

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 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 considered “liberal” democracies.

As comparisons of these countries’

democratic paths reveal a striking disparity between aspirations and outcomes, such comparisons also reveal the puzzling case of one country experiencing an inauspicious democratic transition, yet eventually producing one of the most widely recognized democratic regimes on the African continent. 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 de-facto one party inaugural government, a dominating presidential system, and an overall uneven playing field between government and opposition parties—nevertheless managed to follow a steadfast path of democratization? Whereas all other countries with similar conditions have since produced ambiguous, or otherwise non-democratic governments, what factors explain why Ghana took a different path?

In answering this puzzle, my project investigates Ghana’s political history after its 1992 democratic opening and argues that the case of Ghana indicates a larger phenomenon when explaining contemporary democracy in Africa. Positing Ghana as a paradigmatic example of a *democratic trajectory*, the insights gathered from this project aid in explaining the variation of regimes occurring in Africa after the Cold War. In brief, this project assesses for variation among three factors present at the time of each country’s democratic opening: the strength of political opposition, foreign aid, and the amount of international leverage placed behind such aid. Furthermore, I also consider executive decision-making and the manner in which leaders of these countries chose to either tolerate ongoing democratic demands or to repress them altogether, based on the proverbial “writing on the wall” displayed through the presence/absence of the three previous factors. In

other words, these conditions structured the sets of choices for leaders following each democratic opening: each leader’s perceived chances of maximizing their authority ultimately determined whether a given country would proceed along a democratic or non-democratic trajectory.

During my eight months of field research in Ghana, supported through the Boren Fellowship Program, I collected data through elite interviews among a variety of in-country experts within academia, politics, government, and civil society, as well as through local archival and academic resources. Based on the results produced from this investigation of Ghana, my research successfully explains 21 of 25 countries’ regime trajectories (excluding exceptional cases). In sum, by regarding Ghana as the norm, rather than the exception to democracy in Africa, we learn more about why some countries maintained democratic regimes, and we understand why others will continue to do so in the future.

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