

# Trajectories of Democracy in Africa and the Legacies of Democratic Experiments

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The period following the end of the Cold War witnessed a significant shift in regime-change on the African continent. With the combination of factors including the decline of great-power rivalry on the continent, rising economic problems, and increased conditionality to foreign assistance, many African governments found themselves in positions where their non-democratic status-quo would no longer suffice. Between 1990 and 1994 approximately twenty-eight African states undertook efforts at democratization, including the holding of inaugural elections. By 1994, the formal one-party state had all but ceased to exist on the continent. And yet, with the benefit of hindsight we know that such democratic optimism would be dashed by occurrences of government coups, collapses, and democratic breakdown. By 2009, only half of the twenty-eight states that previously held democratic elections between 1990 and 1994 could still be nominally considered democratic, while only about half of those could be confidently considered as liberal democratic. Why is it that some of these countries succeeded in consolidating democratic institutions and principles of governance, while others did not?

Seeking to better understand the regime “trajectories” of states that engaged in democratic reform in the period following the end of the Cold War, my research investigates the institutional paths that each of the twenty-eight abovementioned countries have taken in the past two decades since their initial democratic opening. By identifying the salient factors and events occurring in these states during their initial efforts at democratization, and furthermore assessing for similarities and differences associated between the cases under scrutiny, this project builds upon the contributions of previous research in this area by constructing a typology of regime trajectories that serves to assist with understanding how this group of countries—that similarly experienced the “wave” of democracy in Africa in the early 1990s—came to acquire their contemporary democratic and non-democratic regimes.

Through preliminary research on this issue, the case of Ghana stands out as a country following a steadfast trajectory of democracy, despite



experiencing what could be reasonably considered inauspicious initial conditions. As Ghana’s political history points to a legacy of military rule, a dominant executive, and other incumbent advantages within the media and elsewhere, it is striking that nearly two decades after holding what were considered by many to have been a problematic inaugural election, Ghana has since become a role model for democratization on the African continent. By obtaining a pre-dissertation research grant from the Center for African Studies, I was fortunate enough to travel to Ghana during summer 2012 to inquire into how Ghana’s regime status evolved between 1990 and 2012.

Through meeting with a variety of in-country experts, as well as accessing academic resources available only in-person, I was able to obtain information and data that not only aided my research concerning factors associated with Ghana’s

particular trajectory of democracy, but additionally supplied avenues for comparing Ghana’s experience with that of other countries within the scope of this study. In other words, although the research obtained this past summer constitutes only one step in what will be considered a much larger project, the information, resources, and experiences obtained serve to advance the project by not only identifying the factors applicable to one state’s experience with democracy, but also highlighting how such factors may be compared with respect to the experiences of other African states.

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