3. DEMOCRATISATION

a) Upheaval in Benin

Africa’s great wave of democratisation in the 1990s began in the small West African country of Benin. Just a few months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, representatives of a wide range of political groups, including both supporters and opponents of the regime, convened a national conference in the seat of government, Cotonou, to discuss the country’s woes. However, they did not leave it at that. Within a few days, the national conference declared itself sovereign, in other words, the highest authority in the country. General Mathieu Kérékou’s regime, which had ruled the country with an iron fist for seventeen years, was forced to stand by as the political system underwent a radical transformation. The general offered no resistance, paving the way for a civilian candidate to triumph at the ballot box and assume power in early 1991. Benin thus became the first African country in which the civilian population managed to overthrow a military regime and remove a sitting president by means of elections.

The sixth military coup since Benin’s independence took place in 1972. Although nothing indicated at first that this one was different from its predecessors, the military leader of the coup, General Kérékou, announced in 1974 that the takeover should be regarded as a Marxist revolution. The people of Dahomey, which was shortly to become Benin, had unwittingly chosen the path of socialism. The reasons for this choice lay in the Cold War context, in which the logical outcome of the country’s enduring anticolonial and anti-French sentiments was a choice in favour of the West’s ideological adversary. As it happens, the international status of the country did not change as a result of this turnaround: the Eastern Bloc was unable to provide substantial aid and France continued to serve as the patron of its former colony, regardless of who was in power. The socialist features of the political system were negligible. A Marxist-Leninist party was established in 1977, but the military was unwilling to play second fiddle.

The revolution had more significant economic implications. Whatever economic activity existed in the People’s Republic of Benin – which was not much, as the country has no resources or export products to speak of – was completely destroyed by socialist measures. The few existing private enterprises were nationalised, and a new range of state-owned enterprises, regulatory bodies and monopolies saw the light of day. These developments initially created employment, but the new enterprises proved to be entirely uncompetitive. All other products, including expensive ones from Western countries, proved cheaper than their Beninese equivalents. Exports had ceased almost entirely: export revenue dropped to just fifteen per cent of the value of imports. This situation eventually became too much even for France, which had continued to provide financial support to the regime. During the 1980s, the Beninese government became increasingly unable to pay the wages of the many public employees. Other economic activity had all but disappeared, and it was almost impossible to earn anything, even in the informal sector. When the government-appointed leader of the country’s single, socialist trade union called for wages to be paid, he was replaced by somebody who did not issue such calls.

In 1988, the regime’s financial bankruptcy spilled over into moral bankruptcy, when information leaked out that, in a desperate bid for revenue, it had planned to import and bury toxic waste from other countries for profit. As if that was not enough, the military, which was dominated by northerners, had selected the historical capital, Abomey, located in the middle of the densely populated southwestern territory of the Fon, as the prospective dumping ground. As a result of this plot, which – once revealed – was not carried out, and the collapse of the economy, the military regime’s position had become untenable by the end of the 1980s. The government entered into negotiations with the World Bank and the IMF to secure financial assistance, which it could only obtain if it agreed to radically restructure the economy: the public sector had to be largely dismantled, the number of public employees had to be reduced and radical cutbacks were required across the board. While the parties were discussing these matters, mass strikes broke out in Cotonou. The protesters were united by their lack of income. This applied even to non-commanding members of the military, who had not received their wages in months.
The regime could see no way out of this dismal situation for the country or itself. By convening a broad-based conference, it hoped to encourage some form of national unity or even reconciliation that would make it easier to swallow the bitter medicine prescribed by the structural adjustment programme. Representatives of the protesters were given the opportunity to articulate their grievances at the conference. In addition to political opponents and returning exiles, the participants included representatives of the government, the military and many institutions that officially supported the government. The 488 delegates met for the first time on 19 February 1990, at a short distance from the hotel where a World Bank delegation was staying. It quickly became clear that there would be no declarations of support for the regime. The delegates rejected the government’s agenda and refused to accept the president as chairman of the conference, electing the archbishop of Cotonou in his place.

For nine days, the national conference discussed the situation in the country as it saw fit. The population, which was able to follow the deliberations on radio and television, listened and watched with bated breath. The whole range of political, economic and social grievances was openly vented at this modern-day tribal council, while nobody defended the government. It was clear that the government would collapse in the absence of drastic military action, but Kérékou seemed unwilling to pursue this option under the watchful eye of the World Bank delegation. He understood that the military government would have to step down and decided to smooth the transition. He also apologised to the conference for the mistakes his government had made.

On 25 February 1990, the conference declared itself autonomous and sovereign. It established an interim government with twenty-seven members, including all the country’s former presidents, and charged it with drafting a new constitution to replace the Marxist constitution of 1977 and with organising elections for a new parliament and a new president. As a result of these developments, General Kérékou became acting president of Benin, whose only responsibility was to see to it that the above-mentioned decisions were carried out. Actual power was placed in the hands of a new prime minister, a former World Bank official named Nicephore Soglo, who was considered neutral by the Beninese and enjoyed the backing of the World Bank and France.

The interim government drew up a liberal constitution that was adopted by referendum the same year. Parliamentary elections and presidential elections, the latter in two rounds, took place in February and March 1991 respectively. Having become a swift convert to democracy, Kérékou actually participated in the presidential elections, but was soundly defeated by Soglo, who was sworn in as president in April. Thus it happened that, within a period of two years, Benin’s political order was transformed without bloodshed from a Marxist military dictatorship to a liberal democracy, in the civilian equivalent of a coup d’état. Civil society had assumed power and dealt a heavy blow to the predatory state. With the support of the population, the new government was ready to take on the immense task of reforming the economy, but, for the time being, the rest of Africa and the world were captivated by the success of Benin’s peaceful transition to democracy.

b) Many paths to the one-party state

When considering the history of democracy and democratisation in Africa before the 1990s, it is important to determine first what these terms actually mean, all the more so because in recent years almost every regime in Africa, however dictatorial, has tended to describe itself as democratic. Let us understand democracy as meaning that the population controls the state and governs freely, if indirectly, by means of elected representatives. Democratisation is the process that is meant to lead to democracy. In the 1940s, Joseph Schumpeter formulated his by now classic definition of the democratic method: ‘…that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.’³ This definition, which has been characterised as electoral democracy due to its emphasis on the electoral process, is nowadays regarded as minimalist.

In the 1970s, Robert Dahl expanded the concept of democracy by introducing the concept of polyarchy, which encompasses not only political competition and participation, but also a considerable number of individual freedoms (freedom of speech, the press, assembly and so forth), and makes democracy conditional on pluralism in society.⁴ According to Dahl, political competition and participation only have meaning if human rights are also observed. Schumpeter’s classic concept of ‘electoral democracy’ was thus expanded to ‘liberal democracy’, where ‘liberal’ refers in particular
to the government-protected freedoms of both individuals and groups. Besides elections, ‘liberal democracy’ thus includes respect for civil rights. It is sometimes also emphasised, finally, that democracies may not contain substantial areas of activity that evade democratic control because they fall under the jurisdiction of the military, the bureaucracy or oligarchic groups. Though such reserved domains were larger in Latin America and Asia, they existed in Africa too; for example, military control of a country’s main natural resources.

The colonial system had its roots in Europe, which was going through turbulent years, politically and otherwise. In the early twentieth century, Europe made great advances in human rights and democratisation. Their impact was scarcely felt in Africa. Only a handful of Africans had been ‘civilised’ (to use the language of the period) by colonialism, by means of a European education, and thereby elevated from subject to citizen. The population of the colonies continued to be deprived of the human rights and democracy that were becoming the norm in Europe. Nevertheless, a small, Europeanised African elite became familiar with such ideas.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea began to take hold that the colonial powers were duty-bound to improve the lot of their colonial subjects. However, the colonial powers did almost nothing to put this idea into practice in Africa before World War II. Only after 1945, when it became clear that colonial relations were in need of rethinking, did things begin to change. In addition to social and economic reforms, France and Britain introduced political innovations with democratic characteristics. The French government, which had a policy of assimilating Africans into French culture, went further in this regard than the government of Britain, which believed in two separate worlds: a colonial European world and an indigenous African world. Hence, Africans in the French colonies could be assimilated into the French political system (and could even become members of the National Assembly) but the role of the Europeanised elite in the British colonies remained less significant. No noteworthy political innovations took place in the Portuguese colonies during this period. Although Portugal, like France, had a policy of assimilation, the country was so underdeveloped and undemocratic by European standards that it was unable to exert a modernising effect.

As noted in chapter 1, the French and British colonies in Africa gained independence around 1960. The first leaders of the newly independent states came from the new African elite created by France and the United Kingdom during the colonial period. These leaders inherited a tradition of centralised colonial power and everything this implied in terms of outlook, especially arrogance. In many respects, the European colonial order had reinforced the tradition of absolutism that held sway in many parts of Africa. This effect went much deeper than the democratic systems and constitutions, similar to those of France and other Western countries, which were not introduced until the end of the colonial period. Historically speaking, the first wave of African democratisation in the twilight of colonialism was a superficial phenomenon, but it did present a challenge for the newly independent political systems. Following independence, the political parties established in the colonial period began a new existence in their native African environment.

The fledgling democratic institutions and organisations did not survive for long. Not only were they regarded as foreign impositions, but they also failed to serve the interests of the new rulers. In contrast to the elites of Western countries, the African political elite had no economic resources of its own. Its members had generally reached the summit of national politics solely on the basis of their education and ties with former colonial rulers. They depended for their income on a central role in government. Elections paid off for some members of the elite, but left others – the members of the losing parties – high and dry. The victors gained access to the state institutions and their revenue, while others received nothing. Elections were thus a zero-sum game where the winners took all and the losers were left empty-handed. As the opposition was unable to survive economically without alternative sources of income, it was not difficult for the authorities to encourage opposition politicians to defect to the ruling party, and to neutralise the small hard core in other ways. This led to the emergence of the one-party system in Africa. As the single surviving party was sustained economically by the state, the two gradually merged, creating a one-party state.

In order to consolidate their power, the civil authorities had to cooperate with the military establishment. The nature of this cooperation differed from country to country and in some cases
changed over time. However, the military always received or appropriated a portion of state revenue in exchange for its services. In some countries, civilians continued to call the shots with the support of the military, while, in others, the military ousted the civilian leadership and established a dictatorship. In fact, it was not always possible to make a meaningful distinction between political and military elites. The national leaders further strengthened their popular support base – initially built on their reputation as liberators who had freed their country from the yoke of colonialism – by exploiting traditional relations of patronage. In exchange for political support, clients received a share of the state pie. This frequently took the form of government jobs, which made a valuable gift in an underdeveloped economy where unemployment and uncertainty were the order of the day. The regimes thereby ensured themselves of a support base in the cities. In addition, they often received substantial aid from the major powers. Regardless of their performance, the African governments were thus quite firmly ensconced and could govern in an authoritarian manner. During this period, political freedom and popular influence on national government were non-existent in almost all African countries.

In fact, the period of one-party systems and military dictatorships, which began in the mid-1960s and effectively continued until the end of the Cold War, was not as homogeneous as the preceding account might suggest. There were some significant exceptions. For example, Botswana and Gambia boasted a certain amount of political pluralism and liberal democracy throughout this period, although the influence of the largest party on the state was quite substantial. Some one-party states permitted internal party elections in which multiple candidates participated. Multiparty systems occasionally emerged, sometimes to stay (as in Senegal from the 1970s onwards) but usually only to disappear again in short order. In spite of everything, the struggle for democracy remained alive in many places in this difficult time. During the process of renewed democratisation, which began in 1989, politicians sometimes fell back on these experiences when it came to forming political parties.

c) The call for social and political change

During the Cold War, democracy was the exception in Africa and a combination of authoritarian leadership, centralised decision-making and a lack of political freedom, pluralism and human rights was the rule. This situation was ideologically justified by reference to Africa’s dismal socioeconomic condition. Freedom was not considered important for development and political pluralism was regarded as un-African; it would lead only to infighting and instability and would waste resources needed for development. The authoritarian regimes nonetheless failed to produce socioeconomic progress, regardless of their ideological slant. On the contrary, by the end of the 1980s, most African countries had reached rock bottom, financially, economically, socially, politically and morally. The people of Africa became increasingly restless and frustrated about the faded hope of a better future. As noted by the prominent Nigerian scholar Claude Ake: ‘Poor leadership and structural constraints have turned the high expectations of independence into painful disappointment.’

The changes that led to democratisation were set in motion by urban protests against deteriorating social conditions. Unemployment was high, and what was worse, people with jobs had often stopped receiving part or all of their wages. This not only affected ordinary civil servants, but also members of the armed forces and the many groups that were dependent on the state as a result of its pivotal role in the economy. Having almost completely run out of funds, African governments were no longer able to meet their responsibilities to their own citizens. In addition to the direct financial implications for public employees, there was a general decline in other job benefits. Social conditions for the population as a whole also suffered as a result of deteriorating health care and education, as well as price increases for basic necessities.

In many countries, the protests were led by students but others were usually quick to join in. After years of oppression and cooptation, however, there were no real leaders that could channel their energies in the service of a clear-cut programme. Initially, this made the protests look very similar to the demonstrations of discontent to which African regimes had become accustomed over the years. At first, therefore, the authorities saw no reason to respond differently than they had in the past: by making as many concessions to their critics as possible, for example, by delaying price increases, paying back wages and improving conditions for students, while bringing the remaining hard core
firmly into line, if necessary by force. In the past, this strategy had almost always produced the
desired effect, and it turned out to be relatively successful once again in countries that still had the
resources to satisfy the demands of the population, such as Côte d’Ivoire and Gabon.

However, the key difference from previous years was the severity of the problems – not just
economic, but moral and political – facing the African states, as a result of which they had lost all
their legitimacy, even among the large urban groups that the elites had traditionally managed to hold
onto by means of government jobs. Clientelist networks collapsed because governments could no
longer afford to pay wages, and the material foundations underpinning the loyalty of the regime’s
supporters disappeared. In addition, the young were already too far removed from the old leaders to
be able to see them as the freedom fighters of yore. Members of the new generation, especially
students, were more likely to see the authorities as domestic oppressors of whom nothing good could
be expected. Maintaining the status quo was therefore no longer as straightforward as in previous
years.

This fundamental change at the domestic level – the imminent demise of the traditional
postcolonial state due to bankruptcy and generational transition – went hand in hand with dramatic
changes in the international context that had important implications for Africa. The end of the Cold
War deprived the authoritarian African regimes of their strategic value. The major powers no longer
considered it necessary to prop up African dictators and were therefore unwilling to continue
subsidising their deficits. Instead of international aid, which the incumbent regimes had used to
maintain their clientelist networks, the major powers now preferred to provide loans, and only on the
condition that the regimes be radically overhauled. Cutbacks were unavoidable. This led to the further
fragmentation of networks of patronage and removed the possibility of ending the crisis by appeasing
a sufficient number of protesters. The time-honoured alternative of forcefully suppressing the protests
was also out of the question, as such a move would have cost the leaders their last vestiges of Western
support, making it even more difficult to solve the underlying problems. In many countries, the
authorities could no longer see any way out of this sorry situation; they were checkmated.

It did not take the disaffected population long to realise that the authorities would no longer
be able to end the crisis in a traditional manner. This insight lent a political dimension to what had so
far been social protests. The shift happened more quickly in countries where some political freedom
and pluralism had already existed than in countries that had little or no experience of non-
authoritarian politics. A connection with structural adjustment programmes also emerged; protests
were more political in character in countries where reforms (i.e. cutbacks) had aggravated the urban
population’s problems than in countries where economic reforms had not, or not yet, been
implemented. Initial political demands concerned the abolition of onerous or oppressive government
measures and practices and the expansion of popular influence over the running of the state; in other
words, political liberalisation.

At this very time, in 1989 to be precise, these demands were backed up by an unexpected source: a
report from the World Bank, an institution on which African governments were financially very much
dependent. In this report, entitled *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, future aid
was linked to the quality of governance in the countries concerned. The report did not discuss
democratisation, but it did address freedom of speech, transparent decision-making and free political
debate. The African leaders were unaccustomed to this and protested strongly that the World Bank
and the former colonial powers had no business interfering in African affairs (although they were
apparently welcome to foot the bill). Some leaders, including President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia,
got so far as to claim that multiparty democracy was unsuitable for Africans. In spite of their
rhetoric, the African authorities realised that the West’s new attitude indicated a fundamental shift in
the relationship between African governments and the international donor community. The extent to
which the times were changing was further emphasised in Central and Eastern Europe, where one
regime after another was forced out over the course of a few months. The dramatic downfall of the
Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, in particular, made a deep impression on many African
potentates.

It started to dawn on the authorities that political liberalisation could not be halted, as there
was simply no alternative. After a number of governments had reluctantly taken the first steps down
this road, others followed. Social demands led to political demands, and political liberalisation (the
destruction of authoritarian structures) was followed by democratisation (the construction of new
democratic structures). Countries drew on each other for models of democratic reform. Nowhere was
this clearer than in Francophone Africa.

d) Democratisation in Francophone Africa

The governments of almost all the countries that had been part of French West Africa and French
Equatorial Africa were largely dependent on the economic, political and military support they had
received from France since gaining independence. The domestic power of many African presidents
was based on their relationship with the French government, and correctly interpreting the signals
from Paris was therefore a matter of political life and death. This had not been a problem during the
Cold War, when it was clear where everyone stood, but became significantly more complicated after
1989, when France started sending mixed political signals. While Benin’s national conference was
meeting in Cotonou, Jacques Chirac, the mayor of Paris who just a few years later became the French
president, declared in Burkina Faso that multiparty systems were perhaps not suited to Africa. A few
months later, in June 1990, the regular Franco-African summit took place in La Baule, France, under
the chairmanship of President François Mitterrand, a social democrat. There, the French government
for the first time made a connection between the depth of France’s relations with its partner countries
and their level of democracy. To the dismay of his audience, Mitterrand declared that African
countries that flouted basic democratic principles and violated human rights could no longer count on
France’s support. In future, French support would be directly linked to the democratic calibre of the
political systems of the recipient countries.

President Mitterrand’s declaration made a deep impression on the African heads of state
attending the summit, as well as on African groups seeking a change of government. The fact that
France ultimately watered down its position somewhat did little to diminish the effect of his words.
The democratisation process in Francophone Africa accelerated substantially in the months following
the summit, despite the fact that the French government subsequently issued less stringent statements
on political conditions for future aid. A year-and-a-half after the summit in La Baule, in November
1991, at the fourth conference of Francophone countries in Paris, President Mitterrand noted that
African countries were free to determine the nature and pace of their democratisation processes,
thereby indicating that France would wield the criterion of democracy in a flexible manner. At the
Franco-African summit of 1992, which was held in the Gabonese capital of Libreville, France laid out
its priorities in greater detail. According to some African leaders, it was sometimes difficult to further
democracy, pursue socioeconomic development and maintain security simultaneously. In response,
Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy of France noted that France’s African allies should adhere to the
following agenda: first security, then development and finally democratisation.

These qualifications somewhat reassured African leaders about France’s position. Nevertheless,
Mitterrand’s statements in La Baule had given an enormous boost to the democracy movements in
Francophone Africa. In 1990-1993, significant political changes took place in almost all Francophone
countries in Africa, almost suggesting a domino effect. In fact, these reforms were not limited to
Francophone Africa: the wave of democratisation of the early 1990s swept across the entire continent.

Even so, there was an important difference between developments in Francophone Africa and
elsewhere on the continent. In almost all the Francophone countries in West and Central Africa
(though not in the more remote Djibouti, Rwanda and Burundi), the above-mentioned changes were
ushered in by so-called national conferences, for which the groundbreaking conference of February
1990 in Benin served as an example. In countries where they did not take place, such as Côte d’Ivoire,
Burkina Faso and Cameroon, antigovernment groups did call for such conferences, but the authorities
managed to prevent them from taking place. Of all the Francophone African countries, only Senegal
did not even experience a call for a national conference, which may be interpreted as a sign that the
country’s democracy (to which many critics have added the prefix ‘quasi’) had nevertheless managed
to function in a more or less satisfactory manner in the eyes of opposition groups. In contrast, national
conferences did not form part of the democratisation process in a single country outside Francophone
Africa.
Apart from the possibility that the Francophone countries influenced each other, French political tradition might also have played a role. In an attempt to explain the different political developments that have taken place in Africa, for instance, a Zambian commentator described the resort to national conferences as the Jacobin model of civil revolution. This comparison with the French Revolution, which took place two centuries earlier, is of course far from perfect, but it highlights a number of interesting similarities, such as the struggle of representatives from a patchwork of groups for a voice in a constituent assembly that sought to adopt a constitution and determine the future form of the state; the assembly’s declaration of sovereignty, making it the highest authority in the state and adding legal force to its decisions; and the unchecked and therefore increasingly scathing criticism of the incumbent regime, as a result of which the confidence of the opposition movement grew and that of the regime declined in equal measure.

From a long-term perspective, the most important outcome of the debates that took place during the aforementioned national conferences may have been the new power of civil society. Alongside the similarities, there were substantial variations in the nature and development of these conferences, which were partly responsible for the success of the democratisation process in the Francophone countries.

The developments in Congo (Brazzaville) were most similar to the successful reforms in Benin. During the Cold War, a military regime under the leadership of General Denis Sassou-Nguesso had transformed the country into a people’s republic, with a centralised government and a nationalised economy, which ended in bankruptcy in the late 1980s. During the summer of 1990, at the time of the summit in La Baule, the president of Congo renounced Marxism-Leninism and promised political reforms. Ultimately, however, he was unable to withstand public pressure to hold a similar conference to the one in Benin. The following February, as many as 1,200 representatives from various political parties and associations convened to establish a national conference. Unwilling to admit defeat, the government placed its hopes in its nominal supporters at the conference. This strategy proved to be a mistake. The vast majority of participants immediately began to criticise the regime. During the deliberations, which lasted until June, the government lost one battle after another; first the chairmanship of the conference went to the bishop of Owando, then the conference declared itself sovereign and superior to the government, appointing a transitional government to draft a new constitution and organise multiparty elections. A new, liberal constitution was adopted in March 1992. A few months later, in July 1992, Pascal Lissouba was elected president.

National conferences also played an important role in the Sahelian states of Mali and Niger. In March 1991, protests against the dictatorial regime of Moussa Traoré, who had ruled Mali for twenty-two years, led to bloody riots in the capital city of Bamako. Under the leadership of Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré (also known as ATT), the military staged a coup d’état, only to come face to face with the democracy movement. The organisers of the coup quickly decided to cooperate with the civil opposition. The two sides appointed a joint transitional government to organise a national conference, which lasted just two weeks, long enough to adopt a new constitution, an elections act and a charter for political parties. This was followed in April 1992 by a general election that launched the presidency of Alpha Oumar Konaré. ATT’s short period of rule had given him a taste for power. After Konaré completed two terms of office, ATT won the 2002 election and succeeded him.

In neighbouring Niger, an even larger national conference lasting many months took place in 1991. After criticising the regime’s performance at length, the more than one thousand participants managed to replace it by appointing a transitional government and organising elections. As a result of ethnic tension (including a Tuareg uprising in the north of the country) and opposition from the military, however, the new democratic government soon faced problems of its own.

One dictator survived a national conference through cunning, without resorting to force. President Omar Bongo had ruled oil-rich Gabon since 1967. Originating from a small ethnic group from the interior of the country, he was advanced by the French at the time of Gabon’s independence as a neutral individual who could help reduce the tension resulting from ethnic rivalry between Gabon’s political parties. Bongo banned all political parties, after which he founded a single party to lead the country. He managed to secure the loyalty of potential opponents by providing many members of the elite, from all ethnic backgrounds, with jobs in the expanding state institutions. France’s extensive military support of Bongo’s regime helped to keep political life stable in Gabon.
However, his firm hold on power did not blind him to the signs of change. Even before the summit in La Baule, he decided to organise a national conference. When it was convened, the opposition appeared largely unaware of the opportunities that such a conference presented. The government therefore had little trouble keeping it under control. The conference was satisfied to play an advisory role, and a declaration of sovereignty was therefore not forthcoming. Although it resulted in a new constitution, the introduction of a multiparty system, elections and a freer press, the conference did not directly restrict the president’s powers. In Gabon’s liberalised political environment, Bongo managed to win both elections that took place during the 1990s, in 1993 and 1998.

Although the aforementioned national conferences were the first step towards greater democracy, the role of the military proved to be a decisive factor in the success of the opposition at replacing authoritarian regimes with democratic systems of governance in almost every country (with the exception of Gabon, as noted above). In Benin and Congo, the military offered little resistance to these changes. In Mali, they initially seized power themselves, but were willing to hand it over to a democratic government. In Niger, the military was significantly less cooperative in this regard, creating problems for the civil government. In the small country of Togo, which borders Benin, the military remained firmly behind General Gnassingbe Eyadéma, ensuring his political survival after Togo’s national conference of July-August 1991. The regime ordered the ‘adjournment’ of the deliberations, and, in the ensuing months, the military dealt forcefully with the divided civil opposition and the transitional government appointed by the conference to organise the elections. Eyadéma’s bloody regime, which began in 1967, thus continued into the twenty-first century.

e) Democratisation in Anglophone Africa

Just as Benin had played an important role in Francophone Africa, so Zambia was pivotal to the democratisation process in Anglophone Africa during this period. Following its independence in 1964, Zambia was effectively ruled by one party and one person: Kenneth Kaunda. As a symbol of his country’s independence and as a result of his fairly progressive policies, the president of Zambia enjoyed much prestige at home and abroad. However, the country’s modest wealth and Kaunda’s power were both entirely dependent on the sale of copper. When the price of copper on the world market dropped in the 1970s, Zambia’s social provisions underwent the same deterioration that afflicted many other African countries during this period, with lost jobs or salary cuts for public employees, cutbacks in education and health care, and the lowering or elimination of many government subsidies. In spite of these measures, Zambia was as good as bankrupt by the late 1980s.

Rocketing food prices, due to lower subsidies, led to riots that were put down harshly by the regime. Calls for political reform were meanwhile becoming stronger. Kaunda agreed to elections with remarkable alacrity, apparently assuming that his position was secure despite the setbacks of recent years. This proved not to be the case. By the time of the elections, in 1991, the opposition had not yet managed to organise itself into distinct political parties, but proved single-minded in its desire for a new political system and a new leadership. It therefore united under the banner of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy, under the leadership of a trade unionist named Frederick Chiluba, who challenged Kaunda for the presidency. To the surprise of almost all concerned, Chiluba managed to defeat Kaunda at the polls. The latter accepted defeat and, after having served as president of Zambia for twenty-seven years, stepped aside in favour of Chiluba.

In certain respects, developments in neighbouring Malawi were similar to those in Zambia. There too, the person who had led the country since it gained independence in 1964, President Hastings Banda, was forced to surrender his position as a result of the democratisation process. In the 1960s, Banda had successfully resisted all challenges to his leadership and continued to rule the country in a rather totalitarian manner. In addition to declaring himself president for life in 1971, he was also chairman of the country’s single party, which all Malawians were obliged to join. A youth movement (the Malawi Young Pioneers) and the police dealt harshly with all opposition to Banda, while the military was scarcely involved in the oppression. In 1992, after emerging calls for democratisation met with a bloody response from the regime, the military intervened on the side of the reformist groups. The youth movement was disarmed, and the officers informed the government that they too supported reform. Banda agreed to a referendum on the introduction of a multiparty
system. In spite of the regime’s attempts to influence the voting in its favour, however, a majority of voters appeared to favour democracy. In 1993-1994, the old system was gradually replaced by a new one. Banda’s ‘presidency for life’ ended when, after taking second place in the presidential election, he handed over power to the victor, Bakili Muluzi, in 1994.

A little further to the north, Julius Nyerere, known as the father of Tanzanian independence, had bowed out on his own initiative. More so even than Kaunda, Nyerere symbolised a particular brand of African humanism. In 1965, he had declared Tanzania a one-party state, but twenty years later he decided, at least as far as he was concerned, that enough was enough and voluntarily stepped down – a unique step in the African context. Of course, Tanzania’s single party, an amalgamation of the political forces on the mainland and the island of Zanzibar, appointed a successor, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, who came from Zanzibar. It was thus Mwinyi who came face to face with the population’s demands for democratisation. With Nyerere, who had publicly declared in 1990 that the one-party state had been a mistake, still in the background, the party launched reforms. In 1992, it agreed to the establishment of multiple parties, although elections did not take place until 1995. The former single party, which still counted the ever-popular Nyerere within its ranks, managed to maintain its majority over the divided opposition. Its candidate, Benjamin Mkapa, a former student of Nyerere, became president. Due to the continued domination of one party and, effectively, one person (Nyerere, until his death in 1999), the political scene in Tanzania did not change radically, despite the introduction of a multiparty system.

The same applies even more strongly in the case of Kenya. Following independence, the country formally became a parliamentary democracy, but increasingly took on the character of a one-party state during the 1970s. In 1982, the transformation was officially complete. The regime took increasingly harsh action against the opposition during the 1980s, blotting its previously good record in the field of human rights. In 1991, the government reluctantly reintroduced a multiparty system, but this did not signal a change in the attitude of the authorities. Arrests, torture and even murder of political opponents remained the order of the day. The groups opposing the regime of President Daniel arap Moi at one point appeared to join forces under the banner of the Forum for Restoration of Democracy, but failed to maintain their unity. The forum broke up into separate groups, largely along ethnic lines. As a result, the governing party was able to emerge victorious from the December 1992 elections, and Moi held on to the presidency.

The same applies even more strongly in the case of Tanzania and Kenya. In the 1960s, power was concentrated in the hands of Prime Minister Milton Obote, who later became president. Opposition parties were banned, and Obote’s rule became increasingly authoritarian. In 1971, a military leader named Idi Amin came to power in a successful coup d’état. In the 1970s, General Amin proved to be a colourful, unpredictable and above all bloodthirsty dictator. A military incursion into Tanzania in 1979 brought an end to his rule. The Tanzanian army occupied Kampala, and Amin fled to Libya. After a period of anarchy, Obote returned to power in Uganda but was unable to rebuild the country or even restore order. In the meantime, more and more Ugandans were being driven from their homes by battles between various armed groups. In 1985, the leader of the main armed opposition group, Yoweri Museveni, seized power. Obote managed to escape to Zambia.

In 1986, Museveni became president of a country devastated by fifteen years of bloodshed. He did not regard democratisation at the national level as a solution to the instability that plagued Ugandan politics and suspended the scheduled elections, as well as all party-political activity (although he allowed the parties to exist as organisations). Only later, in 1989, did ordinary Ugandan citizens become eligible for election to a parliament that further comprised government-appointed members and representatives of various organisations. A committee created by Museveni recommended extending the suspension of party-political activities until 2000, and its advice was followed. A referendum was held in 2000 on the continuation of the existing political system. The government won and decided to maintain Museveni’s ‘no-party democracy’ until 2004.

The president defended the system enthusiastically, arguing that Ugandan society – and, essentially, African society in general – was not diversified enough to sustain political parties on the basis of competing ideologies or interests. According to Museveni, most Africans were simply peasants who shared the same basic priorities. Any political parties they might form would be based
The striking difference in the international community’s attitude towards the political situation in Kenya and neighbouring Uganda has been pointed out on many occasions. Kenya, formally a parliamentary democracy, was constantly subjected to heavy criticism, while Uganda, a no-party democracy, not only received the benefit of the doubt, but even enjoyed a certain amount of esteem at the international level. Obviously, a substantial part of this discrepancy can be traced back to the different histories of the two countries. In Kenya, after a hopeful start just after independence, the political situation deteriorated. The impact of democratisation measures in the early 1990s appeared to be minimal. At any rate, they had little or no effect on the country’s political culture. Also, manipulation, violence and corruption have continued to characterise Kenyan politics, mainly due to the conduct of the authorities. Meanwhile, despite a lack of democratisation at the national level, Uganda’s political development moved in the opposite direction. After the chaotic and violent years of Amin and Obote, the country found a new stability under Museveni, with disciplined armed forces and – in comparison with Kenya – a more efficient and less corrupt government. Museveni’s idiosyncratic views on democracy did little to detract from its successes.

President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana was similarly admired by the international community, although he too could hardly be described as a paragon of democracy. In 1979, as an air force lieutenant, he carried out his first coup d’état against the military regime of the day. Rawlings used populist tactics to portray himself as a national hero who protected the man in the street from successive corrupt governments. For a long time, he did not take the slightest notice of national laws or even of the constitution. He also dealt harshly with his political opponents, not eschewing execution. Over time, however, he became less volatile, and, as an enduring central figure in Ghanaian politics, made increasing use of conventional political channels. In the early 1990s, this meant participating in the wave of democratisation. He created a national committee for democracy that organised meetings to discuss the future of the political system. This led to the establishment of a parliamentary democracy in 1992. Rawlings, who by then had been in power for ten years, took part in the elections as a presidential candidate. The opposition was divided. Some parties accused the government of electoral fraud and refused to participate in the elections any longer, although this may have had more to do with their own disappointing results. Under these circumstances, Rawlings easily won the elections and continued his career as a democratic president.

In Nigeria, an important country because of its large population and considerable regional influence, attempts to introduce democracy were stifled by the military. General Ibrahim Babangida, in power since 1985, attempted to bend the future political life of the country entirely to his will. In order to prevent several dozen ethnic and religious parties from causing political chaos, Babangida banned all of them. He then founded a party that was slightly to the right of the political centre and another that was slightly to the left of it. The Nigerian people had to make do with these two parties, whose names and even manifestos were determined by the military. Elections were scheduled for mid-1993. Despite the military’s hold on this ‘guided democracy’, a presidential candidate not favoured by the military, an eccentric businessman named Moshood Abiola, appeared to be headed for victory in the election. Halfway through the counting of the votes, Babangida therefore, not surprisingly, declared the election invalid, but still stepped down soon afterwards. Abiola, who had become the leader of the opposition, declared victory and was subsequently imprisoned. All hope of democracy then evaporated under the new military leader and president, Sani Abacha, who banned political parties once more and oversaw years of harsh oppression of the population by the armed forces. During the first half of the 1990s, Nigeria thus formed the most salient example of failed democratisation in Africa.

The democratisation process in South Africa, the other predominantly Anglophone giant of Africa, took place in the framework of an even more important process, namely, the abolition of apartheid (see chapter 4, section c). In neighbouring Zimbabwe, there was little to report in the way of democratisation. By abolishing apartheid in 1980, Zimbabwe had a fourteen-year lead on South
Africa (where it continued until 1994), but it was roughly twenty years behind most African countries, where political power had moved into African hands around 1960. As a result, the inevitable crisis did not strike Zimbabwe’s one-party system until the beginning of the twenty-first century, much later than in other African countries. The belated political and governmental deterioration of Zimbabwe and, potentially, South Africa is discussed in section g of chapter 10.

f) Failed democratisation in the Great Lakes region

The history of the Great Lakes region has been largely shaped by the ethnic makeup of its population.10 With the exception of a small group known as the Twa, who account for roughly one per cent of the population, the inhabitants of the region belong to the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. To this day, the historic differences between the two peoples, which the first Europeans to arrive in the region dubbed the enemy brothers at the sources of the Nile, have left a mark on the countries in the region. They also strongly influenced the efforts of Rwanda and Burundi’s moves towards democratisation.

Central Africa had been home to both Hutu and Tutsi since time immemorial. The Hutu, in particular, tended to emphasise their ethnic origins and thus the differences between the Tutsi and themselves. This was undoubtedly related to the numerical balance between the two groups: there were five times as many Hutu as Tutsi living in the region. As a logical consequence of this situation, the Tutsi generally tried to play down ethnic issues and the differences between the two groups, by arguing, for example, that the only distinction that mattered was the one between Rwandans and Burundians. Clearly, the meaning and application of ethnic labels largely depend on the situation in a particular time and place. In the countries neighbouring Rwanda and Burundi, relations between Hutu and Tutsi were of a different nature. In Uganda, relations had been peaceful for such a long time that Hutu and Tutsi were sometimes treated as one ethnic group, but there were sharp differences between the two groups in the area alongside Lake Kivu in eastern Congo (Zaire).11

Traditionally, the Hutu grew crops and the Tutsi chiefly raised livestock. More importantly, the Tutsi were almost always in charge in the precolonial kingdoms. The Belgian colonial regime reinforced this uneven distribution of power and even provided a theory to justify it: in contrast to the short, stocky Hutu, who were descendants of the Bantu, the tall, athletic (read: ‘aristocratic’) Tutsi were descendants of the Hamites, a race originating from the Middle East and the northeast of Africa. The members of this group, according to this story, had not only been in close contact with European civilisation in the past, but could even be regarded as distant relations of the white man. This was the reason given for placing the internal government of the colonised territories in the hands of the minority Tutsi. However, during the limited democratisation that took place at the end of the colonial period, Hutu parties were able to seize power in Rwanda, while the Tutsi kingdom in Burundi survived until 1965.

The changing of the guard from the Tutsi to the Hutu in Rwanda did not take place without a struggle. During the first half of the 1960s, the Hutu removed the Tutsi from positions of power throughout almost the entire country. Many Tutsi lost their lives, and between 100,000 and 200,000 others fled to neighbouring countries, exacerbating tensions between Hutu and Tutsi in eastern Congo. In Burundi, the refugees strengthened the Tutsi leadership against the challenges of the Burundian Hutu. The kingdom sought to preserve a certain balance between Hutu and Tutsi, but the demographic predominance of the Hutu started to have an impact by the time of the 1965 elections. The Burundian Tutsi refused to accept this development and seized power through the Tutsi-controlled military, wiping out almost the entire Hutu leadership and abolishing the kingdom. In 1972, the two groups in Burundi were involved in a much larger and bloodier encounter. The Tutsi elite ultimately held on to power and took brutal revenge on the rebellious Hutu and their associates. Approximately 200,000 Burundians, most of them Hutu, were killed. For the Tutsi authorities, the Hutu threat was thereby averted until the end of the 1980s.

As a result of the change of power in Rwanda at the beginning of the 1960s, a considerable number of Tutsi refugees ended up in Rwanda’s northern neighbour, Uganda, and were caught up in the country’s political turbulence. During the 1980s, many of them, and their descendants, fought alongside Museveni, who belonged to a Tutsi-related group himself. After Museveni had secured his
position in Uganda, the services of the battle-hardened Rwandan Tutsi warriors were no longer needed, and they were forced to find a new outlet for their energies. Their adjacent fatherland, where the Hutu had been in control continuously since independence, radiated a natural power of attraction. The refugees organised themselves into a military force, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), and prepared to invade Rwanda.

By the end of the 1980s, Rwanda and Burundi were both de facto one-party states, the first controlled by the Hutu and the second by the Tutsi. They experienced the same problems as other one-party states in Africa and were among the poorest countries on the continent, despite receiving large amounts of foreign aid. Rwanda had some good years, but much of its economic growth was cancelled out by rapid population growth. The shortage of productive land also became increasingly palpable, as Hutu agriculture and Tutsi nomadic livestock raising started to get in each other’s way. The political systems of the two countries had hit a dead end: authoritarian leaders were totally uninterested in liberalisation, and oppression and corruption were the order of the day. The crisis became acute when, from 1987 onwards, prices of important export products such as coffee and tea began to drop rapidly.

Rwanda and Burundi were part of the French-led Francophone community. The autocratic leaders of the two countries could not ignore the warning issued by President Mitterrand in La Baule in June 1990 any more than their colleagues in the former French colonies. None of them could afford to forfeit foreign aid, especially from Belgium and France, in a time of political and economic crisis. In 1990, the Rwandan dictator, Juvénal Habyarimana, adopted a new constitution establishing a multiparty system, and various parties entered the political stage.

This new political openness began immediately after the Rwandan Tutsi refugees of the RPF had launched an invasion from Uganda. Their objectives were, first, the return of all Tutsi refugees to Rwanda and the restitution of their land and, second, the end of the Habyarimana regime, with its corruption and human rights violations. The attack by the well-trained and well-armed refugees caught the small Rwandan military by surprise. In all probability, the Rwandan government’s plans to democratise the country’s political system accelerated the plans of the invaders, as the existence of a dictatorship provided a good argument for overthrowing the government, an argument which could no longer be used if the system became democratic. In addition, as a result of the demographic balance, free elections would have unavoidably led to a Hutu-controlled government.

The attempt to democratise Rwanda was overshadowed by the fighting between the RPF and the government forces. Democracy was not the RPF’s objective, and the Habyarimana regime took advantage of the fighting to delay political reforms. The war between the military and the RPF also led to a radical polarisation between Hutu and Tutsi. The government tried to create a united Hutu front by bringing leaders of new opposition parties into the government. From 1992 onwards, various coalition governments operated under the leadership of President Habyarimana, who continued to maintain a strong hold on power. The most important problem faced by the government was which attitude to adopt towards the invaders. For example, should it be trying to reach a power-sharing agreement with the Tutsi rebels?

The government opted for a dialogue that would lead to such an agreement. In 1993, the two sides reached a peace agreement in Arusha (Tanzania) as a result of intense international mediation and pressure. The RPF agreed to transform itself into a political party and join a transitional government with the members of the existing government and other political parties. In addition, both armies, which by now had considerably grown in size, were to be merged, although a majority of soldiers would be demobilised. Finally, returning Tutsi who had fled the country more than ten years earlier would not be able to reclaim their land. The French forces that had supported the Habyarimana regime in the war against the RPF left Rwanda, and a contingent of UN peacekeepers arrived to oversee the implementation of the Arusha agreement. However, the demobilisation of fighters and the distribution of political functions did not get off to a good start. Tensions in the country thus remained high, and violence flared up repeatedly.

As a result, the radical currents that regarded military confrontation as the answer, rather than dialogue and power-sharing, continued to grow. In practice, the country was divided into three camps: Tutsi, moderate Hutu and extremist Hutu. These groups interacted in a complex manner. The
Tutsi wanted to seize some or – if possible – all power in Rwanda. Their main opponents were the extremist Hutu, who wished to hold on to the power that the Hutu had held since Rwanda’s independence. The third current consisted of moderate Hutu, who were tired of the failing Hutu regime and wanted to democratise the political system, allowing Tutsi involvement. The moderate Hutu were thus potentially useful for the Tutsi, but in the eyes of the extremist Hutu they were extremely dangerous, because they opened the door to a loss of Hutu power. The extremist Hutu regarded the moderate Hutu as traitors to the Hutu cause, which was unforgivable.

In Burundi, the Tutsi government and the Tutsi-controlled military had already brought an end to the oppression of the Hutu in 1988, after disturbances in the north of the country led to thousands of deaths. The government of President Pierre Buyoya, an army major who had seized power in a bloodless coup a year earlier, decided to form a government with an equal number of Hutu and Tutsi ministers, under the leadership of a Hutu prime minister. The government also made it easier for Hutu to find work in government institutions and education, but all command positions in the military remained in the hands of the Tutsi. In 1990 a newly drafted constitution established a multiparty system, on condition that parties were not organised along ethnic lines. The Hutu opposition thus failed to obtain a platform for its grievances. Although each of the new parties counted both Hutu and Tutsi among its leaders and members, it proved impossible to keep them from diverging along ethnic lines in the run-up to the 1993 elections, since the main issue in the country was the relationship between the Hutu and the Tutsi. As time went by, President Buyoya’s governing party (Uprona) became more and more of a Tutsi bastion, while the main opposition party (Frodebu) increasingly positioned itself as a Hutu party. President Buyoya continued to control the state and all communication channels until the elections, presenting himself as ‘the father of democracy’ and a symbol of national unity. However, the population was already too ethnically polarised to allow Buyoya to triumph. The outcome of the elections was a surprising and resounding victory for the Hutu candidates.

The Tutsi elite was shocked by this outcome, but resigned itself to the facts. Buyoya stepped down and was succeeded by Melchior Ndadayé, a Hutu who had fled to Rwanda at the time of the 1972 massacre and had lived there ever since. As the new president, Ndadayé’s task was to allow the Hutu to increase their power in Burundi, inevitably at the expense of the Tutsi. All this was based solely on the outcome of a mere election, while the Tutsi continued to dominate the military. Ndadayé was aware of the difficulty of his position and embarked on a moderate, conciliatory course. A national unity government was established under the leadership of a Tutsi, Africa’s first female prime minister. In quick succession, Hutu were appointed to various key positions.

The Tutsi elite immediately came under a great deal of pressure. Tutsi students protested in the capital against what they regarded as a purely ethnic manoeuvre, and the military became increasingly restless. After an earlier attempt by rebellious troops to force their way into the president’s residence, Tutsi soldiers assassinated the president, with the knowledge of their superiors. Various important Hutu ministers were also killed. Ordinary Hutu did not take these developments lying down. They attacked Tutsi families throughout the country, which in turn provoked a harsh response from the military. This outbreak of violence led to approximately 50,000 deaths. Under intense international pressure, the violence subsided and a certain equilibrium returned. In early 1994, Frodebu and Uprona, the largest parties in parliament, reached a temporary political compromise, which led to the emergence of a new Hutu president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, and a Tutsi prime minister. Nevertheless, the situation in the country remained extremely tense, with Hutu and Tutsi almost entirely separated from each other.13

On the other side of Africa’s Great Rift Valley, in the vast country of Zaire (now again known as Congo), the Hutu and Tutsi in the east did not play a major role in national politics, which for many years had been controlled from the distant western capital of Kinshasa by President Mobutu Sese Seko. However, the end of the Cold War forced Mobutu to change his policies. Zaïrean opponents of the regime at home and abroad were calling for political and economic reform and when his main foreign allies – France, Belgium (the former colonial power) and the United States – added their voices, Mobutu introduced a number of changes. He stepped down as chairman of the country’s single party (only to reassert the position at a later date) and allowed the formation of new political parties.
He also withdrew from day-to-day politics to a certain extent, only to maintain his hold on power from a distance, far away from the country’s almost insoluble problems, by controlling the armed forces, the central bank (and thereby the state’s finances) and the country outside the capital (through the provincial governors). Under pressure from the opposition, Mobutu consented to hold a national conference, as elsewhere in Francophone Africa, which paved the way for the appointment of the leader of the opposition, Étienne Tshisekedi, as prime minister.

Tshisekedi’s first objective was to depose Mobutu, whom he regarded as the main cause of the country’s problems. Mobutu removed the prime minister instead, but Tshisekedi was reinstated by the broad-based opposition. Mobutu then formed his own government. This led to a standoff in which two competing governments both tried to gain control of the state’s key institutions. Mobutu triumphed, not only because he had retained control of the military and other key institutions, but also by employing a policy of divide and rule (in the course of which he did not even hesitate to fan the flames of ethnic tension) and by successfully appeasing key foreign powers. These powers were becoming more and more concerned about the escalating violence in neighbouring Rwanda, which they feared would spread to Zaire. Under the circumstances, France gave more weight to its narrowly defined national interests in the Great Lakes region than to the principles it had articulated in La Baule. The truth was that France’s position was not invulnerable in this formerly Belgian region. This became especially clear in Rwanda, where the RPF was fighting its way to the top under the leadership of a Ugandan-trained, English-speaking elite. As always, therefore, France continued to support the incumbent heads of state of Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire.

The failure of the democratisation process in these three countries had far-reaching consequences for the region’s future. Levels of political tension remained high in all three countries, which continued to experience frequent outbreaks of violence. In Rwanda, the fighting between government forces and the RPF continued, resulting in the largest massacre in modern African history in 1994. Burundi did not experience a similar tragedy, but the violence there claimed many lives each year, while a political solution remained elusive. In Zaire, Mobutu, who continued to oppose democratisation, was forcibly driven out in 1996-1997, although his successor, Laurent Kabila, was no more of a democrat than he had been. For the remainder of the twentieth century, nobody was able to initiate a serious political dialogue in Zaire/Congo. Its complex relationships with its neighbours also went awry. By 1998, the entire region had descended into hostilities, which soon involved so many parties that the conflict in the Great Lakes became the largest war in African history (see chapter 6, section c).

g) Obstacles to the development of democracy

Putting aside the major problems in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire, Africa took great strides toward democracy in the early 1990s. However, this process of political transformation was impeded by a number of obstacles, mainly historical and social. These obstacles resulted from the complex interaction between indigenous African culture and imported Western culture, which had already lasted more than a century. As long as that may seem, however, it was a short historical period in which to make the leap from traditional African power structures (which in their own way were quite effective and sometimes had democratic features) to modern systems of governance. The development of democracy in Europe took many centuries. This seems to imply that obstacles to democratisation in Africa are structural; there is little or no possibility of eliminating them, certainly not in the short or medium term.

The nature of social relationships in Africa is the first obstacle to the development of democracy. Political, economic and social relationships between individuals are often characterised by a patron-client pattern. Patrons occupy a certain social position, possess power and resources and are therefore able to grant favours, such as jobs, to others (clients). Such networks of patronage were responsible for the social structure of precolonial Africa, where unpredictable and insecure conditions made them a logical option. The same pattern had emerged under similar circumstances on other continents; for example, in Western Europe after the collapse of the Roman empire. Networks of patronage persisted in colonial Africa and were even reinforced in certain areas, as the European powers operated by means of indirect rule. This meant that, in principle, the Europeans only interacted with patrons.
As we have seen, the state structures introduced by the colonial powers fell further and further into the grip of patronage networks in the postcolonial period. The patrons were almost always in control of the state and treated government resources as their personal property, using them to buy as much support as possible from local leaders, who did the same thing at a lower level. Although clientelism provides a certain degree of stability through informal, personal networks, it also has a highly corrosive effect on the political system: it encourages corruption, since the leadership (the patrons) are not held accountable for their decisions and it is impossible for the clients to apply checks and balances of any kind. Organised mistrust in the form of a parliament or a free press has no place in such a system, which tends to regard the opposition as the enemy.

The extended family is a major pillar of clientelism. Members of extended families are expected to care for their relations. This applies in particular to upwardly mobile family members who occupy senior government offices or other lucrative positions. Within this system, authoritarian conduct by patriarchs and their political cronies, as well as a flexible approach to the law (including corruption), are normal and widely accepted practices that are therefore difficult to eradicate. From time immemorial, clientelist networks have been organised along ethnic lines.

A second factor that can form an obstacle to the development of democracy is the ethnicisation of politics. Africa consists of a patchwork of ethnic groups, each with its own language and culture, and just a few African states (such as Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland) possess a more or less homogeneous population from the point of view of language, culture or religion. Under dictatorial regimes, expressions of ethnic identity usually met with little or no tolerance, for reasons related to nation-building and the preservation of power, but they reappeared with the new political openness of the early 1990s. They received a boost from the emergence of new political organisations, especially political parties, which were often organised around a specific individual and supported by a particular ethnic group. Where the ideological differences between the parties were small, as a result of a country’s still limited economic diversification, it was only natural that groups rallied around individuals, preferably from their own elites. Each elite had a bond with its ethnic support base and could be expected to use its political power to take care of its own. By the same token, leaders looked for followers within their own ethnic groups.

In many countries, Africa’s ethnic realities thus led to the formation of ethnic political parties, which threatened to accentuate differences and fuel tension between population groups. It is this process that might be termed ethnicisation. The Great Lakes region offered an extreme example. Some countries therefore constitutionally prohibited the formation of political parties along ethnic lines, in part to encourage the formation of national parties, while other countries did not impose such restrictions. The still brief history of the new African political parties reveals a wide range of trends. In some cases, parties appeared to develop more distinct stands on political issues, thus taking on a more national character. In other cases, however, they lost their national character and split along ethnic lines. Kenya was a case in point; parties that still had aspired to a national, multiethnic support base at the time of the 1992 elections participated in the 1997 elections as ethnic parties.16

In fact, it seems that the basis – whether ethnic or otherwise – on which political parties are formed does not ultimately determine the success of a democratic system. The problem is usually not the manner in which groups wish to organise (or are organised from above) so much as the way in which they interact. The leaders of the different groups must arrive at practical agreements of which compromise and power-sharing are key elements. Almost all multicultural systems that have proved stable are based on power-sharing arrangements. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, African politics could boast few such arrangements. Key politicians focused on confrontation, instead of searching for consensus on important issues. Even on the eve of an election, the main players could sometimes not agree on how they would operate in the future, thereby encouraging the loser of the election to continue the struggle by other means. Modern African political culture, which is characterised by confrontation and a ‘winner-takes-all’ approach, is thus at odds with stable democratic governance.

A third obstacle to the development of a modern democracy is the manner in which power is traditionally exercised in Africa. The increase in the power of African authorities over their citizens and the omnipotence of the president (‘presidentialism’) correspond to a concept of power that is
widespread in Africa, where power has always possessed a sacred and all-encompassing character. Rulers are able to assert their authority in all areas of life, from politics and the economy to social relations. No separation exists between the public and private spheres, and power knows no boundaries. The origins of this all-encompassing concept of power are located in a social framework that is based, as noted above, on networks of patronage. This framework is clearly very old. It has even been said that the omnipotence of the Egyptian pharaohs served as an example for rulers in other parts of Africa, in particular the rulers of the Sudanese states in and around the Sahara Desert. In these and other African political systems, the economy and other sectors of society could not be separated from power or politics. Power was centralised and always reached further than the purely political, pervading all areas of life in society.

Obviously, this concept of power is not unique to Africa. Furthermore, we have seen that the type of power restricted by checks and balances was in fact also present in precolonial Africa, but local political systems of this kind were almost entirely destroyed during the colonial period. The colonial authorities themselves also acted in an authoritarian manner, avoiding all forms of accountability to the African people. Following independence, the tradition of authoritarian leadership was often further nourished by the role of the military. Many African countries were ruled by the military for a prolonged period, and this had a considerable impact on the relationship between citizens and the state. The existence of a tradition of authoritarian power did not mean that the state had a totalitarian hold on society, however, as most African states were far too weak for this. In many places, especially in remote rural areas, the power of the state was more or less limited and offset by the local power of chieftains and patriarchs.

Africa’s low level of socio-economic development is a fourth obstacle to the development of a modern democracy. In Western countries, democratisation took place in the course of the nineteenth century, following a process of economic development, steady advances in civil rights and cumulative governmental reforms. The African countries have an entirely different historical background. As a rule, they have only experienced advances in the field of human rights since the end of the Cold War, at the same time as democratisation. Their understandably weak tradition of human rights has occasionally given rise to incidents that had hitherto been rare in democracies, such as populations awarding power to autocratic leaders of their own free will or majorities stripping minorities of their rights. Such democracies, which are characterised by their inadequate respect for human rights, are sometimes referred to as illiberal democracies, in order to distinguish them from liberal democracies, which place a strong emphasis on the protection of individual human rights. In addition, some African countries have had democratic constitutions but failed to apply them adequately in practice. This failure can be ascribed to a lack of effective implementation mechanisms, but also to a certain amount of unwillingness on the part of the authorities. Alongside problems with the quality of the political system, which were definitely not limited to inadequate levels of democracy, there were other obstacles; for example, the institutional structures of many African countries were very poorly developed and had become weaker still as a result of cutbacks.

Experience has shown that Africa’s low level of socio-economic development does not make democratisation impossible, but it should nevertheless be regarded as a structural obstacle to the development of a stable and mature democracy. A robust private-sector economy makes citizens less dependent on income from or through the state, so that the individual economic stakes in the contest for state power are not as high. And in any case, people need a decent income in order to provide a solid material foundation on which to build a democracy. After all, it is the public that provides the government with the resources it needs to implement policy by paying taxes and it can use this avenue to compel the government to spend these resources in a certain manner and account for its expenditure.

Democracy is closely linked to taxation. A situation of limited economic development offers little scope for taxation and therefore provides an inadequate material basis for democracy. From the late 1970s, multilateral financial institutions and large bilateral donors were the main backers of African governments, which enabled them to function as the ‘external parliaments’ of African countries. This situation will not change until African governments become more dependent on revenue from their own populations. From the 1980s onwards, various countries improved their taxation systems somewhat, often in the framework of structural adjustment programmes.
A democracy also functions more effectively if citizens no longer need to devote most of their attention to acquiring basic necessities. Better socio-economic conditions make the population less dependent on traditional patrons and thereby expand its range of choices, since clientelism encourages conformity and generally excludes real political debate. Moreover, in countries where the economy and society are still not very diversified, there are few ideological differences or conflicts of interest that can serve as a basis for political pluralism. Better socio-economic conditions also include general education. On the whole, both the availability and quality of education were extremely inadequate in Africa around 1990. As a result of inadequate education, African countries were not making optimal use of their human resources. It is plausible that a link exists between standards of education and the quality of government, as well as between education and the potential for democratisation, particularly when education devotes attention to diversity, tolerance and human rights. Low levels of literacy and education, especially among women, hamper the active participation of the population in decision-making. More advanced education can promote understanding of, for example, development issues, economic phenomena and historical context. Insight into such processes leads to the kind of emancipation that is a prerequisite for democratisation.

h) The democratisation years: an overview

During the 1989-1994 period, democratisation took place throughout Africa, although the nature of the political changes in each country and region depended in large part on local conditions. In almost all countries, popular social and political protests were at the root of the liberal reforms, but in a few reforms took place even in the absence of such protests. In each case this remarkable political turnaround usually started with the legalisation of political parties and the resultant demise of the one-party state. In addition, new constitutions officially ended the governing party’s ties to the state and, in some cases, the military. Measures were also introduced to achieve a clearer separation of the three branches of government (the legislature, the executive and the judiciary). Another key change that appeared in many new constitutions was a limit on the number of presidential terms of office. In most cases, presidents were obliged to step down after a maximum of two five-year terms. To crown these achievements, the new political parties organised parliamentary and presidential elections.

Democratic transitions, in which autocratic governments were replaced by more democratic ones, took place in roughly a third of all African countries. In addition, at least ten other countries launched democratisation processes that met with delays of varying seriousness. In a similar number of countries, however, these processes ground to a complete halt (at least for the time being), while the remaining countries (of which there were very few) did not experience any democratisation at all.

By the end of 1994, only a minority of countries (sixteen to be exact) had held elections that deserved to be called free and fair. More than ten other countries also held elections during this period, but failed to comply with the international minimum standards. The remaining countries (also more than ten) did not hold elections at all. A large number of countries experienced political liberalisation (a relaxation of the authoritarian system that granted more political freedom to citizens), but as yet did not develop democratic structures.

Political pluralism increased almost everywhere in Africa. This manifested itself, first of all, in the rise of multiple political parties in almost all African countries. By 1994, the average African parliament contained six or seven parties, although one party – the governing party – often held a large majority of seats. This was a significant improvement on the situation in the 1970s and 1980s, but Africa continued to lag behind other continents with regard to pluralism in party politics.19 The same could be said of civil-society organisations and the public media: significant improvements had occurred in relation to previous decades, but in comparison with other regions they remained weak.

The relationship between citizens and the state is determined in part by the power of civil society, which in Africa currently differs from country to country. African civil society is often described as weak. This may be fair as a general comparison with Western civil society, but does not by any means apply to all African countries. In some parts of Africa, all manner of traditional and modern non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are shooting up, many of them local in character. In recent years, poor political and socioeconomic conditions have also encouraged Africans to organise and pressure their governments to change course. The public has thus become part of the democratisation process, preventing it from remaining an exclusively elite issue and allowing it to
take root in society. In some countries, incidentally, civil society may be dominated by a counter-elite whose primary interest is to seize power (see chapter 9, section g). The influence of genuine civil-society interest groups, such as women’s rights groups and farmers’ associations, varies significantly from country to country.

In many respects, the democratisation of Africa from 1989 to 1994 was of great historical significance, however weak or incomplete the process may have been. In the first place, it was significant that it took place at all. Until that time, a certain level of socio-economic development had generally been regarded as a prerequisite for democratisation. This supposed regularity even led Samuel Huntington to predict in 1990 that the so-called third wave of global democratisation would probably not reach Africa. According to Huntington, most impoverished societies would remain undemocratic as long as they remained poor. On the basis of the African experience, in particular, it appears that the connection between political and socio-economic development is more complex, to say the least. It is true that democracy performs better in more developed countries, but this does not mean that the spark of democratisation cannot ignite under poor socio-economic conditions as well, especially if there is hope for a better future.

Democratisation was also important because it interrupted the ongoing centralisation of political power that had been taking place in Africa since its independence. Political decision-making and financial resources were increasingly concentrated in the capital, and in the hands of certain people. In almost all political systems this had culminated in ‘presidentialism’: all power was in the hands of the president. The successful changing of the guard by means of elections was therefore an important step on the way towards changing the system. In addition, the broadening of the political base of the regime as a result of democratisation also led to a wider distribution of power, even if that power usually remained within the elite. Various countries launched decentralisation programmes, and the centre began to lose influence to the periphery. Finally, the democratisation process was also historically significant, because it represented another victory of African civil society over the authorities (the first being decolonisation). This unexpected victory – often called the second liberation of Africa – provided the African population with an incentive to become more deeply involved in politics, which further strengthened democracy.

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen has written that ‘a country does not have to be judged to be fit for democracy, rather it has to become fit through democracy.’ In Africa, too, democracy was regarded as a new means of building society and the state. The implications of democratisation were therefore not limited to the field of politics, but also related to the economy, social structures and relations between groups. The connection between democratisation and economic reform attracted much attention. Could democratic governments implement the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and the IMF, which required cutbacks and thus caused a deterioration in social conditions, for the urban population in particular? Numerous observers were of the opinion that only authoritarian regimes would be able to implement such unpopular measures, and they consequently suspected the international institutions of secretly opposing democratisation in order to rescue economic reforms.

In the protests against such socio-economic deterioration, there was an important difference between the cities and the countryside. The main impact of the cutbacks resulting from the adjustment programmes was felt in the cities, in the state’s infrastructure and capacity. Because many African states still had next to no presence outside the cities, at least not as a source of services and funds, the countryside was almost untouched by the cutbacks. In fact, agriculture was one of the main sectors to benefit from the economic reforms. Another factor contributing to the urban character of the protests was that political problems generally occurred at the national, ‘macro’ level and less so at the intermediate or ‘meso’ level of districts and provinces. In many African countries, local government functioned better than its equivalent at the meso and macro level, presumably because the villages had preserved much of their old style of administration and because they were ethnically and culturally homogeneous. More so than the authorities in the national and provincial capitals, local authorities could boast a natural link to Africa’s past and therefore enjoyed relatively high levels of legitimacy.

Unfavourable socio-economic conditions stimulated important political developments all over Africa, but these developments were not so far-reaching that most countries were able to develop effective
democracies within just a few years. The democratic governments that replaced the dictatorial regimes were almost always weak. In some cases, they started to display the same autocratic and corrupt behaviour as their predecessors. This should not come as a surprise, in light of the structural obstacles to democratic culture in Africa (see previous section). Examples of such obstacles include not only a tradition of authoritarian leadership, but also a social framework largely based on clientelism and ethnicity. Other aforementioned structural obstacles also had an impact, including the lack of a tradition of human rights and good governance, the continued weakness of civil society and low levels of socio-economic development and education. In addition, insecurity and instability sometimes made it impossible to develop democratic political systems.

By 1994, the wave of democratisation had passed its crest. Instead of progress, the emphasis came to lie on consolidating what had been achieved in previous years. In some countries, democracy continued to strengthen, almost unnoticed, beneath the surface as it were. This led to renewed progress around 2000 (see chapter 10, section e).

In other countries, however, democratisation turned into its exact opposite. This was connected to a negative side effect of the democratisation and pluralisation of African societies in the early 1990s, namely, widespread ethnic polarisation. This trend was visible all over the world around the same time, but was remarkably powerful in Africa, just as in the Balkans and the Caucasus. In particular, the impact of African ethnicisation increased as a result of the weakness of the African state, which was barely able to assert itself. In so far as it stimulated ethnicisation, democratisation therefore actually threatened the stability of the state, resulting in outbreaks of violence. Although there is clearly a connection between democratisation and ethnicisation in Africa, ethnicisation is also connected to other issues, such as economic decline, the decline of the nation-state and the rise of globalisation. In reality, ethnicisation has both positive and negative effects, but the negative ones were the most striking, particularly the escalating hostilities between ethnic groups. Besides democratisation, the spread of internal conflict thus became another leitmotif of African politics in the early 1990s. In 1994, new depths of horror were reached in the Rwandan genocide (see chapter 6, section a).

Before we turn to those topics, the following chapter discusses a number of positive developments that accompanied democratisation, such as the end of several violent conflicts dating back to the Cold War (the highlight of which was the abolition of apartheid in South Africa), renewed economic growth and, above all, the emergence of a new African consciousness and optimism. In the mid-1990s, was Africa headed for a renaissance?

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1 Although in some respects the island state of Cape Verde (which is outside the scope of this book) was a few months earlier.
2 Decalo, ‘Benin: First of New Democracies’.
4 Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*.
5 Ake, *The Unique Case of African Democracy*, p. 239.
6 This categorisation comes from Bratton and Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, p. 120.
8 The only possible exception is South Africa, where the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) resembled a national conference. See Shubane, *South Africa: A New Government in the Making*.
10 Ethnicity is a loaded concept that is not easy to define in a generally acceptable and clear manner. In this context, it is sufficient to regard ethnicity as anything the authorities wish to describe as such (the top-down approach) or any such group to which a person believes or feels he belongs (the bottom-up approach).
17 Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.
18 The centuries-old battle cry of the American struggle for independence, ‘no taxation without representation’, illustrates this linkage.
19 For an assessment of the intensity and scope of pluralism, see Bangura, *Democratization, Equity and Stability*.
22 Mkandawire and Olukoshi (eds.), *Between Liberalisation and Oppression*. 