in both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the members of that system.¹² This, in turn, informs political behavior.¹³ Where mass values become congruent with the values governing well-run democratic political institutions, the chances for democratic consolidation are greatly enhanced. Where the potential for the development of such desirable trajectory is hampered by poor governance, which results in unfulfilled expectations, mass values are unlikely to attain traits that will contribute to the strengthening of a democracy, as the empirical findings presented in the essays on South Africa illustrate.

Political culture in Africa also has been influenced by exogenous factors. One such key factor, namely, the impact of Christian religion introduced by missionaries, is explored in the present collection.

The potential Christianity holds for the emergence of values congruent with democracy is well documented in literature. The unfolding of liberal democratic thought can be traced back to the Christian synthesis of the philosophical speculations about human nature by the ancient Greeks, to the elements of Roman law, and to the God-given code of moral behavior, which Judaism applied equally to everyone in the congregation, from king to commoner.¹⁴ This synthesis formed the concept of an individual with equal standing in the eyes of God, which ultimately provided the idea of a democratic society based on respect for the like moral status of all its members who have an equal right to liberty. The proclamations in 1517 by Martin Luther and the subsequent emergence of Protestantism played the singularly most important role in nurturing liberal democracy in the Western world, leading one author to go as far as to suggest that liberalism is Protestant Christianity divested of its ritual and sacramental content.¹⁵

The question is whether the dynamic that had played such a key role in the Western world might bear on the fortunes of democracy in transitional states.

¹² Lucian Pye, "The Elusive Concept of Culture and the Vivid Reality of Personality," *Political Psychology: Cultural and Crosscultural Foundations*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon and John Duckitt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 18-32.

¹³ Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

¹⁴ Samuel Edward Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Time: Ancient Monarchies and Empires*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Larry Siedentop, *Democracy in Europe* (London: Penguin Press, 2001).

The prevalence and growth of Christianity in the region is posited as having the potential to produce values that encourage democratic development, specifically, the value of the individual and the value of liberty. Yet, South Africa, which has a large Christian population, still has a fairly undemocratic political culture; 41 percent of the self-identified Christian population is willing to forgo a democratic regime for a strong leader. Syncretism is a possible explanation for the discrepancy. It is characterized by collectivism and sacralising of authority and remains a prevalent political culture in South Africa. Such attitudes stand in contradistinction to the values of the individual and liberty, which historically and of necessity have required holding human authority to account.

Research Rationale and Approach

Democratic consolidation has remained elusive in sub-Saharan Africa. The 2015 Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index, which identifies four categories of regime types (full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid, and authoritarian) awarded full democracy status to only Mauritius.¹⁶ Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia are all considered flawed democracies and Zimbabwe is classified as authoritarian. Similarly, Polity IV, which categorizes regimes from full democracy, democracy, open anocracy, closed anocracy, and autocracy, to failed state, considers Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia to be democracies and Zimbabwe to be an open anocracy.¹⁷ Botswana has held democratic elections since 1965, Zimbabwe has held a form of elections since 1980, and Namibia since 1989, and South Africa transitioned to a democracy with its first multiracial democratic elections in 1994. Yet, none of these southern African countries has been able to consolidate its democracy, while Zimbabwe has become authoritarian.

The collection of essays appearing in this edition of the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* represents the culmination of a two-year research project, which brought together experts from all four of the southern African countries. The research was conducted within a wider investigation carried out by the Transformation Research Unit (TRU): Democracy Globally. The overall guiding research question was: What are the hindrances to democratic consolidation in a set of southern African countries? It was acknowledged that democratic consolidation—understood as democratic endurance and stability—remains elusive in the region. As Adrain Leftwich noted, “It is one thing for a democratic transition to take place; it is altogether another matter for democracy

¹⁶ The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an Age of Anxiety” (2015), <http://www.yabiladi.com/img/content/EIU-Democracy-Index-2015.pdf> (accessed May 24, 2017).

¹⁷ See Polity IV, http://www.edac.eu/indicators_desc.cfm?v_id=63 (accessed May 24, 2017).

to survive.”¹⁸ And, as J. Samuel Valenzuela opined, to be democratically consolidated, a regime is expected “to last well into the future.”¹⁹ Democratic consolidation thus refers to democratic stability. The essays included in this volume are concerned with identifying and understanding what prevents a democracy from achieving consolidation and endurance.

Case Selection

The case selection was motivated by an interest in establishing the effects of the ideology and the ethos of the liberation struggle movements in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe on the formation of the political culture in those countries. Botswana, coming from a different path dependency, was chosen as the control case.

The four cases share the following similarities:

- Geography—southern Africa;
- Negotiated democratic transitions;
- Dominant-party systems—the same ruling parties have governed since the first democratic elections;
- Legal systems based on Roman Dutch law;
- Religion—Christian liberal values are prevalent in each case;
- Traditional tribal systems and culture remain significant, despite Christian influences; and
- None of the cases has managed to consolidate its democracy.

The following differences were acknowledged:

- Demography: Population sizes vary significantly—Botswana and Namibia have populations of little over two million, while South Africa (55 million) and Zimbabwe (16 million) have comparatively sizeable populations;
- Levels of homogeneity differ, South Africa being the most ethnically diverse; and
- Electoral systems vary between Proportional Representation (Namibia and South Africa) and majoritarian (Botswana and Zimbabwe).

¹⁸ Adrain Leftwich, *States of Development: On the Primacy of Politics in Development* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 134.

¹⁹ J. Samuel Valenzuela, “Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process, and Facilitating Conditions,” in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O’Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 70.

The control case of Botswana displays additional differences when compared with its southern African neighbors: It is the most successful case in terms of its democratic and socio-economic development; the ruling party was never ideologically influenced or materially supported by communist China or the former Soviet Union, as were the liberation movements in the other three cases; and there is no history of armed struggle.

Data

The empirical analyses were based on several sets of data. To assess the relationship between various socio-economic factors and political participation in South Africa, census and voting data aggregated at the ward level were cross-referenced with individual-level data from the World Values Survey (WVS). To map the characteristics of the South African political community, data from the last four waves of the WVS were utilized. To trace socio-economic changes in South Africa, the investigation relied on the two most recent public WVS (2006 and 2013) and the Opinion Leader Surveys (2007 and 2013). To assess how South African political parties frame their immigration policies, seventeen national election manifestos were perused. All four countries included in the study were ranked on their 2014 scores on the liberal democracy index in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database.

Theoretical Grounding

A rich body of literature on democratic consolidation was consulted to answer the research question. The literature provided the theoretical background against which the case studies were analyzed. Broadly, the conditions the literature lists as conducive to democratic consolidation are categorized as structural, institutional, and cultural.

Structural conditions refer to the socio-economic environments of the state. In the tradition of Adam Przeworski and others, it is recognized that once a country has attained a democratic regime, its level of economic development has a strong effect on the probability that democracy will survive. Democracies can still endure in poorer countries, if they generate economic growth with a moderate rate of inflation. Nevertheless, democracies are more likely to survive when they grow faster than 5 percent annually than if they grow at a slower rate. At the same time, it is acknowledged that, in transitional democracies, economic growth alone will not suffice if it does not promote socio-economic development. Thus, democracy is more likely to persist in countries where income inequality declines over time.

Besides the establishment and institutionalization of democratic institutions—paramount among these being an independent electoral commission—a key *institutional* condition is the constraint on, and the limitation of, the power of the executive. Following Ethan Kapstein and Nathan Converse, democracies are more likely to fail when a leader faces weak constraints, as the temptation grows to gather economic and political

power into executive hands.²⁰

Cultural conditions were considered of fundamental importance to understanding the apparent unattainability of democratic consolidation, as “attitudes work as a prime mover of behaviour,”²¹ affecting policy-making, institutional formation, and leadership. Political culture was regarded to be the “system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place.”²² A democratic regime’s prospects for survival are affected by whether actors value democracy intrinsically, observing formal democracy, the rule of law, and political and civil liberties, as well as valuing democracy as a political regime.²³ If they support both counts, such actors—the elites and the broader public—are then committed to democracy as the best type of political regime.

Finally, the choice between policy moderation and radicalism affects the survival of competitive regimes: powerful radical actors and radical policy make it harder to sustain a democratic regime.²⁴ The policy goals of radicals are located at the extreme poles of the policy spectrum, both on the right and left, and they tend to create intransigent polarization, which is not conducive to democratic stability. Theories of democratic consolidation acknowledge the necessity to develop a pattern, and ultimately a culture, of moderation, cooperation, bargaining, and accommodation.²⁵ The cases examined in this issue of the journal offer substantive empirical evidence to bear out these theoretical assumptions.

²⁰ Ethan Kapstein and Nathan Converse, “Why Democracies Fail,” *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 4 (2008): 57-68.

²¹ Andreas Schedler, “Measuring Democratic Consolidation,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36, no. 1 (2001): 66-92, 69.

²² Sidney Verba, “Comparative Political Culture,” *Political Culture and Political Development*, ed. Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 513.

²³ Scott Mainwaring and Anibal Pérez-Liñán, “Democratic Breakdown and Survival,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 123-137.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Larry Diamond, “Introduction,” in *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1993).