

Review

“In defence of electoral politics and democracy in Africa: Review of Lindberg’s Thesis”

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This article critically reviews the extent to which Lindberg’s proposition that “African states will become more democratic if they simply keep holding elections” defies the unfavourable conditions suitable for the consolidation of democracy in Africa. It also attempts to examine “how” and “why” Lindberg’s famous model of “Democratization by Elections” can still be held as the true reflection in that part of the 48 states of the sub-Saharan Africa’s current democratic experiment. To achieve the objectives of this study, this paper attempts to assess the theoretical justifications underpinning Lindberg’s argument and some of the views from his critics, with the help of notable scholars on democratization in Africa, critically assesses some of the arguments against Lindberg’s propositions and his response to his critics and draws some conclusions from the propositions thereof.

Key words: Democratization, elections, electoral politics, consolidation.

INTRODUCTION

“There has been talk of an African political renewal and political rebirth, even if it exists side by side with considerable political violence”

--- E. Gyimah-Boadi (2004:5)

“While it remains emphatically true that ‘elections do not equal democracy’- that there is much more to having democracy and making it work than free, fair, and truly competitive elections- it is also the case that institutionalising free and fair elections, with rigorous and effective electoral administration, is a crucial aspect of democracy. And over time, it will have a tonic effect on

the governance problem” in Africa.

----Larry Diamond (2009: xviii)

Africa has been the scene of some of the most dramatic political reforms since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent end of the Cold War (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004:5). Within this period, some form of pluralism has been introduced or reintroduced into the politics of over thirty out of the fifty-three countries of Africa (ibid). According to Gyimah-Boadi, since that period, “there has been talk of an African political renewal and political rebirth, even if it exists side by side with considerable political violence”

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(ibid). As Ihonvbere (2003:33) rightly indicates “any evaluation of the on-going processes of democratic renewal in Africa must be considered against the background of the continent’s past experiences.”

Considering the fact that Africa’s post-colonial history reveals a “record of brutal dictatorships, predatory regimes, military juntas, and one-man (mis) rule must be located within a holistic appreciation of the continent’s history, historical experiences, and the negative consequences of such experiences. Conditions of dependence, foreign domination, structural distortions, underdevelopment, weak state structures, and the politicization of the national question did not make governance in postcolonial societies any easier” (ibid). However, Richard Sandbrook (1996) is of the view that although these are indeed onerous conditions, their impact on democratization requires some clarification. They do not prevent a transition to democracy by means of reasonably ‘free and fair’ electoral contest. Such a contest can be successfully arranged even in a poor underdeveloped country suffering from ethnic/regional tensions, rampant clientelism and limited democratic experience (Sandbrook, 1996: 69). Staffan Lindberg (2006) also argues that ‘democratizing nations like African states learn to become democratic through repeated democratic behaviour, even if their elections are flawed’.

An overview of Lindberg’s argument on ‘Democratization by elections’

Where do competitive elections lead in Africa? Do these institutions reinforce democracy or contribute to the durability of authoritarian rule? As Bratton (2013:17) notes, some scholars have argued strongly that repetitive elections, even when flawed, will eventually lead toward competitive democratic rule, whereas others have also strongly argued, to the contrary. For instance, in his article, “*the End of the Transition Paradigm*”, Thomas Carothers (2002:16) argued strongly that the “greatly reduced expectations are in order as to what elections can accomplish as generators of deep-reaching democratic change”. He therefore concluded that “elections are in and of themselves largely insignificant to democratization” (ibid). However, as Lindberg, simply puts it an uninterrupted series of elections has a “self-reinforcing power” to inculcate society with democratic qualities (Lindberg, 2006: 2; 2009: 25-46).

In his groundbreaking book, *Democratization by elections: a New Mode of Transition*, Lindberg (2009), posits that regular elections as a “new mode of transition”, cumulatively over time, precipitates regime change (ibid: 2). Even though, in the later versions of his theory, Lindberg acknowledges the fact that elections can sometimes lead to “autocratization” as well as

Democratization (Lindberg, 2009:13). However, he continues to hold the view that “the link between elections and democratization is not theoretically tied to freedom and fairness of elections” (Lindberg, 2009:328). In sum, he concluded that it is the frequency of elections that supposedly creates the democratic change; the quality of these contests is apparently less important (Bratton, 2013:17).

Furthermore, Lindberg (2009) observes that the empirical landscape of Africa has changed in many ways with the events following the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 12, 1989. In the 1980s, 123 nations are presently “electoral” democracies, meaning they live up to a minimum definition of “polyarchic” democracy (Dahl, 1971, quoted in Lindberg, 2009: 3). Specifically, in Africa, ‘of the sub-Saharan Africa’s 48 countries (from 1993, when Eritrea became independent), over 20 can now be considered relatively democratic by a minimum standard definition, while another 20 or so (from Nigeria to Chad and Zimbabwe) are electoral authoritarian in various guises, and 5 countries remain closed authoritarian (Angola, Ivory Coast, Eritrea, Somalia, and Swaziland) (ibid).

Other scholars disagree with Lindberg’s arguments. In their landmark contribution to the comparative study of political regimes, Levitsky and Way (2010:3), *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, argue strongly on the contrary that:

“Transitions did not always lead to democracy. However, in much of Africa and the former Soviet Union, and in parts of Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Americas, new regimes combined electoral competition with varying degrees of authoritarianism.

In other words, Levitsky and Way (2010), take note of the spread of “competitive authoritarian” regimes in the post-Cold War world (ibid). They indicate further that these hybrid systems combine electoral competition with new forms of autocratic rule (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Bratton, 2013:17). As the above quotation, indicates for Levitsky and Way, a defining feature of competitive authoritarianism is low quality elections: competition is “real but unfair” because it is never played out on “a reasonably level playing field” (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 5-7). Moreover, the electoral terrain is uneven because incumbents take advantage of access to state resources for partisan campaigns while systematically blocking opposition forces from organising a winning challenge (Levitsky and Way, 2010, quoted in Bratton, 2013:17-18). Thus, “under these circumstances, multiparty elections do not necessarily herald the arrival of democracy. Instead, autocrats learn how to control a seemingly democratic process with vote buying, ballot stuffing, and manipulation of the vote count, and also, if necessary, by resorting to repression and violence” (ibid). They,

therefore, conclude that “in these ways, competitive elections contribute not so much to democratization as to the longevity and respectability of authoritarian rule” (Ibid).

On the other hand, in his reflection of Lindberg’s work, Larry Diamond (2009), points out that, Lindberg proved “that even when elections left a lot to be desired in terms of freedom and fairness, the process of repeated, competitive elections tended to generate momentum for greater democratization” (Lindberg, 2006, quoted in Diamond, 2009: xiii-xiv). More significantly, Diamond indicates that “Lindberg’s finding, that even deficient elections were worth holding and engaging because they could advance real democratic change, brought the debate about elections and democracy full circle, in a sense” (Ibid). Since, “this has been true both in providing a procedural means to achieve a breakthrough to genuine democracy, with opposition victories or at least improved quality of elections, and deepening of democracy with respect to political rights and civil liberties over time” (Ibid). Moreover, Diamond (2009: xviii) notes that: “theory, experience, common sense—and the empirical in *Lindberg’s* book—all tell us that where the political terrain is more pluralistic and the opposition has best mobilized its strength, the model of democratization of elections is most promising”. In sum, Lindberg’s overall hypothesis may be summarized as “the longer an uninterrupted series of elections a country has, the more its society will become imbued with democratic qualities” (Lindberg, 2006:99) (Figure 1).

The Interrogation of the thesis ‘Democratization by Elections’: Lindberg and His Critics

According to Teorell and Hadenius (2009: 82), not all scholars agree on the democratizing power of elections. They point out that Carothers (2002), for instance, dispels the notion—widely held in the US foreign policy community that, the “attempted transitions to democracy, elections will not just be a foundation stone but a key generator over time of further democratic reforms” (Ibid). Thus, against this assumption Carothers argued that even “reasonably regular, genuine elections” in many transitional countries have generated no political participation beyond voting and only shallow government accountability, and have done precious little “to stimulate the renovation or development of political parties” (Carothers, 2008: 8,15, quoted in Teorell and Hadenius 2009: 82). Furthermore, Teorell and Hadenius, point out that, “along similar lines some case study comparativists have raised doubts about any democratizing results from holding elections” (Ibid). They note also that “Brownlee (2007), for example holds that ‘authoritarian elections tend to reveal political trends rather than propel them’, that elections are ‘symptoms, not causes’ (Brownlee

2007:9-10, quoted in Teorell and Hadenius, 2009: 82).

Similarly, Levitsky and Way (2010:22), concluded in their 35 comparative case studies of the newly democratizing countries between 1990 and 1995 democratic experiments from 5 regions of the world (including 14 African states) that “neither the breakdown of authoritarian regimes nor the holding of multiparty elections necessarily led to democratization during the post-Cold War period. These regime patterns suggest that—contra Lindberg and others—multiparty elections are not by themselves an independent cause of democratization”. In a similar comparative case study by Richard Sandbrook (1996) in his Article, *Transitions without Consolidation: Democratization in Six African Cases* (including Ghana, Mali, Madagascar, Niger, Zambia and Tanzania); argues that “democratic transitions respond, in a sense, to a ‘technical fix’. But democratization, when it occurs in a hostile environment, tends to stall at this stage. The ‘second transition’ that should begin after the election- the consolidation of a democratic regime-resists technical fixes... Africa’s harsh conditions, legacies and conjectural factors intrude at this stage to impede the institutionalisation of democratic organisations and procedures” (1996:70).

According to Andreas Schedler (2009:310), in contrast to both Levitsky and Way (2010) and Richard Sandbrook (1996), “large-N studies that cover (roughly) the kinds of electoral authoritarian regimes in which electoral transitions are supposed to take place are more likely to confirm the democratizing power of elections”. For instance, she points out that “in his research on electoral cycles in sub-Saharan Africa since 1989, Staffan I. Lindberg (2006) concluded that the regular conduct of multiparty elections tends to cause steady improvements in their integrity, legitimacy, and competitiveness. In addition to increasing the ‘democratic qualities’ of elections, he found, uninterrupted sequences of electoral contests tend to have ‘a significant and positive causal effect’ (Lindberg, 2006:144) on the improvement of civil liberties”.

In the view of Larry Diamond, a more radical position adopted against Lindberg’s model of democratization through elections was by Terry Karl and other political science critics as they exposed what they saw as a “fallacy of electoralism”, indicating that “(multiparty) elections do not equal democracy, and that many of the regimes in Central America and elsewhere that were being accepted and praised as democracies were in fact hybrid regimes” (Karl, 1986, 1995, cited in Diamond, 2009: xiv). Diamond (2009) stressed further that Karl et al. argues that “in Central America and beyond, elections gradually became increasingly competitive and fair, and during the 1980s, El Salvador gradually transformed from what Levitsky and Way (2002) call a “competitive authoritarian regime” to at least an electoral democracy (though in many ways still an illiberal one)” (Diamond,

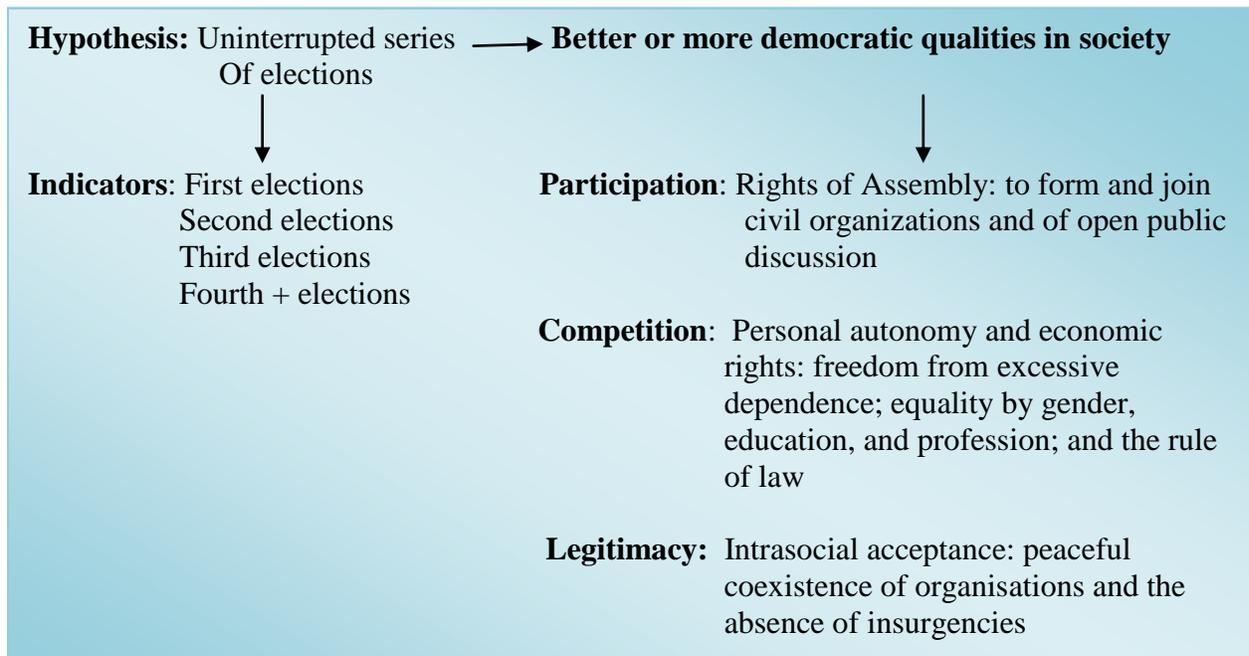


Figure 1. The Main hypothesis of Lindberg's (2006:103) model of the overall relationship between elections and democratization.

2009: xiv). In response to these critics, Diamond in his defence for Lindberg's hypothesis, argued logically that:

"While it remains emphatically true that 'elections do not equal democracy'—that there is much more to having democracy and making it work than free, fair, and truly competitive elections—it is also the case that institutionalising free and fair elections, with rigorous and effective electoral administration, is a crucial aspect of democracy. And over time, it will have a tonic effect on the governance problem" (Diamond, 2009: xviii).

In his own defence of the proper "role of elections" in facilitating democratization in Africa, against the some of the well established pessimistic views 'on the role of elections'; for example Linz and Stephan (1996) used 'the date of the first election as the day when the transition process ended, and Bratton and van de Walle (1997:195) adopted this approach in their analysis of Africa's post-cold war democratic experiments' (Lindberg, 2009: 4-5). As well as Huntington's (1991) use of elections as mere indicators of consolidation as in his 'use of two alternations in power after successful completion of first elections—the "two-turnover test" (ibid). Lindberg strongly argues that 'in none of the uses of the term in the literature, however, did elections play a part other than to signify the genesis or completion of consolidation' (Lindberg, 2009:5). Lindberg argues further that "the inescapable conclusion is that neither the dominant

theories of democratization nor those depicting consolidation of democracy have furthered elections as a causal factor in the democratization process". Lindberg's points out here that 'perhaps Terry Karl's warning about the electoral fallacy that elections do not make a democracy (Karl, 1990; 2000) - gave us one of the first leads, to be followed up by Carothers (1997; 2002), who cautioned about the over-reliance on elections as the most important venue for donors' democracy support'. More significantly, in Lindberg's response to Terry Karl's criticism, is that 'while Karl's point was to warn against assuming that a country is democratic just because it holds what looks like reasonable multiparty elections, the observation made something else obvious: if competitive elections and democracy can be separated both conceptually and empirically, there is the possibility of a causal relationship between the two' (Lindberg, 2009:6).

On the other hand, in his response to Carothers (1997, 2002) pessimistic view about the 'power of elections' in furthering democratization, as already noted above, Lindberg, argues that the findings from his study "challenges one of the core assumptions in the field of democratization by showing that first elections are not necessarily 'founding' but are more often just a step in the transition process, and this corroborates Carothers's (2002) critique on the point" (Lindberg, 2006:145). Moreover, along similar lines this response also meets up with Sandbrook's (1996: 70) "technical fixes" of "founding" elections in Africa on point.

Moreover, according to Lindberg, the prevailing pessimism built around concepts of hybrid or electoral authoritarian regimes since the mid- 1990s is challenged by this study. Using relatively short periods of study, skeptics have posited hybrid regimes as evidence that many countries are not moving towards democracy, although they are moving away from harsher authoritarian rule (Ibid), that is only based on the findings of 'a comparative study of 35 regimes in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and post-communist Eurasia between 1990 and 1995 (Levitsky and Way, 2010:4).

In his defence of electoral politics and democratization in Africa, based on the analysis and findings from his book, *Democracy and Elections in Africa*, which "examines the relationship between elections and democracy building on a new data set of 5, 568 observations on 232 elections in Africa, 1997-2004" (Lindberg, 2004: xi), and "2006" suggests that "moving from authoritarian rule to a competitive electoral regime tends to lead to further democratization. No matter what the emerging regimes of Africa are to some academic observers—hybrid, electoral authoritarian, patrimonial, or democraduras (Diamond 2002, Karl 1995, Luckham 1995)—successive uninterrupted cycles of elections tend to promote greater "democraticness" of both the electoral regime and the society" (Lindberg, 2006:145). However, Lindberg, warns that, "the time frame of the present study is also limited, and this should caution against too determinate conclusions. On the other hand, the period used here is the longest so far available on African elections" (ibid).

Conclusion: Lindberg on the 'Power of Elections' in unfavourable conditions in Africa

As Gyimah-Boadi pointed out "alongside the democratic failures, deficits, and dilemmas, there lies another reality: a positive reality of a modest but appreciable degree of improvements in the quality of governance in many African countries. In short, democratic reforms and political liberalization have helped to improve the quality of politics in Africa; they have helped to make the African state significantly less autocratic, even if it remains largely neopatrimonial" (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004:5-6). Along similar lines, Lindberg, also concludes that "countries with a turbulent present and where the future seems unpredictable need de jure participatory, competitive, and legitimate elections to provide a possible means and mechanism for democratization" (Lindberg, 2006:159). More significantly, on the issue of "unfavourable conditions" for the prospects of democracy in Africa, Lindberg's response is that his "Study has not deduced factors lacking in Africa; it is based exclusively on Africa's own experiences with electoral procedures and practices. When scholars posit that the growth of an urban middle

class, formation of pacted transitions, or establishment of parliamentary rather than presidential systems, for example, furthers democratic development, such advice is based on assumptions of causal equivalence and spatially constant effects". In sum, Lindberg (2006:161) pointed out that "Dahl (1971) concluded his study by positing that countries with political conditions unfavourably to democracy—which includes most African nations—are unlikely to transform into stable polyarchies in the near future. This prediction has been borne out for more than 30 years now". Linberg (2006), stressed emphatically, that 'his present study has surveyed a blind spot in Dahl's and many others' reasoning. Exercising and improving democratic procedures in the partial regime of elections tends to have positive effects on democratic qualities in society. These freedoms and rights are undoubtedly of fundamental value in and of themselves' (ibid). In this light, Staffan Lindberg, rested his case by concluding that "elections in and of themselves further the spread and depth of such fundamental freedoms. It seems that it is no small or insignificant thing to vote" (ibid).

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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