The African Basis of Democracy and Politics for the Common Good
A Critique of the Neopatrimonial Perspective

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Abstract

Since its rise to a prominent position as a key approach to understanding and explaining African politics, governance, and political economy, a number of critiques have been published on neopatrimonialism and its perspective on African politics. This essay contributes to the emerging criticism of the neopatrimonial approach by addressing one of the key arguments of the theory concerning the intrinsic nature of African politics, its cultural underpinnings, and the ideas which form the basis of democracy and politics for the common good in Africa. Although the underpinnings and ideational basis exist and are central to the dynamics of African politics, the neopatrimonial approach has treated them as nonexistent. In its discussion, this essay also describes the sources and vital influence of African ideas on democracy and the common good in African states.

Keywords: Neopatrimonialism, critique of neopatrimonialism, African democracy, African common good, African dominant parties, struggle for democracy, accountable leadership.

For almost five decades since its inception in the 1970s, neopatrimonial theory has dominated the explanation of African politics. As a body of work on Africa, the neopatrimonial approach remains the most complete and influential explanation of the nature of African governance and the perceived failure of its evolution to democracy that embraces good governance and focus on the common good. Mkandawire, one of Africa’s leading researchers, appraised neopatrimonialism as a perspective that “has had an enormous impact on how Africa is perceived and constitutes an important element of attitudes

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and knowledge of many who have to deal with governments and societies.”

However, scholars have begun to criticize neopatrimonial theory for its advancement of an essentialist and overly negative interpretation of African politics and society and for being dominated by a Western perspective. This essay contributes to the critique of neopatrimonial theory by discussing the ideational basis and values that underlie the positive aspects of regime legitimacy and politics for the common good in the African context. The essay appreciates that neopatrimonialism is complex and has complicated African politics as described by neopatrimonial theorists. What the essay attempts to extract and offer is an undercurrent in African states that arguably captures and expresses the ideals and values of democracy and politics for the common good in Africa. This differs significantly from the neopatrimonial perspective.

The discussion in this essay is organized into three main sections. The first addresses neopatrimonial theory and the application of the theory to explain the dominance of regime parties in multiparty elections in Africa. The second section analyzes the limits and the emerging critiques of neopatrimonial theory. The final part of the essay discusses an alternative basis for democracy, leadership, and government that fosters the common good in African states.

The Neopatrimonial Explanation

The neopatrimonial approach to African politics has its origins in theories of modernization which sought to observe how newly independent countries in Africa and Asia developed into modern states, building on the foundations of modern state institutions (parliament, courts, system of government, and bureaucracy) that had been established by departing colonial powers. It is also underpinned by Weber’s threefold categorization of types of political authority: patrimonial, as found in traditional societies; rational-legal, as they

have evolved in modern European societies; and charismatic.4 This perspective assumed that the newly independent states in Africa and Asia would develop into modernity by acquiring features that characterized Western states, and by consolidating institutions of rational-legal authority, as opposed to patrimonial authority, that were present in their largely traditional societies. However, such transition did not turn out to be the case. In many postcolonial states, what came to be called neopatrimonial regimes developed characteristics that differed greatly from the modern nation-state, as there was dissolution or breakdown of the initial modern institutional models that had been established.5

Neopatrimonial theory concludes that neopatrimonial personal relationships form “the foundation and superstructure of political institutions in Africa and that neo-patrimonial practice is the core feature of politics in Africa.”6 Moreover, “in the end what all African states share is a generalized system of patrimonialism and an acute degree of apparent disorder.”7

Like the earlier researchers who adopted neopatrimonial explanations of African politics, contemporary proponents picture Africa’s current political systems as “hybrid,” in which “customs of patrimonialism coexist with and suffuse the rational-legal institutions.”8 Bayart argued that Africa was different from Asian and Arab countries and also from Latin America because the dynamic of hybridization of African politics unfolds in a particular way, given the absence of a great historical tradition of power.9 Chabal and Daloz10 agree with Bayart, as well as with Bratton and van de Walle, that the patrimonial and other cultural components of Africans straddle and suffuse the modern institutions, resulting in a hybridization that explains African politics. However, Chabal and Daloz differ from them in how much weight they give to culture. They argue that the real cause of this state of affairs in Africa is what they call political “instrumentalization of disorder.”11 By this they mean that Africans have a vested interest, or some kind of economic rationale, in perpetuating the

5 Eisenstadt, Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism, 13, and Clapham, Third World Politics, 44.
6 Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle, Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 63.
7 Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xix.
8 Bratton and van de Walle, Democratic Experiments in Africa, 62.
10 Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works, 4-16.
11 Ibid.
weak institutionalization of political practices and that the state is vacuous and ineffectual in that it has rapidly disintegrated and fallen prey to particularistic and factional struggles, rendering it an empty shell, and reflecting that it has been in the interest of African political elites to keep the state at a low level of institutionalization and incapable of action.\textsuperscript{12}

There is broad agreement on the key components of neopatrimonial regimes. In the first place, the term encompasses the “cultural stuff” from the traditional precolonial past that the elite and the common people appropriate and use in their lives.\textsuperscript{13} More particularly, the term patrimonial is based on the idea of a patron: a person culturally anchored in the social and political order, bestowing gifts from his own resources to followers to obtain their loyalty and support. The clients he patronizes, in return, obtain material benefits and protection.\textsuperscript{14} Patrimonialism is a traditional form of authority, but it is a phenomenon that is a common feature in all societies, both in Western developed and non-Western developing states.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, in neopatrimonial research, it has been described as the unique, basic pillar of African political systems.\textsuperscript{16} The neopatrimonial literature proposes that the patron-client relationship features African leaders and their subjects as a modern version of the traditional ruler-subject relationship in which an individual rules by dint of personal prestige and power, while ordinary people are treated as an extension of the big man’s household, with no rights or privileges other than those bestowed by the ruler. These followers are therefore less citizens of a polity than they are clients of the ruler.\textsuperscript{17}

Another key aspect of the neopatrimonial explanation is signified by the prefix “neo,” which emphasizes that the political system is no longer entirely traditional\textsuperscript{18} and that patrons typically are office holders in rational-legal state institutions who use public funds to build personal loyalty among clients.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{16} Bayart, \textit{The State in Africa}; Bratton and van de Walle, \textit{Democratic Experiments in Africa}; and Chabal and Daloz, \textit{Africa Works}.
\textsuperscript{18} Chabal and Daloz, \textit{Africa Works}, 9.
to stay in power. Even though people who hold positions in rational-legal institutions and their actions are the most important factors in the success of this system, the shape of the political institutions also matters, as positions of power give access to monopolistic resources through which personal interests can be promoted. According to the neopatrimonial perspective, although rational-legal institutions conform to the “Western template,” their workings are derived from patrimonial dynamics. It is observable that, even though rational-legal institutions are “straddled,” “suffused,” and “instrumentalized,” they are important contours and markers along which “big men” interact with their clients. The use of state resources in this way is an important feature of neopatrimonialism. In Africa, particularly, the heterogeneity of ethnicities has been regarded as one of the major components of patrimonial maintenance of power. Ethnic groups have been defined as “interest groups” in African politics—a conduit through which resources are channeled and power is established.

Bratton and van de Walle conceptualized African neopatrimonialism as marked by three main features: presidentialism, the most prevalent political system in Africa; clientelism; and ethnic groups having political significance. Their conclusion was that neopatrimonialism works because governments in Africa tend to be centralized, and as power is so disproportionately concentrated in the president, it easily degenerates into personal rule, especially as the president typically faces weak accountability mechanisms and disproportionately controls state resources that can be used to appease and control ethnic groups. From that conclusion, van de Walle elaborated that ruling parties become dominant because this system conspires to make the opposition weak and fragmented.

To explain why regime parties in Africa dominate the political competition, hence, producing dominant-party systems, it is argued that the features of neopatrimonialism create “disincentives” for opposition politicians to form coalitions to defeat the ruling party and “incentives” for politicians to become powerful individuals in their own right by mobilizing small and highly personalized parties. As these parties remain small and divided, they fail to

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20 Bayart, The State in Africa, 74-82.
21 Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works, 9.
22 Bayart, The State in Africa, 60-86.
24 Clapham, “Clientelism and the State,” 77-81.
25 Ibid.
26 Bratton and van de Walle, Democratic Experiments in Africa.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 313.
defeat the regime party. In addition, ethnic communities seek representatives in arenas where they believe “the national pie is divided,” and as opposition politicians look for narrow sectional votes, they mobilize their respective ethnic groups to vote for them so that they can gain leverage in the winning coalition. As a result, the opposition remains divided and fragmented because each opposition politician wants either to be president or to join the winning party in order to avail himself of public resources under the president and his government.

The centrality of the neopatrimonial argument of Bratton and van de Walle and the prevalence of the van de Walle hypothesis in explaining the dominance of regime parties and the emergence of dominant-party systems in Africa have been echoed in many recent studies on party system development following third-wave democratization in Africa. Tracing the evolution of the party system in Africa, Salih has pointed out that the difference between African political parties and Western parties is that they are “by and large ethnically based” in Africa. He has pointed out further that, in Africa, ethnic interests often are treated as group interests. Like Bratton and van de Walle, Salih observed that the client-patron relationship is an important feature of African politics. Following the linkage of the dominant-party system to ethnic groups, recent research (both small n and large n studies) has investigated the phenomenon. Inquiries have focused on the ethnic basis of support for successful parties, and the strategies that the regime parties employ to court winning coalitions among ethnic groups. Building on this research, a direct link has been suggested between the practices of neopatrimonial systems and political competition in the context of the current multiparty democracy in African countries. In

30 Ibid., 314-315.
general, it is argued that neopatrimonialism disadvantages the opposition while favoring the ruling party, as it allows not only the use of state resources to command political loyalty, but also the use of state bureaucracy to rig elections and even to orchestrate violence, creating conditions that allow regime parties and elites to retain control of power.

Limits of the Neopatrimonial Explanation

Mustapha began to criticize the research methodology of neopatrimonial approaches, in particular, the use of selective anecdotal evidence from individuals as the key unit of analysis. Using the example of Bayart’s 1993 study, Mustapha argues that, in order to arrive at an account of African politics, Bayart’s deriving anecdotal evidence from extensive interviews with people instead of emphasizing the lives and politics of ordinary people as a group, gave credence to the views of a limited “assortment of individuals.” Mustapha calls this a problem of “methodological individualism” and claims that, as an approach, it departs from the normal view of politics as a group process in which “both rulers and the ruled participate.” He criticizes this type of research as depicting Africa as “replete with individuals.” The fault is that “the people as collective social reality” are missing and, as a consequence, African people are perceived as nothing more than a passive mass of victims.

The second main methodological problem, to which the critics of neopatrimonial research have pointed, is what deGrassi has termed “African essentialism,” and what Mustapha has called “cultural determinism.” This is an issue on which Erdmann and Engel, as well as Pitcher, Moran, and Johnson, have focused in their critique of the neopatrimonial approach. As deGrassi argues, it is essentialist and erroneous to assume that neopatrimonialism is the essence of African politics, and, furthermore, that the neopatrimonial approach errs in reifying the patrimonial in neopatrimonialism as a primordial African tradition, placing African politics in the “traditional realm as opposed to modern realm.” Mustapha also has argued against a tendency to see the negative aspects of neopatrimonialism as rooted in African culture, contributing to a view of Africa “as a theatre of the absurd.” Mustapha maintains, while it is true that culture is an important element in the economic and political processes at work in Africa, the reduction of this important variable to “absurd sensationalism and the so-called spirit of criminality” has served only to “demean Africans without contributing in any meaningful way to improving

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
our knowledge of the complex linkages between cultural, economic and political processes.”

Others have tried to reach a balance between the claims of neopatrimonial theory and the criticisms leveled at it. Erdmann and Engel have observed that, under patrimonialism, all power relations—political as well as administrative, and between the ruler and the ruled—are personal relations, and that there is no distinction between the private and the public realms. However, under neopatrimonialism, the distinction between the private and the public realms exists, and neopatrimonial rule takes place within the framework of rational-legal bureaucracy, or “modern” stateness. Erdmann and Engel have pointed out that, in practice, separation of the private and the public spheres is not always observed and that the two spheres permeate each other: the patrimonial penetrates the rational-legal system and twists its logic, functions, and output, but does not take exclusive control over the rational-legal logic. For example, in the neopatrimonial state, clientelism exists not only in the traditional periphery but also in the modern center, “which itself is not modern, but very much tainted by and interwoven with the traditional elements.” This view does not challenge the definitions of neopatrimonialism found in Clapham, Bratton and van de Walle, and Chabal and Daloz, but instead seeks to correct what is believed to be an over-emphasis on patrimonialism to the neglect of rational-legal elements.

Pitcher, Moran, and Johnson advance further critique of the neopatrimonial approach. They focus on the contemporary use of patrimonialism by neopatrimonial theorists, arguing that, in contrast to current usage, patrimonial authority or legitimacy originally “was not a synonym for corruption, bad governance, violence, tribalism or weak state. It was instead a specific form of authority and source of legitimacy, with specific cultural underpinnings in which compliance to authority was constructed.” They argue that a more accurate definition of patrimonialism would include the reciprocities that Max Weber discussed, as well as the personal dimensions of power, governance, and compliance that are featured in contemporary accounts.

Pitcher, Moran, and Johnson use the example of Botswana to argue that, by building on the Weberian patrimonial authority of traditional reciprocity practices and networks, rather than referencing the kind of neopatrimonialism

39 Ibid., 3.
41 Ibid.
42 Clapham, “Clientalism and the State,” 48; Bratton and van de Walle, Democratic Experiments in Africa, 62; and Chabal and Daloz, Africa Works, 9-10.
43 Pitcher, Moran, and Johnson, “Rethinking Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonilism in Africa,” 125-156.
44 Ibid., 126.
45 Ibid.
advanced by the neopatrimonial theorists, the political elites in Botswana have delivered sustained economic growth and a successful elite democracy. They assert that the Botswanan elite did not abandon essential Weberian patrimonialism; rather, they built a democratic state on the foundations of that tradition of highly personalized reciprocities and loyalties. Much earlier research also pointed out that in precolonial African societies there was accountability of leadership, and within the framework of strong participatory democracy in some cases. Colonialism changed the lines of accountability between the African people and their leaders, which made the African leaders unpopular and tainted the prior Weberian patrimonial authority. The unpopularity of older generations of leaders who colluded with the colonial regimes resulted in a shift of leadership from the traditional chiefs and leaders to new and modern generations of educated African leaders during the struggle for independence of African nation states. The latter assumed political power on the basis of a social contract to restore just rule, democracy, unity, welfare, and prosperity for all.

**Alternative Explanation to Neopatrimonialism beyond the Existing Critique**

The remainder of this essay delves further into the criticisms of African neopatrimonialism and offers an alternative explanation for it. The critique and alternative explanation specifically focus on two key arguments that the neopatrimonial theorists have put forward as an explanation for why African politics and governance tend toward a neopatrimonial framework. While the description and formulation of the architecture of the neopatrimonial system by the theorists is complex and, on the whole, not disputable, their explanation for the existence of the system and its practices is too simplistic and therefore contestable.

According to the neopatrimonial theorists, there are two factors that account for the neopatrimonial system in Africa. First, there is lack of values, ideas, and experience in African states that would support democracy, unity, and politics and governance that are focused on the common public good. Simply stated, there is no prior or existing culture on which such a political system can build.

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46 Ibid., 145.
48 Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 22.
In fact, in their explanation, neopatrimonial theorists have gone so far as to point out that prior and existing African culture supports and drives politics toward neopatrimonialism.\(^49\) Second, neopatrimonial theorists argue that there is no long tradition of the state in Africa.\(^50\) As Hyden also contends, there is no separation between society and the state. He maintains that African society has usurped the state and that is why the politics and economy of affection and neopatrimonial relations are dominant.\(^51\)

This essay focuses on the two arguments above because they are key to understanding African politics and governance. The explanations given by neopatrimonial theorists, here, arguably address the fundamental question to be asked about any state politics and governance system: What ideas, values, and traditions are at the core of any society and drive the dynamics of the body politic and its publics collectively? In other words, this question probes the intrinsic nature of the politics of a state. The conclusions drawn by neopatrimonial theorists about African politics and governance are disputable, as the emerging critiques of neopatrimonial theory have begun to point out and the discussion in this essay will demonstrate.

The alternative explanation of African politics offered in this essay unfolds as follows. The first section of this part of the essay discusses elements of the emerging critique of neopatrimonial theory. The second part presents ideas, values, traditions, and experiences of prior and existing indigenous African culture since the foundation of postcolonial states. These characteristics support and arguably are at the core of the dynamics of African politics and governance, fostering democracy, unity, politics, and governance that are concerned with the common public good. The third section of this part of the essay develops a historical narrative of African politics and governance, which demonstrates the existence and the interplay of values, ideas, experiences—prior culture of African politics and governance—and supports democratic governance aimed at the common public good. This narrative begins with the foundations of African states during the struggle for independence and moves to the struggle for democracy, human rights, and economic development during the late 1980s and early 1990s that continued into the third wave of democratization.

It is acknowledged that neopatrimonialism is complex and complicates African politics and governance. However, equally true and important is the acknowledgement that at the heart of African politics lie the simple collective ideas, values, and vision of the majority of Africans, who expect them to be reflected in governance. However, leaders—both civilian and military—make promises to implement them, but often do not to the peril of their support.

\(^50\) Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 35.
from the general population. Indeed, they often face resistance and opposition from civil, political, and even military sectors of their respective states. These ideas, values, and experiences, as this essay will discuss, are rooted in specific moments of African political development and continuously have played a role by informing struggles for responsive government, fulfillment of the common public good, development for all, and just and democratic governance throughout the history of African modern states. The fulfillment of the collective ideas, values, and visions arguably has made it possible for a number of regimes in Africa to enjoy a high level of popular support, while the lack of fulfilment has caused constant tribulations and the inability to settle and stabilize politics and governance in many African states.

The critiques of neopatrimonial theory by Erdmann and Engel and by Pitcher, Moran, and Johnson rebalance to some extent the relationship between what has been defined as traditional African culture and the modern institutions of the state in neopatrimonial literature.52 In this essay, however, it is argued further that African regimes can have at their core political processes that are more than simply the combination and interaction of the rational-legal and patrimonial elements of the regime, as discussed by Erdmann and Engel, or that there are African cultural aspects that support accountable responsive regimes, as discussed by Pitcher, Moran, and Johnson.53 Mustapha touched on this central point when he questioned the reliance of the neopatrimonial approach on methodological individualism. He argued that what was missing in neopatrimonial research and analysis was discussion of African regimes as political communities. He pointed out that the neopatrimonial approach discussed African regimes as if they were “an assortment of individuals with only self interests” and that “people as collective social reality is missing.” He concluded that this biased and reductionist perspective on African politics robs nonelite groups of political agency.54

According to Mustapha,55 methodological individualism orients researchers away from the concept of politics as a group process in which both rulers and the people who are ruled participate—both exercising a measure of autonomy and political expectation. He argued that the monochromic fixation on elite politics reduces African politics to the struggles for spoils among the elite, while the visions and passions that have fueled broad-based African political life since the colonial period—nationalism, Islamic radicalism, African Christianity, communitarian self-improvement, ethnic mobilization, and so on—all disappear from analytical view. Thus, the political organization

53 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
is reduced to a narrow elite with greed and predation as the only sentiments in evidence. Mustapha concluded that analyses of the political community effectively disappear and are replaced by grim realism, with its gaze decidedly fixed on the behavior of wayward and self-serving elites.

Starting with Mustapha,56 it can be argued that the key elements that the neopatrimonial literature has failed to identify and address in African politics are the ideals and values that form and guide Africans as a political community. This is true even when the observable manifestations of politics can be interpreted as neopatrimonial. Clapham concluded that the lack of common ideals and values of the nation-state community has made African elites adopt neopatrimonialism as the only possible way to legitimize the state and avoid governing by open coercion and force all the time. The explanation for the absence of ideals and the value of politics for the common good in Africa, and in the third world, in general, is that there was no “merging of the state and society as a common expression of a set of shared values.” This “did not take place in the third world countries partly because of colonial origins of the state.” This is “the single most basic reason for the fragility of the third world state,” and, therefore, for “its problems of legitimacy.”57 It is this absence of legitimacy that fuels insecurity as well as personal and political corruption. In the final analysis, Clapham argues that, given that African states do not operate according to the classical model of the modern state in which the constitutional structure is ultimately upheld by a sense of national identity, in the absence of this national identity, regimes resort to practices which fall under the theme of neopatrimonialism.58

Contrary to the positions above, this essay argues that there are shared values and ideals which have informed African politics and which have constituted African people as political communities. These shared values and ideals developed in the movements that were formed to contest colonial regimes and gave rise to the demand for independence. The persistence of these values and ideals as aspirations is evident in the modern period and has informed politicians, university students, lecturers, writers, NGO activists—as well as the people as a whole—and led them to denounce dictatorial leadership in postcolonial African regimes from the outset. These aspirations led people to stage massive protests and to support opposition activists and parties in their demand to restore democracy at the end of the 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s. This surprised most Western researchers of African politics,59 who had predicted that the third wave of democratization would not touch the shores

56 Ibid.
57 Clapham, “Clientelism and the State,” 42-44.
58 Ibid.
of Africa. Yet, despite these predictions, public uprisings toppled dictatorial regimes. Indeed, Africa is one of the places where support for democracy was high from the onset of the third wave of democratization.60

The basis of the shared ideals and values that constituted the idea of democracy and national political communities in African colonial states stems from three sources. First, and most important, is the struggle of Africans against colonial rule and the promise of what an independent state would be. Second are the shared cultural values of an idealized precolonial African community. Third is the widely shared experience of living under dictatorial postcolonial regimes.

The struggle against colonial rule can be conceptualized as having been based on and promising three things: democracy, development, and national unity or integration. The speeches of African leaders, the poetry, the songs, and even the armed struggle against colonial regimes amply demonstrate the ideas contained in the promise of independence. As Ake pointed out, the independence movement in Africa “denounced the violation of the dignity of the colonized, the denial of the basic rights, the political disenfranchisement of the colonized, racial discrimination, lack of equal opportunity and equal access, and the economic exploitation of the colonized.”61 Notably, even though many states have failed to embody the aspirations of the independence struggle in significant measure, still, the basis for political community which was at the core of the movement has informed the search and demand of the African people for accountable leadership since the struggle for independence, as discussed further below.

The Legacy of the Independence Struggle, Its Promise, and African Regime Legitimacy

Independence struggles in Africa developed in response to brutal and racist colonial regimes. In essence, the independence movements promised to deliver new African states that would reflect desirable political and social characteristics which colonial rule had denied to African communities. As they engaged in the struggle against colonialism, African people fought collectively for postcolonial independent states that would be democratic and just, economically developmental—even welfare-based—and would unite all the people socially within their respective territories. African people had been influenced by the democratic community leadership of the past, which the colonialists had disrupted, and, for those who had had the opportunity to


study in the West, by their exposure to ideas of democratic rule in Western nations. In the early years following independence, the regimes which came to power had leeway to interpret these rather general themes, and to initiate ideological and policy directions of their own choosing, and even to prioritize their implementation.62 The legitimacy of the state and its leaders was premised on fulfilling the promises of independence embodied in the ideas of the independence movements, and on behaving in accordance with what society expected of its leaders. It is in this mandate that, early on, the African regimes argued for and adopted single-party systems and socialism in order to achieve democracy, development, and national unity.

Many commentators have characterized the adoption of the one-party state as a selfish act of power accumulation and centralization, manifesting the lack of interest on the part of African post-independence leaders to serve the common good or a higher ideal.63 To critics, implementation of one-party states simply consolidated authoritarian and neopatrimonial power in the hands of African leaders. However, the main argument for adopting one-party political systems after independence was to create unity during the nation-building processes within what were, for most states, arbitrary boundaries without historic roots that were drawn by colonialists. It also was argued that a form of democracy could exist in a one-party system, as the institutional set-up could be similar to the African tradition of democracy, in which all people in the community discussed matters until they reached an agreement that then became broadly binding on them.64 In his support for a single-party regime for Tanzania, Julius Nyerere maintained that, at the time of independence, a non-class-based African society such as Tanganyika, like most African communities, did not need many parties to represent different classes, unlike the situation in Europe where a multiparty system responded to the needs of differing classes. Therefore, a one-party state was deemed appropriate for Africa, as it also would avoid the emergence of a political opposition, which

did not serve the key aims of independence.\textsuperscript{65} As Ake points out, the adoption of one-party political systems was premised on creating inclusion, unity, and solidarity of the people in political affairs within state boundaries.\textsuperscript{66}

The adoption of socialism (few African states professed to follow the capitalist economic model) reflected a similar argument, which posited that socialism was the socio-economic system closest to the communalism which most African traditional societies practiced. Land, the main means of production in the society, was communally owned and people cooperated to meet family and community needs. As an economic system, socialism was deemed desirable because it would place a cap on the differential acquisition of wealth and avoid attendant divisions and conflicts, which could result from growing inequality. Such socio-economic conflicts were not considered desirable and also were inconsistent with the promises of unity, development, and prosperity which were anticipated through the achievement of independence. Nyerere pointed out that the socialist option was also a rational choice, given the smallness of the capitalist class in African countries at the time of independence that could spur economic development whose benefits would accrue to all. As a means to hasten development, state intervention in the economic sphere, which socialism permitted, therefore was considered desirable.\textsuperscript{67}

In addition, and more importantly, socialism promised to do away with the exploitation to which Africans were subjected under colonialism. The colonial regimes and European employers supported by the regimes not only siphoned the wealth from the colonial lands but also exploited the labor of individual people through payment of low wages, tolerance of bad working conditions, and a taxation system which did not benefit the development and welfare of the people in the colonies.\textsuperscript{68} Post-independence, socialism was attractive as a socio-economic system because it promised equality of opportunity and prosperity, while stamping out exploitation by the regime and among individuals, as experienced during colonial rule.\textsuperscript{69}

Political elites in Africa adopted one-party political systems and socialism as the policy solutions most likely to bring about the democracy, development,

\textsuperscript{66} Ake, The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa, 38.
and national unity envisioned in the ideas of the struggle for independence that Africans as a collective body politic expected to be fulfilled. These policies were consistent with what the majority of people expected, but in truth it did not matter which political system the elite implemented, for, in most cases, they were easily able to adopt the ideologies and policy options of their choice because there was little or no opposition. There was very little resistance from the elite and no mass resistance from ordinary African people when most post-independent regimes argued for and adopted the one-party state and socialism. Only in a few countries, such as Angola and Mozambique, did the adoption of socialism become a source of conflict between the ruling elite and the opposition. These conflicts were exacerbated by the Cold War divisions among the global superpowers of the time, turning them into protracted civil wars. The opposition gained support from capitalist powers such as the United States, including the then Apartheid South African regime, while the incumbent ruling elite were supported by the former USSR and Cuba.

What the African leaders of most regimes did by adopting one-party political systems and socialism was to establish the potential ideological and institutional means by which to achieve the promises of independence and legitimize their rule to the people who shared the vision and values of the independence movements. These included modern ideals as well as the traditional values of life and leadership which ensured freedom, dignity, well-being, and the welfare of all people and the community long before colonialism. Whether the post-independence leaders, in practice, achieved legitimacy through meeting the common vision and the promises of independence is a question that needs to be analyzed for each African state. While neopatrimonial theories can help one to understand the post-independence political and socio-economic systems of many African states, because they ignore the core of African politics (i.e., the evolution of African politics, and whether the dynamics of democracy and the common good were fulfilled during precolonial times and colonialism, and in the struggle against colonialism), they arguably cannot provide a comprehensive analysis for any African state, and, in some cases, may be completely weak explanatory theories.

It is notable—and natural, given the overwhelming support and participation of the people in the independence movements—that Africans cooperated enthusiastically and followed closely the early projects of nation building put forward and implemented by the first leaders of the post-independence regimes. The people were informed and driven by the vision and ideas of democracy,

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development, and unity which they believed the independence movement embraced. However, in the short history of each independent African state, one can observe failures of African leaders to achieve expected outcomes. Thus, complaints arose, followed by protests by the people and other leaders. It is notable that in this span of time, some leaders changed course and charted new directions that purported to be more responsive to the majority of the people’s demands and expectations. For example, in Kenya, “Sessional Paper No. Ten” was issued in 1965 to describe how the implementation of socialism would lead to rapid economic development and social progress for all citizens; Julius Nyerere put forward the Arusha Declaration of 1967, six years after the independence of Tanganyika, which emphasized socialist development and central planning and led to the nationalization of a number of industries and public services; in Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda promoted left nationalist-socialist ideology called Zambian Humanism; and Obote of Uganda issued the “Common Man’s Charter” in 1969, which had mixed socialist and nationalist motivations and defined the Move to the Left that called for political and economic power to be vested in the majority. Other similar or different response initiatives were put forward by leaders either earlier or later in other African states.

Whether, indeed, the new policies served national interests and the interests of all and were consistent with the aims of independence of each African state is something to be analyzed case-by-case. However, it was evident that, following the change of ideology and policies, in some African regimes there was an increase in the use of force and a reign of terror to silence people’s opposition, as the leadership did not move consistently to respond to people’s demands for democracy, development, and prosperity for all. Anger and clandestine opposition against the unresponsiveness of leadership continued in most African states, and in the late 1980s, the resistance became linked to a favorable international environment by way of the third wave of democratization and the end of the Cold War. These two events bolstered the

73 Kenya Government, “African Socialism and Its Application in Planning in Kenya” (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1965), 1-62. This paper is otherwise called “Sessional Paper No. 10,” as it was presented in the Kenyan parliament by the late Tom Mboya, then minister of economic planning and development.
people’s opposition against irresponsible African regimes.

The third wave of democratization justified the demand for change in economic and political policies, as people throughout Eastern Europe demanded such change and toppled dictatorial regimes, one after the other. The end of Cold War meant that Western powers no longer needed to support dictatorial regimes in Africa as partners. In fact, now Western powers turned against the regimes, demanding that they implement the ideals of democracy as practiced in Western states and as the local people in African states were demanding. The regimes in Africa were at least forced to allow multiparty democracy, which to date remains the main gain of the social movements of the 1980s and 1990s. The establishment of just, democratic, and accountable governmental leadership, the ending of corruption, and the use of a country’s wealth and economy for economic welfare and the development of the nation as whole were predicated on this political change. In the eyes of African people, as before, this remains the key challenge for African leaders and the governments they lead.

Contrary to neopatrimonial arguments and their portrayal of African politics, this analysis shows that, even though much of the architecture of African politics manifests itself as described by the neopatrimonial literature, the inner core of African politics is very much contested terrain. It is a terrain where the people and some leaders who represent the people’s interest and the common good wrestle constantly with the leadership that is in place to implement the ideals of an African post-independence state on which the struggles against colonial rule and for independence were predicated: the promotion of democracy, development, prosperity, welfare for all, and the unity of the people within the state.

What Does the Adoption of Western Multiparty Liberal Democracy Mean?

Although the struggle for democracy, clean government, and responsive regimes led to the adoption of Western-style multiparty, liberal, democratic political systems in most African states during the third wave of democratization, it may be said that the African system and perspective on democracy and responsive government is not viable, or even is nonexistent, as it has not replaced the previous failed practices of leadership and governance in Africa. This essay argues that, even though African states adopted Western, liberal, multiparty democracy, there is a set of indigenous ideas about the democratic state and

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responsive government that requires African leaders to be responsive and accountable to the public. Its origins are in the struggle for independence and in the governance systems of traditional African society.

Such indigenous ideas form the basis of the African people’s dissatisfaction with unresponsive leadership, including the neopatrimonial practices of the leaders, which neopatrimonial theorists erroneously have concluded are the product of African culture and, therefore, acceptable. This collective dissatisfaction with African leaders led Africans, even during the period when they were not exposed to many Western ideas, to demand democratic, just, accountable leadership and government. This element of democracy that Africans demand from their leaders can be viewed as an organic social contract between the African people and would-be post-independence leaders in African nation-states since the time of colonialism and the struggle against it. The contract also is rooted in previous knowledge Africans had of ideal community leadership in precolonial African communities.

The vision and ideas of the social contract arguably now co-exist with Western liberal democratic ideas to which the majority of African people have been exposed. Understanding of both the indigenous ideas and new visions of responsive government and leadership is necessary to gain a full picture of how democracy is evolving in Africa as well as how Africans are appropriating elements of democratic thought, both indigenous and international, and using them to support or oppose their regimes and leaders. This appropriation is in response to their own political experience, which has included the violation of civil and human rights, corruption, and uncaring leadership since independence, contrary to the people’s expectation of their leaders. It is also the result of growing knowledge about Western liberal democracy, as African states, the governing elite, and the opposition did not have the opportunity to develop and implement a unique alternative political system that was purely African in ideas and form during the third wave of democratization since the mid-1980s. This weakness is shared by all political opposition movements to dictatorial regimes during the third wave of democratization as throughout the world, the outcome of the struggle for democracy has been the implementation of Western, liberal, multiparty democracy to replace the dictatorial monolithic regimes that have been opposed.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the abuse of power which leaders of post-independence African governments inflicted on their people resulted in insurrections and protests against many regimes. The scale of the resistance, motivated by a demand for change and for more accountable government, took many scholars of African politics by surprise because Africa was thought to be “unfertile terrain” for democracy. However, the people’s resistance against oppressive, nonresponsive, African regimes has been a feature of political

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life throughout the post-independence period. The resistance has included some political leaders, trade union leaders and workers, academics, students, and farmers in villages and peri-urban areas. Many persons in the opposition, including politicians, writers, and scholars, have been exiled, imprisoned, or killed in their own countries for denouncing the dictatorial tendencies of the regimes.

The fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s as a result of pressures from civil society that demanded political reform and which gained support from Western democracies, provided an opportunity for opposition leaders and publics in Africa to resist not only abusive regimes but also those who had failed to provide leadership during the economic difficulties of the 1980s. It is acknowledged that these protests led to the transition to multiparty political systems in Africa. Contrary to the position taken by Bratton and van de Walle, it is arguable that the protests against African regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s not only stemmed from the bad economic conditions of that period but also were a continuation of the protests against the undemocratic behavior of regime leaderships since the founding of independent African states after colonialism.

The resistance of the people to unresponsive and oppressive regimes can been seen as continuous and consistent with precolonial African political thought and with the struggle against colonialism. The tendency to ignore the history of African political thought and to conceptualize African society as essentially nondemocratic and mostly instrumental is well illustrated by the titles of two academic books from the 1990s presenting the neopatrimonial view of African politics. Bayart’s *The State in Africa: The Politics of Belly* and Chabal and Daloz’s *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* in different ways are negative stereotypes of Africans as either people who are concerned only with immediate material welfare or political leaders and people who are masters of disorder. In neither case are Africans portrayed as having the potential to be political actors who may be motivated by ideals and a sense of the common good. Yet, Africans demanded an end to corruption and nepotism, and the implementation of justice, democracy, and solidarity during the street protests for democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s. There

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82 Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, 97-149.


84 Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*, 4-16.
were political protests in various forms earlier, as well, because the leadership
deviated from the idea of governance for the public good that people had for
postcolonial states in Africa.

Contrary to the materialist and instrumental perspectives of African politics
put forward by proponents of the neopatrimonial view, this essay argues that
the ideas and ideals that constituted the struggle for independence in African
states affect the legitimacy of a regime and can explain the continued support
for at least some dominant parties and regimes in Africa.85 These ideas and
the degree of legitimacy of a regime can be traced through the promise of, and
struggle for, independence to the present day. The ideas, particularly during
the struggle for independence, galvanized the political leaders and people as a
political community. The general thrust of the ideas that constituted the promise
of independence was the enactment of a post-independence state that would be
politically just and democratic, economically developmental, and capable of
uniting the people socially within the borders of a state. This essay argues that
these ideas are still significant and act as reference points or goals for African
people collectively in their evaluation of regimes, even in circumstances in
which the ideals that this vision contains are not met.

Conclusion

Neopatrimonial theorists have not been able to recognize any African ideas
and values as the possible bases of an accountable and democratic polity,
and have gone as far as to describe African culture as the root cause of
neopatrimonial, corrupt, and unaccountable regimes in Africa. Contrary to this
view, an alternative framework advanced in this essay is based on the belief
that indigenous African political thought and understandings of democracy
and government aimed at the common good were constructed by the African
people collectively through their concrete experience of living under the often
brutal, racist, divisive, exploitative, and undemocratic colonial regimes. The
reaction of the Africans was to formulate ideas and a vision for democratic rule
through a caring government that would strive for the welfare and prosperity of
all rather than pursue the undemocratic, exploitative, divide-and-rule strategies
employed by the colonial regimes. Africans as one polity united behind this
vision of society to fight for independence. The main inspiration for the
formulation of this vision was the idealized precolonial culture of democratic
governance and communal living which was combined with ideas from

85 See, David Nyaluke, The Basis of Democracy and Regime Legitimacy in Africa: The Case
of Tanzania (Ph.D. diss., Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, 2013), http://doras.dcu.
ie/19405/ (accessed December 7, 2014), and David Nyaluke and Eileen Connolly, “The Role
of Political Ideas in Multiparty Elections in Tanzania: Refuting Essentialist Explanations of
com/content/7032510666044052/ (accessed December 7, 2014).
modern democratic governments experienced by the few Africans who gained education in the West or who had resided in Europe, America, and some East European countries. Now, in the twenty-first century, unlike in any periods before, many Africans also have had the opportunity to experience Western democracy and its development for the common good through travel, study, and even increased mass communications via television and the Internet.

The alternative framework put forward in this essay challenges neopatrimonial theory and the model used to evaluate the legitimacy of African regimes, accountability, and democracy without engaging African political thought and its history of development. Employment of similar epistemology has often produced paradoxes and puzzles about African politics that point to a misreading of African political processes, even though the research intends to offer a better understanding of African politics. This is particularly true of research concerning the struggle for democracy. For instance, this research predicted that the third wave of democratization which arose after the fall of the Soviet Union would not reach African shores. The failures of this approach to research become even more puzzling when considered in light of the fact that Africa is a continent where the level of support for democracy has been high from the very beginning, compared to many parts of world where liberal democracy spread during the third wave.

There are two important benefits that can be derived from the alternative framework proposed by this essay in place of, or in combination with, neopatrimonial theory. First, it allows for a more complete appreciation of the underlying causes and internal contradictory dynamics of African regime legitimacy. Neopatrimonial theory conflates cause and outcome, and treats the manifestation, or the façade, of African politics as its internal logic, dynamics, and the working of African politics. The theorists have erroneously linked unresponsive leaderships and identified African culture as the cause of neopatrimonialism in African regimes. The alternative framework leads one to understand that the manifestation, or façade, of African politics is different from its underlying mechanisms, which are shaped by contradictory forces operating within them. Neopatrimonial theory has erred in this regard, seeking to justify some selected features of the outward manifestation of African politics as if what is observable is its main feature and its very essence and intrinsic nature.

The alternative framework proposed in this essay places emphasis on African political thought and poses the question of what Africans collectively want their communities and states to be. It also explores the epistemological foundations of this vision. This alternative makes a contribution to what Mamadou has termed the existence of norms which shape political processes

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87 Diamond, “How People View Democracy.”
in a democratic way in Africa. It also points out the ideational basis of the developmental state that Bach discusses in his latest work, which seeks to rehabilitate and rebalance the extent to which neopatrimonialism is used to describe and explain African politics. Building on the works of Ake and Mustapha, this essay has argued that, from the time of the struggle for independence, Africans have espoused a comprehensive vision of their ideal nation-states based on the harsh realities of their lived experience under colonialism. Neopatrimonial research has addressed African politics without taking African political thought into consideration. The theory has not recognized or acknowledged African political thought, and thus it has treated African politics as a purely instrumental process. Indeed, Africa has not had many philosophers who have written down their thoughts about politics and political regime legitimacy. The continent was not part of the industrial revolution that produced many of the ideas about politics and the state in Europe and America, and most African leaders have sought to make the political system neopatrimonial. However, the continent has well-established traditions and a culture of democratic governance that predates colonialism. Indeed, it is this preexisting culture that gave impetus to the African struggle for independence, as the experience of living under undemocratic, racist, divisive, and exploitative colonial rule harshly contradicted Africa’s long-established democratic traditions. In their critique of, and opposition to, colonialism, Africans made known the ideal type of nation-state and governance to which they aspired. These ideals still are at the heart of the political contest between nonresponsive African leaders and how the majority of the people want government and governance to be—responsive, developmental, and unifying.

As an approach and model for understanding African politics, the framework of the ideals, vision, and promises of independence is important because it has links with the precolonial ideas of leadership, organization, authority, and legitimacy which developed in African communities from the beginning of settled social life in Africa. These ideas were integrated into the struggle for independence because that struggle fundamentally rejected the undemocratic and exploitative colonial order and promised that this order would be replaced by a democratic regime that was informed by the ideals of the precolonial traditional communities and its leadership values.

as well as by contemporary ideas of a just, fair, and democratic government. Such political thought and ideals, which not only inform but also form and shape the workings of the African state, cannot be left out when explaining African regime legitimacy, governance, and politics. This, however, is what neopatrimonial theory largely has done.