Exploring the Prevalence of Autocratization and Democratization across Africa in recent Years

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Abstract

This paper examines the prevalence of autocratization and democratization episodes in African countries from 2000 to 2020 in the context of an ongoing third global wave of autocratization. I find that democratization has occurred more often and affected more countries than autocratization while both processes unfold with similar magnitudes and durations within countries. However, autocratization has gained prevalence considerably in the latter half of the period and now overshadows democratization. The years around 2010 might mark the beginning of a grave wave of autocratization across Africa. Especially if democratization fails to pick back up in the coming years.

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Introduction

Processes of democratization and autocratization are key interests in the field of democracy studies. While the global share of democracies has greatly increased in the past century (Lührmann et al. 2018: 65), we are now experiencing a third global wave of autocratization that started in 1994 (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Looking at a continent where democracy is not the predominant form of governance, this paper will explore trends in democratization and autocratization across Africa in recent years. I will investigate changes in democratic quality and incidents of coups to find out whether a wave of autocratization is also affecting Africa or whether democratization processes still have the upper hand. Furthermore, I will examine differences in the occurrence of autocratization and democratization in autocracies and democracies as well as regional differences.

Struggles for democracy in most African countries started right after their independence. There was little trust among citizens that the new elites who had gained power by successfully leading movements for independence would fulfill their political promises. However, the success of movements for democracy was meager across the continent due to various reasons. As citizens felt neglected by their state, they began organizing in communal institutions and against the state (for example by refusing to pay taxes). On the other hand, political and economic elites began constructing parallel states to enrich themselves after realizing that they lacked both hegemony and accountability. Both contributed to a growing disconnect between citizens and the state (Ihonvbere 1996: 344-346). Moreover, most prodemocracy movements didn't effectively challenge the predominant autocratic patterns of politics, were not organized bottom-up (instead lead by politicians or former military officers) and failed to appeal to new political constituencies. They also faced difficulties in broad mobilization due to their elitist programs, neglect of women and reliance on religion and ethnicity. Some prodemocracy movements were directly funded by incumbent authoritarian regimes (Ihonvbere 1996: 350-358). As a result, a majority of African states are still authoritarian today despite large majorities of Africans wanting democracy and rejecting authoritarian regimes such as presidential, military and one-party dictatorships (Mattes and Bratton: 2016).

Research Question and Hypotheses

I intend on identifying and exploring trends of democratization and autocratization across Africa in recent years, more specifically since 2000. Has there been a change over time? Are different processes playing out in democracies and autocracies? Are there regional differences?

Following Lührmann and Lindberg (2019: 1099-1101), I conceptualize democratization as any development that strengthens the principles of liberal democracy such as free and fair elections and the rule of law. Conversely, autocratization is defined as the opposite. To distinguish democracies and autocracies, I consider countries with de-facto multiparty and free and fair elections as democracies. Considering the difficult history of democratization in Africa and the ongoing global wave of autocratization, I expect autocratization to be more prevalent than democratization.

Because of the higher number of autocracies, I expect both autocratization and democratization to occur more often in autocracies than democracies.

However, I expect the democratization developments to be stronger on average than the autocratization developments since there is more room for improvement of democratic quality than deterioration (because of the higher number of autocracies). While autocratization can occur both suddenly and gradually over time, democratization is more likely to occur suddenly. Therefore, I expect episodes of autocratization to be longer on average.

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019: 1102) find that historically, 80% of autocratization episodes that started in democracies ended in autocracy. I expect to find a similar pattern across Africa in recent years.

Finally with regards to regional differences, I expect that democratization will be more prevalent in some regions and autocratization in others as a result of diffusion processes.
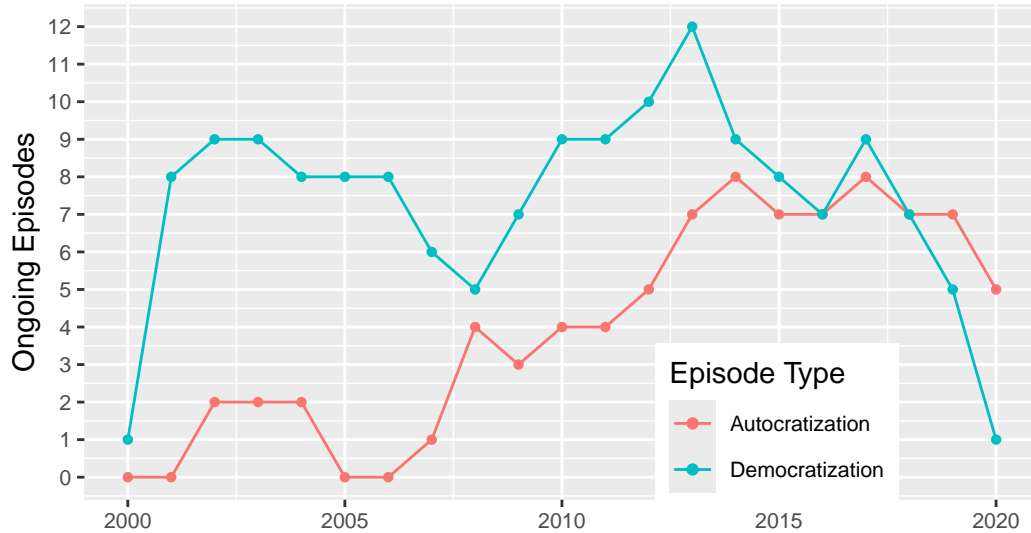
Research Design

My statistical analysis is oriented around Lührmann and Lindberg's (2019) empirical overview of all autocratization episodes worldwide from 1900 to 2017. They measure changes in democratic quality using the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI, v2x_polyarchy) of the V-Dem dataset. The EDI is a so-phisticated, fine-grained index on a continuous scale from 0 to 1 that measures the de-facto democratic qualities of all countries for every year since 1789. Its constituting variables are oriented around Dahl's (1971) conceptualization of "polyarchy": democracy with free and fair elections, alternative sources of information and freedom of expression and association. They identify autocratization episodes, op-erationalized as a decline of at least 0.1 in the EDI within one year or over a connected time period. A potential autocratization episodes starts with a decline of just 0.01 in the EDI from one year to the next and ends if there is no further decline of at least 0.01 for four years (to capture gradual and slow mov-ing processes) or if there is an increase of at least 0.02 during one of those years (which would mark a potential democratization episode). If the total decline over the time period amounts to at least 0.1, an autocratization episode is manifest. To distinguish democracies and autocracies, they use Lührmann et al.'s (2018) Regimes of the World (RoW) classification of democracies as countries with de-facto multiparty and free and fair elections.

Using the same operationalization, I will produce an empirical overview of all autocratization episodes and democratization episodes (operationalized analogously) for 55 African countries[1] from 2000 to 2020. I will use the EDI of the most recent version of V-Dem data (Coppedge et al. 2022) as well as a refined version of RoW data by Herre (2021) for classifications of democracies and autocracies. Additionally, I will compare the autocratization episodes that I find to a dataset of coup d'états (Peyton et al. 2020) to further explore the means by which autocratization is occurring. I recognize a coup as corresponding to an autocratization episode if it occurs between two years before the start of the episode and the year of the end of the episode.

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[1]The de-facto state of Somaliland is included as well as South Sudan starting in 2011

Results and Discussion

Figure 1: Ongoing autocratization and democratization episodes in African countries each year

For the period from 2000 to 2020, I find 19 autocratization episodes in 17 countries and 33 democratization episodes in 27 countries. Contrary to my expectation, there have been more democratization episodes in more countries. Additionally, only 4 countries only experienced autocratization, while 14 only experienced democratization and both occurred in 13 countries (leaving 24 countries unaffected). Both democatization and autocratization episodes last on average 3.5 years, while the average democratization episode is slightly stronger (EDI increase of 0.22) than the average autocratization episode (EDI decline of 0.18), the difference is not statistically significant, however ($p = 0.19$). Tables 2 though 4 in the appendix list all autocratization and democratization episodes as well as the number of episodes for each country.

Of the 33 democratization episodes, 30 started in autocracies and 15 of those ended in democracy, marking a moderate but notable success for democratization efforts in recent years. On the other hand, 10 of the 19 autocratization episodes started in democracies and 7 of those ended in autocracy. Of the remaining three, two are still ongoing as of 2020. This is evidence for the serious danger autocratization processes pose to the survival of democracies.

Figure 1 above shows the number of ongoing episodes of democratization and autocratization for each year. While democratization episodes clearly outnumbered autocratization episodes in the first decade after 2000, the latter rose to equal levels and stayed consistent thereafter. On the other hand, the number of ongoing democratization episodes dropped off considerably from 9 in 2017 down to just one in 2020. The period from 2010 to 2020 could mark the beginning of a wave of autocratization, especially if the number of democratization episodes does not pick back up again in the coming years.

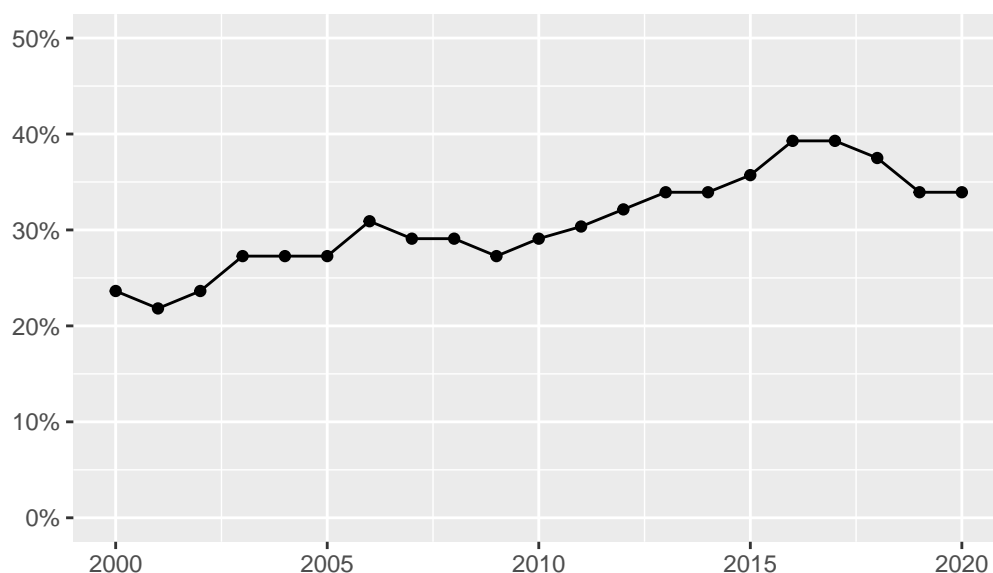Figure 2: Share of democracies across Africa per year

Figure 2 above shows that the share of democracies in Africa has slowly increased from around a quarter in 2001 to a third in 2020. While drop offs in 2001 and from 2006 to 2009 were quickly reversed, a reversal of the notable drop starting in 2018 seems less likely due to the prevalence of autocratization over democratization episodes now.

The Cline Center Coup D'état Project Dataset contains 21 instances of successful coups in Africa from 2000 to 2020. Of those, 11 correspond with an autocratization episode. Surprisingly, only three coups took place in democracies (in Sao Tome and Principe, Burkina Faso, Tunisia). While Sao Tome and Principe stayed a democracy and Burkina Faso reverted to democracy in a later democratization episode, Tunisia has moved to autocracy in 2021 as a consequence of the 2019 self-coup (Boese et al. 2022: 18). Many more coups occurring in autocracies could be an explanation for the fact that autocratization episodes starting in autocracies are on average a little shorter than ones starting in democracies. Interestingly, 9 coups occurred between one year before and one year after the start of a democratization episode (and all except one in autocracies). While incidents of coups have been spread out over the period with the median coup occurring in 2011, 2020 and 2021 both having three successful coups could mark the beginning of a worrisome trend (Boese et al. 2022: 2).

While coup d'états have contributed to autocratization across Africa, they have not been the main driver of it. Boese et al. (2022: 25) find that autocratization in Africa in recent years has mainly happened through undermining of legislative constraints on the executive (uniquely in Sub-Saharan Africa) and through limits on freedom of expression (similarly to other regions in the World). Rice (2018) finds that civil conflict is a significant factor to predict democratic backsliding in Africa but also globally. Additionally, economic growth makes backsliding less likely, a relationship that only holds for Sub-Saharan Africa specifically.

With respect to regional differences, Western African countries are overrepresented for democratization and autocratization episodes. While containing 29% of African countries, they experienced 45% of democratization episodes and 37% of autocratization episodes. The other regions are generally underrepresented for democratization episodes. A detailed breakdown of regional differences can be seen in Table 4 in the Appendix.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of changes in V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index over time, we have seen that both autocratization and democratization have happened quite often across Africa in the past 20 years. The EDI is a fine-grained measurement of de-facto democratic quality that integrates many different aspects of liberal democracy. While there are differences in magnitude and duration between autocratization episodes and democratization episodes as well as autocratization episodes starting in autocracies compared to democracies, the differences are rather small and don't allow me to make inference for these political processes in general. Furthermore, clustering of incidents in Western Africa might be evidence for diffusion. However, the precise mechanisms should be examined further.

The comparison of my findings with a dataset of successful coups in the time period has shown that while coups have played a role for autocratization episodes, they are not the sole drivers of them. There were especially few coups in democracies and autocratization there happened in more gradual terms.

Finally, I am able to conclude with most clarity that in recent years, a serious shift has happened in favor of the predominance of autocratization over democratization. This has been caused by a permanence of autocratization and a sever drop off in ongoing democratization in the past decade, which may well mark the beginning of a prolonged wave of autocratization across Africa. To reverse this trend, prodemocracy movements will have to come back more vigorous and committed than they have been in the past. Studying further developments regarding democratization and autocratization in the coming years will certainly be interesting.

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Appendix

Table 1: Autocratization episodes in African countries, 2000-2020

Country	Start	End	Change in EDI	Regime Type at Start	Regime Type at End
Central African Republic	2002	2004	-0.12	Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy
Liberia	2002	2004	-0.10	Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy
Kenya	2007	2008	-0.10	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Madagascar	2008	2010	-0.27	Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy
Niger	2008	2010	-0.30	Electoral democracy	Closed autocracy
Burundi	2008	2013	-0.12	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Zambia	2010	2019	-0.16	Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy
Guinea-Bissau	2011	2013	-0.16	Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy
Mali	2011	2013	-0.28	Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy
Egypt	2012	2014	-0.16	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Burkina Faso	2013	2015	-0.23	Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy
Libya	2013	2019	-0.28	Electoral democracy	Closed autocracy
Burundi	2014	2017	-0.11	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Lesotho	2014	2017	-0.12	Electoral democracy	Electoral democracy
Botswana	2014	2020	-0.12	Liberal democracy	Liberal democracy
Comoros	2014	2020	-0.21	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Mali	2016	2020	-0.11	Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy
Benin	2017	2020	-0.30	Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy
Mauritius	2018	2020	-0.18	Electoral democracy	Electoral democracy

Table 2: Democratization episodes in African countries, 2000-2020

Country	Start	End	Change in EDI	Regime Type at Start	Regime Type at End
Ivory Coast	2000	2001	0.18	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Kenya	2001	2003	0.14	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
Lesotho	2001	2003	0.30	Closed autocracy	Electoral democracy
Mali	2001	2003	0.10	Electoral democracy	Electoral democracy
Sierra Leone	2001	2003	0.32	Closed autocracy	Electoral democracy
Comoros	2001	2005	0.22	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Burundi	2001	2006	0.23	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Somaliland	2001	2006	0.22	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Seychelles	2002	2008	0.12	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Dem. Rep. Congo	2002	2009	0.20	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Central African Republic	2004	2006	0.12	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Liberia	2004	2007	0.42	Closed autocracy	Electoral democracy
Togo	2004	2008	0.14	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Mauritania	2006	2007	0.20	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Angola	2007	2011	0.13	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Malawi	2008	2013	0.12	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
Mauritania	2009	2012	0.11	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy

Table 2 (cont.): Democratization episodes in African countries, 2000-2020

Country	Start	End	Change in EDI	Regime Type at Start	Regime Type at End
Guinea	2009	2014	0.20	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Kenya	2009	2014	0.12	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
Nigeria	2009	2015	0.15	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
Tunisia	2010	2012	0.57	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
Libya	2010	2013	0.47	Closed autocracy	Electoral democracy
Niger	2010	2013	0.36	Closed autocracy	Electoral democracy
Madagascar	2012	2019	0.27	Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Seychelles	2012	2020	0.19	Electoral autocracy	Liberal democracy
Mali	2013	2015	0.22	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
Benin	2013	2017	0.12	Electoral democracy	Electoral democracy
Central African Republic	2013	2018	0.14	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Guinea-Bissau	2013	2019	0.24	Closed autocracy	Electoral democracy
Burkina Faso	2015	2017	0.31	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
The Gambia	2016	2018	0.28	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy
Ethiopia	2017	2019	0.11	Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy
Lesotho	2017	2019	0.12	Electoral democracy	Electoral democracy

Table 3: Number of autocratization and democratization episodes per country

Country	Autocratization	Democratization	Country	Autocratization	Democratization
Mali	2	2	The Gambia	0	1
Burundi	2	1	Togo	0	1
Kenya	1	2	Somaliland	0	1
Central African Republic	1	2	Ghana	0	0
Lesotho	1	2	South Africa	0	0
Benin	1	1	Senegal	0	0
Burkina Faso	1	1	South Sudan	0	0
Niger	1	1	Sudan	0	0
Liberia	1	1	Tanzania	0	0
Guinea-Bissau	1	1	Uganda	0	0
Libya	1	1	Mozambique	0	0
Madagascar	1	1	Zimbabwe	0	0
Comoros	1	1	Cape Verde	0	0
Mauritania	0	2	Morocco	0	0
Seychelles	0	2	Algeria	0	0
Egypt	1	0	Cameroon	0	0
Zambia	1	0	Chad	0	0
Botswana	1	0	Republic of the Congo	0	0
Mauritius	1	0	Djibouti	0	0
Ethiopia	0	1	Eritrea	0	0
Nigeria	0	1	Gabon	0	0
Guinea	0	1	Namibia	0	0
Ivory Coast	0	1	Rwanda	0	0
Malawi	0	1	Somalia	0	0
Sierra Leone	0	1	Eswatini	0	0
Tunisia	0	1	Equatorial Guinea	0	0
Angola	0	1	Sao Tome and Principe	0	0
Dem. Rep. Congo	0	1	Zanzibar	0	0

Table 4: Afican regions' shares of countries, autocratization episodes and democratization episodes

Region	Countries	Autocratization Episodes	Democratization Episodes
Eastern Africa	36%	37%	30%
Western Africa	29%	37%	45%
Central Africa	16%	5%	12%
Northern Africa	11%	11%	6%
Southern Africa	9%	11%	6%