
The Legacies of Democratic Experiments in Africa: Ghana's Democratic Trajectory in Comparative Perspective

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More than two decades have passed since the end of the Cold War, yet in many ways the world continues to experience its consequences. As many countries, including those in Africa, lost support from their previous Soviet allies, and as future financial assistance became further conditional upon measures of good governance and democracy, many regimes were compelled to both liberalize and democratize in order to survive. Within Africa, such conditions were all the more significant, as many regimes were confronted with poor economic conditions held over from the previous decade. As a result of the increased difficulty of maintaining an authoritarian status quo, no fewer than twenty-eight African countries undertook “experiments” with democracy during the critical period between 1990 and 1994.

However, in spite of the democratic upsurge, instances of coups, crises, and institutional stagnation continued to challenge the democratic gains made during the inaugural period. By 2009, only half of the states previously experiencing such democratic openings could still be listed as nominally democratic, while only six could be widely considered as liberal democracies.

As comparisons of these countries' democratic paths reveal a striking disparity between aspirations and outcomes of democracy, such comparisons also reveal the puzzling case of one country experiencing an inauspicious democratic transition, yet maintaining what many would regard as a liberal democratic state

in Africa. How is it that Ghana, a country possessing many conditions unfavorable to democracy at the time of its democratic opening—including questionable inaugural elections, a dominating presidential system, and an uneven playing field between government and opposition parties—nevertheless managed to follow a steadfast path of democratization? Whereas all other countries with similar inaugural conditions have since produced widely recognized systems of mixed, or otherwise non-democratic rule, what factors explain why Ghana took a different path?

In answering this puzzle, my project investigates Ghana's political history after the Cold War and argues for the case of Ghana as indicative of a larger phenomenon when explaining contemporary democracy in Africa. In positing Ghana as a paradigmatic example of a “democratic trajectory,” the insights gathered from this analysis promise to assist in explaining the variation of regimes occurring in Africa after the Cold War. In short, my project assesses for variation among three factors present at the time of each country's democratic opening: strength of political opposition, relative state power, and foreign aid. Furthermore, this research also considers executive decision-making and the manner in which leaders of these democratizing countries chose to either tolerate democratic expansion (such as acknowledging the structural challenges to maintaining authoritarian rule) or to repress democratic demands through noting their privileged position with respect to the previously

identified factors. In other words, while domestic and international conditions structured the sets of choices for leaders during and following each democratic opening, each leader's perceived chances of maximizing their authority—whether democratically or otherwise—ultimately determined whether a given country would proceed along a democratic or non-democratic trajectory.

During my eight months of field research in Ghana, I have collected data through elite interviews among a variety of in-country experts within academia, government, and civil society, as well as through local archival and academic resources. Through these processes I have obtained the necessary information and data for my research that not only serves to identify the factors accounting for Ghana's particular trajectory of democracy, but additionally serves to test the comparability of such factors against the experiences of the twenty-seven other countries included in this dissertation.

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