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RISK, RULE AND REASON: LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

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SUMMARY

Why are most African countries poorly led? This article looks at the question from the perspective of political economy, considering leaders to be individuals who respond rationally to incentives created by their environment. Critical is the level of risk, which can encourage leaders to pursue short-term, economically destructive policies. Using a new database of national leadership transitions in Africa since 1960, the article demonstrates that the risks of office holding are very high in the region. It also finds that African countries where leaders face less risk tend to have more open economic regimes and to have lower levels of perceived political corruption, as predicted by political economy theory. Because it makes the political environment less perilous, democratization in the region holds out some hope for encouraging leaders to govern with an eye to longer-term results.

INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan Africa is poorly led. The region has far too many tyrants and 'tropical gangsters', far too few statesmen, let alone merely competent officeholders. Too often, these leaders reject sound policy advice and refuse to take a long and broad view of their job. They persecute suspected political rivals and bleed their economies for personal benefit. With a handful of exceptions, notably South Africa under Nobel laureate Nelson Mandela, countries in the sub-Saharan area are set back by a personalist, neopatrimonial style of national leadership (Aka, 1997).[1]

Better leadership is not the cure-all for Africa's lack of development, but it would be an important step in the right direction. A few years back some observers saw hope in a new generation of supposedly benevolent dictators, such as Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea, Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, or Yoweri Museveni in Uganda (Madavo and Sarbib, 1997; Connell and Smyth, 1998). Subsequent events (war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, invasion of the Congo Republic by Uganda) chilled the optimism (McPherson and Goldsmith, 1998; Barkan and Gordon, 1998; Ottaway, 1998). In most countries, it seems progressive leadership soon reverts to the more familiar form of autocratic one-man rule.[2]

There is no shortage of macro-level explanations for this pattern. Authoritarian political traditions, lack of national identity, underdeveloped middle classes and widespread economic distress are among the sweeping, impersonal forces cited as factors that produce poor leader after poor leader. Foreign aid may have enabled some of these leaders to hang on longer than they would have otherwise, especially during the Cold War. This article instead takes a micro-level view of leadership. Without denying that macro-level social and economic factors bear on leaders' behaviour, I find it also useful to look at these people as individuals and to speculate about the incentives created by their environment.

In the tradition of political economy, we can begin with the assumption that African leaders are usually trying to do what they think is best for themselves. We can posit that they choose actions that appear to them to produce the greatest benefit at least cost, after making allowances for the degree of risk involved. Such a leader also is capable

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[1]For simplicity's sake, I shall refer interchangeably to Africa and sub-Saharan Africa in this article. The four Arab states of North Africa are specifically excluded from consideration.
[2]In Africa, the national rulers are always men, with only two exceptions in the past 40 years – Rwanda's Sylvie Kinigi and Liberia's Ruth Perry. In this article, I will often refer to rulers by using the male pronoun, which is historically accurate but does not imply any endorsement of the lack of female participation in national leadership roles.

of learning, and takes cues from what is happening to other leaders in neighbouring countries. He can improve his behaviour if he has to.

While no African leader fully exemplifies this rational actor model, all these individuals' behaviour can be illuminated by it. After all, even the best leaders have mixed, sometimes egoistic motives. To the extent that it represents reality, the rational actor model also may suggest how changing the political incentive system might induce African leaders to behave less autocratically.

I start this article by speculating about how these leaders might react to perceived levels of risk in their political environment. Next, I investigate the actual level of risk, guided by a new inventory that covers every major leadership transition in Africa since 1960. Then, I assess how risk appears to have distorted the way African leaders act in office. Finally, I consider the ways in which democratization may be changing political incentives for the better.

LEADERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATION

Perhaps the most troubling thing about African leaders is their tendency to reject (or simply not follow through on) conventional economic advice (Scott, 1998). Africa is the graveyard of many well-intended reforms. The vacillating public attitude of Kenya's President Daniel Moi is emblematic. In March 1993, he rejected an International Monetary Fund (IMF) plan for being cruel and unrealistic. One month later, he reversed himself, and agreed to the plan. In June 1997, the IMF cut off lending to Kenya after Moi refused to take aggressive steps to combat corruption. Again, his initial reaction was defiance, swiftly followed by a more accommodating line.

Why are African leaders apt to resist advice to carry out market-friendly reforms that could boost national rates of economic growth? If one accepts the premise that, with sufficient time, open market policies will work in Africa, such a choice can look senseless. Certainly, no African leader would prefer to perpetuate mass poverty and economic stagnation in his country, which can only make governing more difficult. More to the point, perhaps, cooperating with the international financial institutions is the best way to assure continued diplomatic support and financial credit. Yet, many African leaders apparently see political rationality in choosing policies that are economically damaging or irrational. Miles Kahler (1990) refers to this as the 'orthodox paradox'.

Political economy offers a theory of micro-level behaviour that may explain the paradox. Mancur Olson (1993) argues that time is the key. According to this theory, the predicament facing any individual national leader is that the pay-offs to most economic reforms lie in the future, but he also has to hold on to power now. An insecure power base is likely to encourage either reckless gambling for immediate returns or highly cautious strategies to preserve political capital; it is unlikely to promote measured actions to obtain long-range returns. Whether a leader acts for the short or the long term, therefore, is influenced by his sense of the level of threat to his career.

A more technical way to understand a leader's intertemporal choices is to think of a 'political discount rate'. One of political economy's core ideas is that future events have a present value, which one can calculate by using a rate of discount. That rate of discount rises with risk and uncertainty. When an outcome is doubtful over time, it makes sense to mark down its present value. The more doubtful the outcome, the more valuable are alternative activities that yield immediate dividends, even if the expected return of those activities is low. Thus, under conditions of political uncertainty, the narrowly 'rational' leader will systematically forgo promising political 'investments' – ventures whose benefits he may not survive to reap. Whenever he is given a choice, according to this argument, such a leader will usually prefer current political 'consumption'. It follows that free-market reforms look like a poor bargain, requiring immediate political pain in exchange for distant (and therefore questionable) gain.

High political discount rates are also a possible explanation for the extensive and destructive political corruption seen in Africa. The Democratic Republic of Congo's Mobutu Sese Sekou is the archetype.[3] The late dictator erased the line between public and private property, accumulating a vast personal fortune and bankrupting his country. His is an extreme case, yet every national leader has opportunities to profit individually from his office. According to the premises of political economy, it is the leader with the least certainty about his fate who has the strongest

[3]I will use the current name to refer to this country, though this is not always historically accurate.

incentives to take his rewards now – and to take as much as possible. A more self-assured leader may calculate that it is safe to defer most personal financial gain until after he has left office. Some of the misuse of public office also may be due to the need to buy support from friends and extended family members. Olson (1993), for example, postulates that leaders with an insecure grip on power have an incentive to take steps to patronize favoured ethnic groups, often at the expense of national economic health. This sort of pork-barrelling is well known in Africa.

Political economy thus presents a cogent theory for why African rulers act they way they do. Short-term policy making and political corruption are 'rational' ways of trying to manage the risks associated with governing in an unsettled political system, as we typically find in Africa. According to this thesis, overly cautious or corrupt leaders may simply be attempting to maximize utility under conditions of personal and political uncertainty. Their assessment of risk is affected by their personal experiences and by their perceptions about larger trends in their country and region. Unfortunately for the social welfare, their effort to protect their individual interests has spillovers that hurt everyone else.

The issue for this article is whether the facts support this theory. First, is it true that African leaders face a high degree of risk? We can reasonably assume these people are tolerant of risk, or they would not have chosen political careers. Thus, we need to look for evidence of extraordinary occupational hazards for leaders. The second question is whether political risk in Africa is associated with 'bad' (anti-market) economic policy choices or with corruption. As we will see below, the answers to both questions seem to be affirmative: there is significant physical risk for leaders, and that risk correlates with anti-market policies and with corruption. Those two findings, in turn, suggest scope for enhancing the area's national leadership by reducing the risks of governing, a goal that may be abetted by democratization.

THE DATA SET

To establish a basis for exploring these issues, I compiled a new inventory of all national leaders in independent African countries from 1960 to 1999. My focus is on the main power holders. That usually means the president, but in some countries it can be the prime minister or another official. For simplicity, I assume that each country has only one such leader at a time, which entails judgement calls where competing claimants vie for ultimate national authority, as for example in The Democratic Republic of Congo before Mobutu consolidated his power in 1964.

Many studies of African leaders have looked at transitions, usually defined as a shift from an existing national leader to a new one, whether by legal or extra-legal means (Hughes and May, 1988; Londregan *et al.*, 1995; Breytenbach, 1997). Most of these earlier studies have focused on the acquisition of power. In this article, however, I am more interested in the means by which power is lost. The probability of leaving office and the likely mode of exit are two factors that plausibly affect African leaders' intertemporal risk estimates, which, in turn, may influence the way they exercise power.

In taking an inventory of Africa's leaders, I started by enumerating all formal heads of state (or heads of government in parliamentary systems) for the 48 sub-Saharan countries, going back to independence (though no earlier than 1960). To eliminate figureheads and deputy personnel from the inventory, I cross-checked these names with two earlier studies on leadership succession by Henry Bienen and Nicolas van de Walle (1991) and by Rodger Govea and John Holm (1997).[4] This procedure resulted in many refinements of the list, though unlike that pair of earlier studies I have chosen to leave in most rulers who presided over interregnum governments – the exceptions being leaders who were in office for only a few days during a period of political confusion.

My goal was to single out every principal power holder in Africa over the past 40 years. I came up with 228 leaders (though only 212 individuals, because of 16 people who served non-consecutive terms.) Leaving aside the 48 leaders currently in power, this means Africa as a region has experienced 180 political transitions since 1960. Due to the subjective element in my definitions, this figure cannot be considered definitive. Another coding system might differ at the margins. The important thing is that my list contains a sufficiently large number of transitions to speculate about the personal and political incentives these changes in power produce for African leaders.

[4] The latter study has been published without the details of all the political transitions. The authors generously shared with me the full data set.

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

Table 1 summarizes how independent Africa's 180 leadership successions took place. By far the most common means for African leaders to lose power is through a coup d'état or similar extra-constitutional event. The 1960–1999 period's first successful coup took place on 13 January 1963 in Togo; the last occurred on Christmas Eve, 1999, in Côte d'Ivoire.[5] In between these events, another 99 regimes ended with a coup, civil war or invasion. Three rulers – Ahmed Abdallah of Comoros, David Dacko of Central African Republic, and Milton Obote of Uganda – had the misfortune of being overthrown twice.

The large proportion of coups can be construed as a sign that leaders in Africa typically employ high political discount rates. If a national leader thinks the odds are good of his being overthrown, which is reasonable given the region's history, it is also reasonable for him to place a premium on things that he can do now. I will look at the implications of coups as a mode of leadership transition more fully in the next section. First, however, I want to highlight an apparent counter trend reported in Table 1: African leaders' long terms of office.

Africa is justly famous for 'political dinosaurs', such as Mobutu, who clung to power for 32 years before being driven into exile in 1997. Fourteen present national heads in the region have been in office for between 10 and 20 years; nine have served more than 20 years. The mean tenure for all former African leaders is 7.2 years, and about twice that for leaders who died in office or retired. Among current African leaders, the figure for average length of service is even higher.

We can gain a useful perspective by looking at the number of leaders in the economically advanced countries during the same period. If we take all G-7 nations since 1960, they had an average of one new leader every 3.2 years (counting non-consecutive terms separately) – twice the tempo in Africa. Expanding the comparison to the European Union produces exactly the same result: European national leaders served an average of 3.2 years over the past four decades, with Finland having the shortest average duration and Luxembourg the longest.

To look at the data another way, the average African country has had only between four and five leaders since 1960. The corresponding number for the United States is eight presidents since 1961; for the United Kingdom, it is eight prime ministers since 1963.[6] Note also the infrequency of retirements listed in Table 1. Until the 1990s, only eight established rulers ever retired from the top office in Africa. It is not surprising, therefore, that nearly one African leader in 10 died while in office over the past 40 years. The lack of retirements and the large number of natural deaths are both signs of entrenched leadership.

At first, the relative lack of turnover would seem to contradict the hypothesis that the political environment for leaders is unstable or insecure. As with American corporate CEOs (Ocasio, 1994), any given political ruler's odds of retaining power improves with time in Africa (Bienen and van de Walle, 1989). Even elderly leaders in the

Table 1. How leaders leave office in Africa, 1960–1999

	Number of incidents					Mean time in
	1960–69	1970–79	1980–89	1990–99	Total	office (year)
Overthrown in coup, war or invasion	27	30	22	22	101	5.7
Die of natural or accidental causes	2	3	4	3	12	11.7
Assassination (not part of coup)	1	0	1	3	5	7.8
Retire	1	2	5	9	17	11.7
Lose election	0	0	1	12	13	14.8
Other (interim or caretaker regime, impeachment)	6	8	4	14	32	1.2
All regime transitions	37	43	37	63	180	7.2

Note: Terms of office are rounded off to the nearest half-year (or third of a year when three leaders held power during the calendar year).

[5]Post-colonial Africa's first coup actually occurred in Sudan on 17 November 1958, 13 months before the starting date I use in this article. See McGowan and Johnson (1984).
[6]One British prime minister – Harold Wilson – served two non-consecutive terms, so only seven individuals held this top office.

Table 2. Leadership turnover in Africa, 1960 (or independence if later) through 1999

Number of transitions	Country
0	Eritrea, Namibia, Zimbabwe
1	Angola, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, Seychelles, Zambia
2	Botswana, Congo Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritius, Tanzania
3	Gabon, Mali, Rwanda, São Tomé & Príncipe, Swaziland, Togo
4	Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Mauritania
5	Burkina Faso, Somalia, Sudan
6	Chad, Lesotho, Niger, South Africa, Uganda
7	Congo, Liberia, Madagascar
8	Ghana
9	Burundi, Comoros, Sierra Leone
10	–
11	Nigeria
12	Bénin

Note: Leaders serving non-consecutive terms are counted twice.

region can hold on against pressures from younger politicians with greater energy and fresher ideas. We might infer that this type of job security would produce long time horizons, not the short-termism reported for Africa.

Yet, another interpretation is plausible. In the field of finance, we know that risk is associated with volatility. The same may be true in politics. For the individual ruler who wants to weigh his prospects of retaining power, the average term of office may be a less meaningful statistic than is the variation around the mean. Table 2 gives one indication of how much volatility exists. Three recently independent countries (Eritrea, Namibia, Zimbabwe) have had no leadership transitions. Another 11 countries have had just one transition since independence. At the far end of the spectrum, Nigeria has had 11 transitions and Bénin has had 12.

For the high-variance countries like Nigeria, the average term is a poor indicator of what any given leader is likely to experience. Transitions occur randomly, and, most worrisome, they are often in the form of a coup. Taking history as their guide, even rulers with proven staying power must acknowledge the possibility that, someday, they too may find themselves ejected by the army. However, they cannot forecast when that day may come. Those uncertain prospects would be grounds for safety-first political behaviour, and would tend to deter long-term planning.

PERSONAL HAZARDS

The rational leader also needs to anticipate what may happen to him were he to lose power. Table 3 shows the price has been high.[7] Of the 101 past leaders who left office due to a coup or similar unauthorized event, roughly two-thirds were killed, imprisoned or banished to a foreign country.

Twenty-seven former rulers died violently, counting five whose deaths appear to have been independent of a coup or coup attempt. These last would include Mozambique's Samora Machel, killed when his plane was electronically diverted into a mountainside by South African agents in 1986, and South Africa's Hendrik Verwoerd, murdered by a lone fanatic in 1966.[8] The remaining 22 leaders in this category clearly perished as a direct result of coups. Among them were three ex-presidents in Ghana who all died during Jerry Rawlings' first takeover in 1979.

[7] These data are assembled from several sources, primarily Brockman (1994), Lentz (1994), Rake (1992) and Wiseman (1991). They possibly understate the level of personal risk for African leaders, since information is not available on all 171 former power holders.
[8] Due to the unresolved circumstances surrounding the 1994 plane crash that killed Cyprien Ntariamyra of Burundi and Juvénal Habyarimana of Rwanda, I classify these two deaths as non-coup assassinations. The alternate classification is also plausible.

Table 3. Fate of Africa's ex-leaders, 1960–1999

	All ex-leaders	Overthrown	Killed	Arrested	Exiled
Number	159	101	27	37	29
Percentage	100%	64%	17%	23%	18%

Note: African leaders (12) who died in office of natural causes are excluded. Former leaders who served non-consecutive terms (9) are counted once. Three ex-leaders were overthrown twice.

We can put these executions and assassinations in perspective by looking at the rate of fatal occupational injuries in other lines of work. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the three most dangerous occupations for Americans are commercial fisherman, logger and small plane operator. Each of these jobs has an annual death rate of about 100 per 100,000 workers. By contrast, the implied occupational death rate for African rulers is about 16 times greater.[9]

Of Africa's overthrown leaders who were not executed or assassinated, 37 were detained and held in jail, or if lucky, placed under house arrest. Sentences can be stiff. For example, Hamani Diori of Niger passed 13 years behind bars, Justin Adhmadégbe of Bénin spent 9 years, and Jean-Hilaire Aubame of Gabon spent 8 years. Twenty-nine other ex-leaders were forced into exile, at least temporarily. That figure does not include nine ex-leaders who experienced periods of both imprisonment and banishment. Perhaps the oddest case of the latter is Jean-Bédel Bokassa of Central African Republic. Ousted by his army in 1979, this self-proclaimed emperor fled to neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. France, his first choice for sanctuary, would not have him. Perhaps hoping for a political comeback, Bokassa returned home in 1986, whereupon he was arrested, tried and sentenced to death. Fortunately for him, the death sentence was commuted to life at hard labour. Bokassa did obtain release in 1993, but he died 3 years later.

Some rulers may look for reassurance in the region's declining rate of coups. Table 4 reports how many successful coups (including victories in civil war and foreign invasions) took place in each of the last four decades, adjusted for the number of years of national independence in the region. The rate of military takeovers has dropped steadily, falling from 0.087 per country year in the 1960s, to 0.046 per country year in the 1990s. So, the region-wide probability of being overthrown is currently about half what it was in the early independence period.[10]

To the cautious leader, however, the improved odds still may not be good enough. Successful coups are but the tip of the iceberg. According to the count made by Pat McGowan and Thomas Johnson (1986), for every successful coup in Africa, there are approximately one other failed coup and two reported military plots to take over power.[11] As recently as the 10 years starting in 1980, more than half the countries in the region experienced at least one 'coup event', which includes the unsuccessful incidents (Wang, 1998). Thus, it would be unlikely if many contemporary African rulers count themselves safe from being overthrown.

Table 4. Successful coups in Africa, 1960–1999

	1960–69	1970–79	1980–89	1990–99	Total
No. of coups	27	30	22	22	101
Coups as % of transitions	73%	68%	59%	35%	56%
Country years	310	408	460	477	1655
Coups per country year	0.087	0.074	0.048	0.046	0.061

Note: Includes regime changes due to civil war and invasion. Country years are total years of national independence during the period.

[9]It is interesting to note that, with four assassinations since 1789, the occupational death rate of American presidents is similar. The US experience is exceptional for developed countries, however.
[10]Many efforts have been made to develop models to explain when and why coups occur in Africa. See, for example, Gershoni (1996), Johnson *et al.* (1984), and Wells and Pollnac (1988).
[11]For the period 1956–1986, they report 60 successful coups, 71 unsuccessful coups and 126 coup plots.

It is also true that, like Bokassa, a fair number of jailed or exiled former leaders eventually have benefited from clemency. Some of these individuals were rehabilitated, and they went back into political life. A notable example is Olusegun Obasanjo, the current president of Nigeria, who won his office after serving time as a political prisoner. Seven other current heads of African states are former power holders (none appear to be ex-convicts, however). This phenomenon of a former leader returning to office has happened 16 times in Africa since 1960. Nevertheless, I doubt the possibilities of being let out of jail, or of re-entering politics after a period in private life, do much to mitigate the physical dangers of losing power in Africa.

The dangers extend to include potential national leaders within government or from opposition groups. Such individuals also die or are sent to jail or exile at an alarming rate, according to the tally made by John Wiseman (1993). As he notes, African political competition is a self-perpetuating, zero-sum game. The stakes are very high for both actual and would-be powerholders. Yet, none of the participants has much incentive unilaterally to change the rules. To do so would be to cede the advantage to one's opponents, while exposing oneself to grave personal jeopardy. The cycle of mutual suspicion and pre-emptive repression thus goes on.

RISK AND LEADERS' BEHAVIOUR

There is little doubt, therefore, that holding high office in Africa poses acute risks. To what extent do those risks affect leaders' behaviour, specifically their behaviour in the areas of economic reform and corruption, mentioned at the outset of this article? That question is difficult to answer fully without detailed case studies of the individuals involved. In the absence of such information, however, we can look for approximate answers in national indicators of economic policy and corruption. To the extent we believe that country leaders control public policy or set the tone for public honesty, aggregate data may give us clues about how these leaders conduct themselves.

To represent a country's commitment to free market economics, I use the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom (Johnson *et al.*, 1999). The index is calculated by aggregating country scores on 10 policy indicators and measures of the business climate. Depending on their scores, countries are categorized as free (none in Africa), mostly free, mostly unfree, or repressed. While I do not see eye to eye with the Heritage Foundation on many subjects, I suspect that these categories offer a good approximation for how fully countries comply with IMF-style structural adjustment programs. My grouping of countries is based on the average economic freedom rating for 1995–1999.

I hypothesized earlier in this article that low-risk environments would tend to produce more reform-minded leaders, or at least leaders who would be more willing go along with economic reform in exchange for financial credit. Table 5 provides some evidence that such may be the case in Africa. As we see, a correlation exists between the hazards of leadership and the degree of 'economic freedom'. Leaders in the so-called mostly free countries were the least likely to be overthrown, killed, arrested or exiled. Leaders in the mostly unfree and repressed countries, by contrast, experienced a greater number of negative outcomes. Low political risk and liberal economic programmes seem to go together in Africa.

Table 5. Hazards of leadership, by economic policy category

	Number of incidents per country (1960–99)			
Policy category (1995–2000)	Leaders overthrown	Leaders killed	Leaders arrested	Leaders exiled
Mostly free countries	1.0	0.2	0.2	0.5
Mostly unfree countries	2.5	0.6	1.0	0.7
Repressed countries	1.5	0.5	0.6	0.6

Note: The economic policy categories are based on the Heritage Foundation Economic Freedom ranking for 1995–2000. Mostly free countries are: Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Uganda. Mostly unfree countries are: Bénin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe. Repressed countries are: Angola, Congo Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan.

Table 6. Hazards of leadership, by political corruption category

Corruption category (1999)	Number of incidents per country (1960–99)			
	Leaders overthrown	Leaders killed	Leaders arrested	Leaders exiled
Less corrupt countries	0	0.1	0	0
More corrupt countries	2.6	0.8	0.6	0.9

Note: The political corruption categories are based on Transparency International's Corruption Perception index for 1999. Less corrupt countries are: Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. More corrupt countries are: Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda.

Correlation does not prove causation, especially in making inferences about micro-level behaviour based on macro-level data. We cannot say whether a safer political environment encourages leaders to opt for the market, or conversely, whether leaders who opt for the market make their political environment safer (though the latter possibility seems less likely, at least in the short run). In either case, however, the results are consistent with political economy theory.

What is the relationship between political risk and corruption? For a measure of the latter, I use Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index for 1999. Transparency International is a watchdog organization formed to help raise ethical standards of government around the world. It compiles an annual index that assesses the degree to which public officials and politicians are believed to accept bribes, take illicit payment in public procurement, embezzle public funds, and otherwise use public positions for private gains. The index is based on several international business surveys, using different sampling frames and varying methodologies (Transparency International, 1999). While Transparency International is careful to point out that the rankings only reflect perceptions about corruption, I find it reasonable to assume that they correspond roughly to reality.

I have conjectured that leaders in the riskier African countries would have the greatest propensity to use their public offices for personal ends. Once more, the data lend support to my hypothesis. In Table 6, I divide African countries (for which corruption data are available) into two groups: less corrupt and more corrupt. I then tabulate the hazards of leadership for each group. The pattern is striking. There has never been a successful coup in the less corrupt group of countries. None of their ex-leaders has been arrested or exiled, and only one was killed while in office (South Africa's Verwoerd, cited earlier). The more corrupt countries, by contrast, have many coups and many leaders who suffered personally upon losing power.

As with the economic freedom index, these correlations do not prove that a hazardous political environment encourages leaders to become corrupt. The opposite is also plausible: corrupt rulers seem likely to invite coups and to bring personal suffering on themselves. To the extent that risk and corruption are related, the relationship between the two probably is mutually reinforcing. The important point for this article is that the observed association of risk and corruption conforms to what you would expect, based on the assumption of 'rational' behaviour among national rulers. Without overstating the case, the correlation lends support to a political economy account of poor leadership in Africa.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND IMPROVED LEADERSHIP

Political economy also suggests that one solution to poor leadership is to make the political environment less hazardous. A safer environment would reduce the incentives to engage in political misbehaviour and, in principle, encourage more responsible and forward-looking activity. In this context, Africa's recent moves toward more pluralistic national political systems, where people can express their political opinions and take part in public decisions, are reasons for hope. It is fashionable – and correct – to observe that democracy has shallow roots in most African countries (Joseph, 1997; van de Walle, 1999). Much of the impetus for reform comes from abroad, from the region's creditors. Yet, when we observe the patterns of leadership transitions, it is hard to deny that genuine changes are taking place.

No sitting African leader ever lost an election until 1982, when Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam of Mauritius was voted out. Since then, 12 more incumbents have been turned out of office by voters – accounting for about one-sixth of the leadership transitions in the 1990s (see Table 1). The threat of losing an election also may account for the increasing rate of leader retirements – nine in the 1990s versus only eight in the previous three decades.

Democratization appears to be altering the outcomes of the many coups that still occur. In the past, the new heads of military juntas often declared themselves permanent leaders (sometimes after doffing their uniforms and becoming 'civilians'). Now, it is becoming the norm for coup leaders quickly to organize internationally acceptable elections – and, more importantly, to honour the results afterwards (Anene, 1995). Recent examples include Niger and Guinea-Bissau. This trend is reflected in Table 1's 'other' category – political transitions involving short-term and provisional leaders. The fact we see more transitions of this type in the 1990s is an indirect reflection of the region's growing democratization.

Table 7 reports additional reasons to think that contemporary presidential elections are not simply façades in many countries. The entire sub-Saharan region had only 126 elections for top national office in the 30 years through 1989. Most of those were show elections, with an average winner's share of close to 90%. Conditions have changed significantly in the 1990s. There were 73 leadership elections during that decade, or more than half as many as in the three prior decades. All but five of sub-Saharan countries were involved. Equally important, the winner's share dropped to an average of about two-thirds of the votes cast. Such results would be considered landslide victories in the developed world. No president in the history of the United States has ever reached two-thirds of the popular vote. Still, in African terms, the tendency clearly is toward greater competitiveness at the ballot box.

The classic liberal defences of free and fair elections are that they give voice to majority demands and that they are a means for recruiting new leadership talent. Political economy and African experience suggest three additional benefits, all associated with reducing the hazards leaders face.

First, elections have the virtue of softening the penalties of losing political office. The defeated candidate in an election campaign, as opposed to the victim of a coup plot, is far less likely to be executed, jailed or exiled by his successor. By providing a low-risk avenue of exit, elections thus reduce the stakes in political competition. If the arguments in this article are correct, that would free African leaders to take a more purposeful, pragmatic view of their jobs.

A second benefit occurs if elections become institutionalized, and take place according to a schedule. Countries that hold regular elections reduce speculation about when (and how) the next political transition is likely. Again, the probable impact in Africa would be to change the political calculations made by the region's chief power holders, to allow them to worry less about how to hold onto power and to think more about the long term. Predictable political transitions might also reduce anxiety among private investors, and thus mitigate the harmful political business cycle that exists in some countries.

The third benefit stems from the more rapid turnover among national rulers that results when elections become a regular part of political experience. As leaders come to see their jobs less as an entitlement and more as a phase in their careers, that actually may liberate them to 'do the right thing', and not always feel forced to do what is

Table 7. Presidential elections in Africa, 1960–1999

	Number of elections	Number of countries	Winner's share of votes cast
1960 (or independence if later) through 1989	126	37	87.9%
1990s	73	43	66.7%

Note: Includes only second round totals in cases where the constitution mandates second round voting to assure majority support for the president (including the second round for the 1999/2000 presidential election in Guinea-Bissau, even though it occurred outside the period covered in this table). Total also includes parliamentary elections where president is chosen indirectly or the prime minister is the main power holder (including cases with hereditary heads of state). Winners' share in these instances refers to the largest party in parliament.
Source: Bratton and van de Walle (1997, 11.197, 208), expanded and updated by the author, principally with data from Nohlen *et al*. (1999).

politically expedient. Merilee Grindle and Francisco Thoumi (1993) have remarked on this phenomenon among lame-duck presidents in Latin America. Knowledge that their positions are transitory can, somewhat ironically, concentrate the incumbents' attention on how best to leave a lasting legacy. Similar results are possible in Africa.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Before multi-party competition and elections can have these positive effects on leaders, Africa's competitive political systems must become institutionalized. This has yet to happen in most countries, according to the results of Samuel Huntington's (1968) 'two-turnover test'. Huntington notes that institutionalized democracies prove themselves by repeatedly carrying out peaceful transfers of power through the ballot box. The first time an opposition leader replaces an incumbent power holder does not necessarily establish a tradition of peaceful political change. It is only after the new incumbent is defeated and leaves office that one can begin to be confident that constitutional procedures have taken root.

Second turnovers are almost unheard of in Africa. Botswana has not had one. The same party has ruled that country since independence. Mauritius has had two election-based leadership turnovers, but many observers question whether that island nation properly deserves classification in the region. Bénin is the only other African country where incumbent power holders have twice lost elections. The dictator Mathieu Kérékou fell to Nicéphore Soglo in 1991, but he regained the presidency by defeating Soglo in the election 5 years later. Kérékou's continued role raises some doubt whether Bénin's second transition indicates much other than the persistence of narrow, personalistic politics in that country.

Nonetheless, the last decade does offer hope that some African societies will be able to establish more orderly systems of political competition. That could change the incentives for African leaders, and encourage them to act more responsibly and even-handedly. As a means of redressing decades of oppression and economic stagnation, that cannot happen soon enough.

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