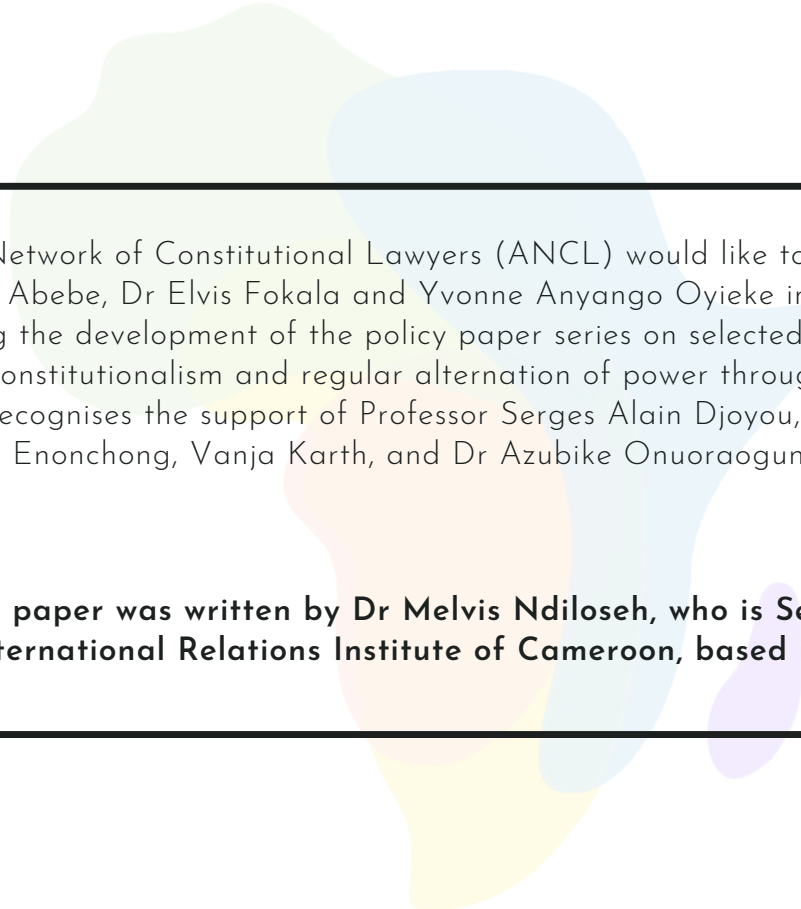# PROMOTION OF CONSTITUTIONALISM THROUGH TERM LIMITS IN AFRICA:

NOSTALGIA FOR THE MYTH OF "BENEVOLENT" DICTATORSHIP

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NOSTALGIA FOR THE MYTH OF "BENEVOLENT" DICTATORSHIP AND CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN AFRICA: A SYNOPTIC REFLECTION

DEVELOPED BY THE AFRICAN NETWORK OF CONSTITUTIONAL LAWYERS

1. Introduction

The image of the strongman – an immensely powerful autocratic political leader at the helm of national leadership with the verve and authority to shake-up the destiny of a country often through personal benevolence or visionary leadership – seems to be recapturing some lost ground in African political and socio-economic imagination. Economist William Easterly defined "benevolent" autocrats as "leaders in non-democratic polities who receive credits for high growth".[i] Against the backdrop of democratic setbacks experienced globally, and the broadly shared sense of disillusionment, even despair, with which most Africans have associated the performance of their elected governments, the reviving affinity for the benevolent dictator – an autocratic political force equipped with the ruthlessness to dispense away with the perceived inertia associated with the slow-functioning of democratic institutions and bureaucracies – seems somewhat understandable.

A key driver behind this growing preference for the autocratic alternative appears to be the legitimate impatience of citizens in the face of failed and corrupt elected leaders, popular yearnings for the realisation of longstanding developmental aspirations, and the growing perception of the efficiency, discipline, and ambition of some countries under benevolent autocratic leaderships.[ii] As Thomas Friedman, *New York Times* columnist once asserted, the "one-party autocracy certainly has its drawbacks. But when it is led by a reasonably enlightened group of people, as China is today, it can also have great advantages. That one party can just impose the politically difficult but critically important policies needed to move a society forward in the 21st century".[iii] Re-echoing the postulations of a segment of political theorists, Frank Fukuyama and Nancy Birdsall sum things up this way: "Leaders in both the developing and the developed world have marveled at China's remarkable ability to bounce back after the [the post-2007 financial] crisis, a result of a tightly managed, top-down policymaking machine that could avoid the delays of a messy democratic process. In response, political leaders in the developing world now associate efficiency and capability with autocratic political systems".[iv]

In the African context, Van Standen, writing about the South African case, cites the findings of an Afrobarometer survey in which many South Africans indicated they "would accept a dictatorship provided the leader solves the country's pressing issues",[v] corroborating a 2021 Afrobarometer polling in which 65% of South Africans expressed their willingness to give up on democracy "if a non-democratic government delivers".[vi] Baliddawa documents the accentuation of a similar trend in Uganda, arguing that "Uganda no longer needs the so-called farce of multi-party democracy. What we are practicing right now is simply a fallacy that takes us nowhere except re-routing us to societal polarisation, inequitable growth, acrimony, destruction, and impoverishment…We need a benevolent dictator".[vii]

Adding to this, the somewhat impressive infrastructural and material gains achieved by countries, such as Rwanda under Paul Kagame who has presided over its remarkable transformation through implements of discipline, accountability, and sometimes coercive governance, appears to be amplifying a populist preference by Africans for effective governance regardless of whether this comes in the form of autocratic rule. Wanki bluntly sums up the contemporary African sentiment this way: "Africans remember the face of Rwanda in 1994 – an underdeveloped backwater simmering with colonially instigated discord and then they see Rwanda today, breaking human development records, at peace with itself and poised to claim the future. Africans want governance options that deliver bread and butter on their tables, peace in their backyards, and the promise of a better future for their children, whether this comes in the form of western modelled democracy, communist inspired developmentalism or benevolent African 'strongmanism'".[viii]

Moreover, recent successful and attempted efforts to extend term limits, from Cote d'Ivoire to Guinea, the Central African Republic to Senegal, and the autocratization in Tunisia, have roots in a belief that incumbents should continue to sustain growth, or more accurately to reduce the chances of slide into weaker growth and/or instability. Similarly, military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea have also emerged as antidote

to the perceived failure of democracy, which is seen as unable to ensure stability and security, tackle corruption and neo-patrimonialism and generate equitable growth.

In all cases, the perceived failure of African democracies to deliver concrete dividends in terms of developmental outcomes to impoverished and despondent masses across the continent appears to be firmly implicated in this worrying about-turn in the perception of the performances of democracies as a governance option. Whatever the roots, this represents a clear backsliding in the popular reverence accorded to democratic governance by Africans on the cusp of the rebirth of multiparty democracy across the continent in the 1990s.

Against this complex backdrop, this paper considers the factors driving the growing popular nostalgia for benevolent autocracy across Africa and asks whether the continent really needs them to ensure stability and/or prosper. If not, what can be done to reframe this narrative and refocus attention towards re-engaging and reconfiguring African democracies to deliver better for Africans? Parsing through historical and contemporary illustrations, the paper argues at its crux that Africa's storied experimentation with benevolent dictatorships, whether in the form of one-party states, military regimes, or personal dictatorships following Africa's independence, have mostly amounted to protracted economic failures, political instability, and social alienation. The much-acclaimed story of Rwanda's impressive socio-economic transformation, for instance, appears to be an exception rather than the rule – a trajectory explained by a multiplicity of endogenous and exogenous considerations that fall outside the scope of this paper. And even in Rwanda, the jury is still out, and it is not clear if the country has the institutions to sustain the trajectory of ostensible progress in the ultimate absence of Kagame, i.e., even if one were to adopt the Rwandan story, the continuity of success may well hinge on the individual characters of Kagame and Rwanda's context that would prove difficult to emulate elsewhere.

The paper is organised as follows: building on this introduction, *part two* briskly surveys the triggers behind the resurging populist affinity for benevolent dictators in Africa, contextualizing this within the remits of the failures of Africa's democratically elected governments to deliver public goods (equitable social security, infrastructure, security/political stability, and justice), and arouse national consciousness/buy-in around a common purpose/vision for their country's sustainable rejuvenation. *Part three* then delves into the mechanics behind the emergence of benevolent autocrats in Africa (e.g., military coups, extension of presidential term limits etc.) depicting from historical illustrations the extent to which the urge for usurpation of power and consolidation often through coercive force leads to the prioritization of regime security over the human security of the masses yearning for change. Closely linked to this, the paper also flags the profound degree of economic predation and political disorder that these so-called benevolent dictators have unleashed on their countries, leaving behind legacies of corruption, profligacy, accentuated political fragility and socioeconomic underdevelopment. If benevolent dictatorships are consequently not a viable alternative for Africa's developmental needs, what then is? How can Africans re-engage and re-engineer African democracy to deliver more than just questionable periodic elections? What policy reflections can guide the continent to the path of reworking African democracy to deliver on the fundamental developmental aspirations of Africans in an era of broader global geopolitics riddled with the ideological uncertainties of increasing great power competition? These are the preoccupations of *the last part* of this paper focused on policy reflections going forward.

2. Why the growing nostalgia for benevolent dictatorships in Africa?

The reflection into the drivers behind the growing perception of nostalgia around benevolent dictatorships in Africa should start by discussing the lingering myth that Africa is not ready for democracy. In some respects, this myth is partly based on a stereotypical, near-racist bias rooted in the faulty assumption that Africans are somehow incapable of summoning the requisite vigilance and intellectual maturity to engage in active citizenship. It also rests on a fundamentally myopic misreading of Africa's recent history which is replete with the strives and triumphs of Africans to emplace democratic rule, good governance, and human rights within their countries in the post-independence era.

That said, there is clearly no doubt that African democracies are currently confronting a multidimensional crisis of credibility, which encapsulates the first driver behind the growing nostalgia for benevolent autocracy across the continent. Almost six decades after most African countries gained independence and three decades since popular clamour for democratisation and good governance incited a tidal wave of political reconfigurations and constitutional reforms across Africa[ix], the region has now begun experiencing a gradual lull in the enthusiasm associated with democratic governments. This can largely be attributed to unmet expectations manifested through the prevalence of deep-seated issues with the perceived performance of African countries since the start of the regular organisation of elections. This includes woefully bad governance and accountability track records, exponential levels of corruption and fiscal indiscipline, underwhelming investments in the socio-economic welfare of the masses, and the inability of a sizeable sample of African democratic states to deliver on service delivery and the human security/human rights aspirations of their citizens. [x]

Comparing average scores of existing democratic governance indicators, a 2017 study of the Institute for Security Studies found bad governance amongst Africa's democratically elected governments as a preeminent variable implicated in the continent's stagnated development.[xi] Olukoshi and Laaka[xii], and to a considerable extent Ayittey,[xiii] had already warned early on that the prevailing crisis of governance in the region is eroding the potency of institutions, reversing the development potential of African states and undermining the role of civil society actors to serve as watchdogs of the social contract. Law enforcement institutions and courts continue to be used to serve the whims of the ruling class and to persecute political opponents. To worsen the scenario, the growing trend whereby elected presidents tinker with constitutions, often acting in complicity with elected parliaments, to eliminate presidential term limits and embed themselves as autocratic "presidents for life" (as seen in countries such as Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, and the Republic of Congo) has given democracy a bad name, a dynamic reflected on broader democratic trend statistics across the continent. In its 2021 report, for instance, Freedom House rated only eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa as free, of which half included small island countries: Sao Tome and Principe, Cape Verde, Mauritius, and Seychelles. The other four included the

usual candidates, such as Botswana, South Africa and Ghana[xiv]. Meanwhile, the number of African countries rated not free upped from fourteen in 2006/2008 to twenty in 2021.[xv] The free country rating has since dropped from eight to six countries. This unsavoury outlook for African democracies is captured in the figures below.

Figure 1:

Fewer Than Ten Sub-Saharan African Countries Are Considered Free
Freedom House 2021 report ratings, with circles sized by country population
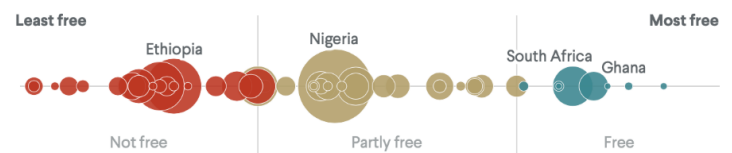
Notes: Scores represent people's access to political rights and civil liberties in 2020, as published in Freedom House's 2021 report. Somaliland is included as a territory separate from Somalia and uses the estimated population as of 2014.

Source: Freedom House

Figure 2:

Democracy Has Gradually Declined Across Sub-Saharan Africa
Number of countries in each Freedom House rating category
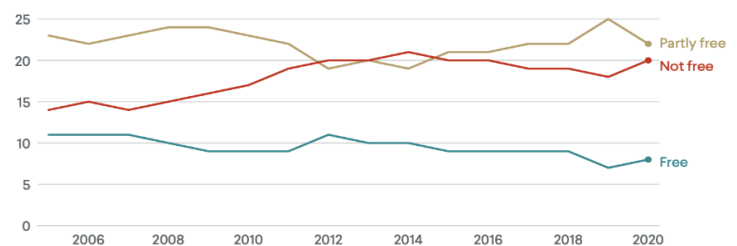
Notes: Data for each year represents scores in Freedom House's annual report, which is published the following year. South Sudan is included from 2011 on. Somaliland is included from 2008 on as a territory separate from Somalia.

Source: Freedom House.

Klobucita has argued that "strong correlations exist between sub-Saharan Africa's entrenched leaderships and its developmental and security challenges, including conflict or instability, stagnant of declining economies and democratic backsliding".[xvi] In 2019, the Ibrahim Index on African Governance also linked the socioeconomic failures in Africa to poor governance, high incidences of human rights violations, corruption, and ineffective leadership. Despite the euphoria of the early 1990s, although African countries with relatively better democratic ranking have delivered better than

their autocratic counterparts, the holding of elections has not generated the hoped for dividends in the form of better institutions, governance, service delivery, stability and security, and less corruption.

Consequently, the nostalgia for benevolent autocrats should first and foremost be conceptualized as a quest by the common African for a crop of powerful, decisive and patriotic leaders who can off root this entrenched class of bad elected leaders, salvage the plight of their nations and improve their well-beings. It is a quest for iron-willed leaders who will be unamenable to the whims of powerful corrupt national elite and strong enough to push back against the machinations of external powers – factors that have both played significant roles in distracting African democratic governments from delivering against the aspirations of their people. Jalloh aptly underscores the mood across Africa in the following submission:

> People's patience has run out…Many in Africa are questioning the tenets of democracy and are asking whether it is still relevant in the continent today…Much of the frustration seems to be directed at democratically elected leaders who were hiding an autocratic streak, living extravagant lifestyles despite their poorer populaces. It is not uncommon for these leaders to change their constitutions for political gain and shutter civic space to block dissenting views…[And] this is all happening under the watchful eyes of the pioneers of democratic governance – Western Europe and North America. But instead of taking action, these Western nations legitimize the dirty habits of these democratic-turned-autocratic rulers by prioritizing their own economic interests over rights abuses and corruption.[xvii]

The second driver behind the growing pockets of nostalgia for benevolent dictators in Africa has to do with what could be termed the "Rwandan Example", as well as the surge in Chinese influence on the African continent. Under Paul Kagame's leadership, the landlocked country of Rwanda has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of its brutal genocidal past to become one of Africa's fastest growing economies and better governed countries. Rwanda is amongst the top African countries with the cheapest and best internet technology infrastructures. The country ranked second in Africa only

after Mauritius on the World Bank's 2023 Ease of Doing Business Report, 38th in the World, is known worldwide for its effective and stringent policies against corruption,[xviii] with some calling it the "Singapore of Africa". These achievements no doubt attracted the likes of Volkswagen, the German car maker, to set up is assembly plant in the country for its Africa market, and "Mara", the first made in Africa smartphones, are produced in Rwanda. Paul Kagame is widely praised across the continent as a pioneer African environmentalist and a champion of women's rights (under his rule, Rwanda improved on the gender parity goals with women constituting up to 60% of its lawmakers).[xix] And despite ongoing criticism of his heavy-handed crackdown on dissenting voices, undemocratic moves, and his extended stay in power, Kagame has been widely praised for sewing together a country torn-apart by genocidal violence nearly three decades ago. Through Umuganda, for instance, Rwandans are compelled to commit a few hours of their time to community service cleaning the streets and their neighbourhoods every last Saturday of the month, a practise that serves to forge a spirit of collective commitment to Rwanda and re-socialize a common purpose between citizens.[xx] A key reason for Kagame's popularity amongst especially young Africans is the perceived penchant for unselfish governance and his ability to get things done.[xxi]

Closely linked to the Rwandan example are African perceptions of China's phenomenal economic transformation under a state-led model, and the country's effectiveness in terms of its developmental and infrastructural projects in Africa. This has provided a persuasive alternative to the Western neoliberal economic model, as well as the related multiparty democratic systems, which they believe has locked African countries within a perpetual loop of policy rhetoric, with limited actual focus on getting things done.[xxii]

Having examined some of the drivers behind the growing nostalgia for benevolent dictatorships in Africa, it is now relevant to look at how African dictatorships emerge.

3. The Making of Dictatorships in Africa

This section focuses on three mechanisms through which dictators achieve power in Africa and seek to build a narrative of benevolent dictatorship: Coups, democrats-turned-

autocrat constitutional amendments eliminating term limits, and father-to-sons transitions. Some incumbents that came through all these means have one way or another sought to present themselves as benevolent leaders seeking to transform their countries, improve governance, address corruption and insecurity, and eliminate legally or extrajudicially the opposition and even critics (media, civil society, intellectuals) on charges of being disloyal to the country's cause or even serving foreign interests.

Coups:

Africa's billing as a land of coups is, in some respects, well-deserved. Military takeovers were the mechanisms of choice for political transitions in the continent in the immediate post-independent era, and they appear to be making a come-back,[xxiii] as the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned back in September 2021.[xxiv] A quick count indicates that when put together, there have been about fifty coups, attempted coups and unconstitutional transfers of governments across Africa since 2010, although this number is likely to change depending on the technical classifications employed in assessing whether or not a power grab attempt was a coup. Nevertheless, a study by two US researchers, Clayton Thyne and Jonathan Powell, has uncovered over 200 such coup attempts in Africa since the 1950s, about half of which have been considered successful.[xxv]

The coups and subsequent tyrannical regimes of Bokassa (present day Central African Republic), Idi Amin of Uganda, and Mobutu Sese Seko (present day Democratic Republic of Congo) might have grabbed global headlines due to their unparalleled penchant for bloodletting and spectacular corruption, but Africa's coup blight has been much widely spread. Sudan, for instance, has had the most coups/attempted takeovers, with six out of the sixteen being successful.[xxvi] President Omar al-Bashir, who himself took power in a military coup, was overthrown in 2019 following months of sustained protests. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has had a significant part of its post-independence history dominated by back-to-back coups and military regimes. Burundi has had eleven separate coups, mostly played out within the context of tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi, and Ghana, the present-day paragon of democracy and political stability in West Africa, used to be beset by a coup

culture, having experienced eight within only two decades, the first being against its founding leader Kwame Nkrumah.

While the number of coups declined after the turn of the century, they have made a recent comeback, with Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan under military leadership as of July 2023. Combined, Africa has experienced by far more coups than any other region in the world. Indeed, of the sixteen coups recorded worldwide since 2017, all but one (Myanmar in 2021) have occurred in Africa.[xxvii] The illustration below depicts African countries with the highest incidences of coups since 1952.

Fig. 3.

Countries in Africa with the highest number of coups since 1952

Source: Jonathan Powell, Uni of Central Florida and Clayton Thyne, Uni of Kentucky B B C

### Constitutional amendments by incumbents to stay in power:

Sub-Saharan Africa is also the bastion of many of the world's longest ruling leaders. As of July 2023, five African presidents have held power for more that three decades each: Paul Biya of Cameroon, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Denis Sassou Nguessou of the Republic of Congo, and Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea.[xxviii]

Fig 4.

Sub-Saharan Africa's Longest-Serving Leaders, 1960–2021
Leaders by time in office, excluding monarchs
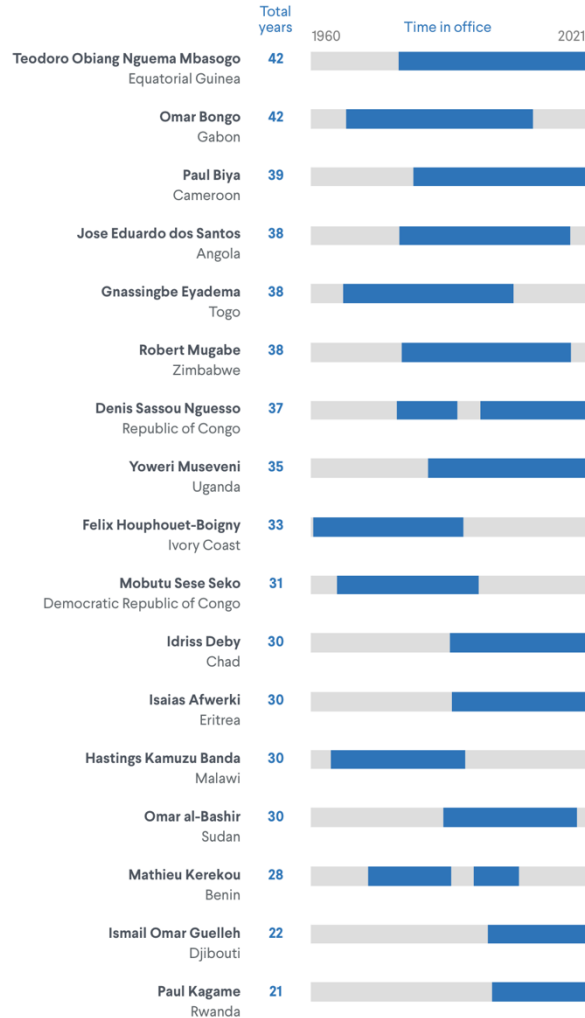
Source: Klobucista (2021)

Others who would have made this list today were recently compelled by natural or political reasons to leave office: Mugabe was forced out by a military coup after thirty-seven years; Jose Eduardo dos Santos of Angola stepped down in 2017 after changing political fortunes made it clearly untenable for him to continue at the helm of the Angolan state after thirty eight years in power; Sudan's Omar Bashir was disgracefully ousted after thirty years in power by sustained protests and military intervention, and Chad's Idriss Deby fell on the battlefield after thirty years in power.[xxix]

To sustain their longevity in power, several elected African presidents have successfully pushed constitutional amendments through rubber-stamping parliaments to eliminate term limits, and complementarily embarked on the organisation of decisively fraudulent elections to ensure they win all subsequent elections, as has been the case with Paul Biya of Cameroon, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Sassou Nguessou of the Republic of Congo to name just a few. Efforts are underway by leaders such as Archange Touadera in the Central African Republic to follow this path to eliminate presidential term limits. As the UNDP has cautioned, "the socio-political systems which sustain such long-term regimes of government have been shown to generate their own inherently fragile momentum – with weak state legitimacy a core factor determining long-term fragility according to current policy discourse".[xxx] To maintain their grip on power, this contagion of deeply entrenched neo-patrimonial regimes have led to the prioritization of regime security and consolidation over human security.

4. Fathers-to-sons Political transitions:

This trend, which Ndiloseh (forthcoming) describes as "demonarchy", is fast becoming a notable form of power transition at the helm of especially central African states that it merits closer scholarly scrutiny.[xxxi] Essentially, this entails the following steps: 1) incumbent presidents amend their national constitutions to eliminate term limits, transforming them into "presidents for life"; 2) The presidents for life then secure the loyalty and acquiescence of their national parliaments and other regional and external powerbrokers through rents from neo-patrimonial networks to ensure their backing over their regimes and those of their chosen successors; 3) As the incumbent gets older or infirmed, steps are then taken to integrate their sons – heir apparent – within the formal government bureaucratic structure through formal appointments as government ministers/senior officials (e.g., Gabon's Ali Bongo, and Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue) wielding powerful portfolios, or as a high-ranking general in the army (Mahamat Déby of Chad, and Muhoozi Kainerugaba of Uganda). In some cases, the heirs are introduced more subtly through the wing of the ruling party (most likely the case with Frank Emmanuel Biya in Cameroon) such that they become the most significant power broker after the president and secure significant allegiances from the army to step in when incumbents die (Joseph Kabila in DRC, and Mahamat Deby in Chad).

In 2015, Faure Gnassingbe was declared elected to power for the third time. The incumbent president is the son of Gnassingbe Eyadema, Togo's fifth president, who was appointed to government as Minister of Equipment, Mines, Posts and Telecommunications by his late father, serving from 2003 to 2005 when he ascended the Presidency of Togo.[xxxii] The elections that saw him rise to power were deemed to be decisively fraudulent by international election observers. The mass protests that ensued led to the killing of more than a thousand citizens by security forces, forcing the flight of more than forty thousand refugees to neighbouring Ghana and Benin.[xxxiii] The Gnassingbe family has now run Togo for more than fifty years, through father-and-son transitions, effectively in charge of the country for more than 87 percent of its post-independence history.[xxxiv] Gabon has had a similar experience with a father and son at the head of the country for over 86 percent of the country's post-independence history (55 out of 63 years of independence).[xxxv]

Fig 5. Fathers-to-sons transitions: Years of African political dynasties in Power distributed by countries.
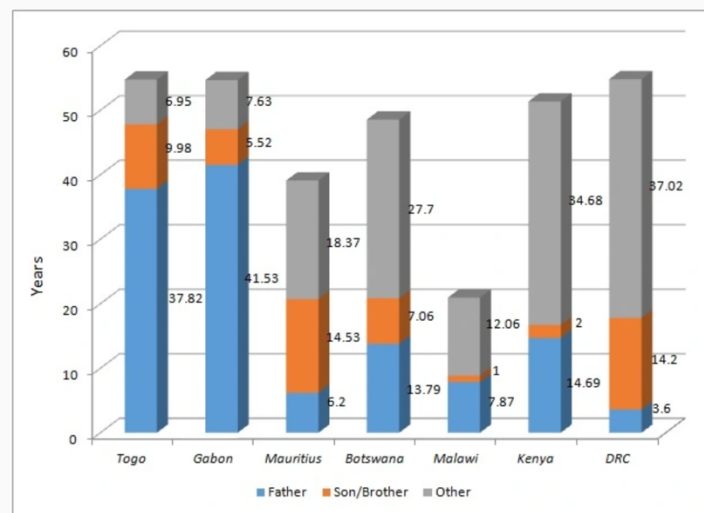
Source: Songwe (2015)

6. The impact of so-called benevolent dictatorial regimes on growth and development outcomes

The preceding parts of this paper have assayed the drivers behind the pockets of nostalgia for benevolent dictators currently being felt across Africa. In case there are any misgivings that these longings for benevolent autocrats as alternatives to Africa's failed democracies are the mere fantasies of intellectually unsophisticated common Africans, prominent African economist Dambisa Moyo also expressed similar sentiments in her 2009 bestseller 'Dead Aid', while castigating the current model of development aid as unhelpful to Africans. As an alternative, Moyo argues that "In in a perfect world, what poor countries at the lowest rungs of economic development need is not a multi-party democracy, but in fact a decisive benevolent dictator to push through the reforms required to get the economy moving."[xxxvi] Moyo's conclusion contradicts Przeworski's[xxxvii] finding that benevolent dictatorships and liberal democracies, through empirical evidence, concluded that political regimes have not had overall effect on economic growth as Moyo claims, with total incomes growing at almost identical rates over the two regime types.[xxxviii]

This section briefly discusses the historical evidence across Africa to assess whether so-called benevolent dictators, except for Rwanda's Paul Kagame, have indeed accounted for growth and progress in their countries or if they have conversely been responsible for bad governance, underdevelopment, and conflict. To do so, we sample the profile of some of Africa's renowned so-called benevolent autocrats.

As Klobucistahas argued, "strong correlations exist between sub-Saharan Africa's entrenched leadership and its developmental and security challenges, including conflict or instability, stagnant or declining economies, and democratic backsliding". [xxxix] This situation is particularly pronounced in countries with authoritarian governments, especially those with long-serving leaders who typify themselves as benevolent autocrats. The desires for regime preservation incentivises the recourse to structured violence, police brutality, arbitrary arrests, and significant restrictions on freedom of expression and human rights. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Robert Mugabe who once described himself as the hope of the Zimbabwean people, presided over the near collapse of the Zimbabwean economy, reducing the country from a pearl in the Southern African region to a pariah in the eyes of the international community. His poor stewardship of the economy[xl] multiplied hardship and poverty and unleashed a long-struggling economy in which profligacy, cronyism

and corruption were the hallmarks: the rich got extremely rich, and the poor languished further into abject poverty. His crackdown on dissenting voices altered Zimbabwe's profile from a rights-enjoying society to a bastion of state-sponsored brutality, and the structure of autocracy that he left behind was so entrenched that even after his death, his long shadow continues to be cast on the country, personified in the corruption and misrule that Emmerson Mnangagwa, his long-time deputy continues to inflict on the control as its current president.

In present-day DRC, Mobotu Sese Seko, who styled himself as a benevolent autocrat, unleashed a brutal dictatorship over three decades that brought the country to its knees. The normalisation of endemic corruption, nepotism, cronyism, embezzlement, and predation over the mineral resources of the Congo were so pronounced under Mobutu that, as Wanki has argued, "by the end of his reign, the strongman had lewdly "amassed a fortune estimated at $4 billion, [excluding] an array of grand villas in Europe and multiple palaces and yachts".xli In the meantime, Congolese citizens suffered in abject poverty and those who dared to oppose the "leopard" paid the ultimate price. Following Mobutu's overthrow in 1997 and the assassination of Laurent Kabila, power passed on to his son, Joseph Kabila who "succeeded in amassing a fortune by stealing state funds and effectively disregarding the provision of public services".xlii Upon leaving power in 2018, Joseph Kabila left a legacy of endemic corruption, a brutal war raging in DRC's eastern flank so deadly that it has been considered the world's deadliest war since WWII.

Despite their difference, what to do the above cases have in common? In some respects, they illustrate the precariousness of counting on the self-proclaimed benevolence of autocrats and dictators for the development of a country. In Africa and beyond, with complete power often comes complete impunity, and very few leaders maintain virtuousness in the absence of accountability mechanisms that reign in their power.

In this context, Rwanda at best remains an exception that proves the rule that dictatorship is rarely benevolent and even less likely effective. Any Rwandan miracle, in view of its size, political history, Kagame's hegemony and political dominance and international support, is unlikely to be replicable in the rest of Africa.xliii Crucially, remarkable as Rwanda's

achievement seems, there is no evidence that it is a result of his autocratic methods, and that the status and trajectory of the country remains open until the time when the country must exist without him at the helm.

In all cases, the idea of benevolent dictatorship suffers from two fundamental weaknesses. First, whether a leader is benevolent or not can only be affirmed after they have ascended to power and led for some time. There is no way of pre-selecting for benevolent dictatorships. Secondly, there is also limited possibilities of removing incumbents who are truly dictatorial but not benevolent. The fact that almost all dictators in Africa, despite their self-proclaimed benevolence, have been dictators of different shades means that the nostalgia for them would likely end with the same disappointment and loss of both worlds – freedom from want (insecurity and economic deprivation) and freedom from fear (civil and political rights).

7. Policy Reflections Going Forward

The people of Africa, as elsewhere, wish to see both effective and democratic government systems. These two are not only compatible but also reinforce each other. It is also clear that some people may be willing to trade effective government for democracy if ambitious autocrats present the two as inconsistent. While democratic systems must be made more effective, it is abundantly clear that benevolent autocrats are not the answer to Africa's development and governance crisis. The question then is how to tackle the endurance of the rhetoric of benevolent dictatorship and crucially re-engage and re-imagine African democracies to deliver development dividends more effectively to the masses. The ensuing policy reflections offer a way forward towards a renewal of the development potential of African democracies:

A. **Strengthened vigilance** on the part of civil society organisations and opposition political parties in Africa is needed to hold governments to account, and to pushback against constitutional amendments extending term limits. The formation of cross-cutting coalitions for rule of law and democracy involving civil society, opposition parties, traditional leaders and influencers and intellectuals is critical to promote the idea of democracy and push back against a rhetoric of incompatibility with effective governance. Such coalitions would also need to manage

popular expectations about democracy and create awareness to push back against myopic promotions of the idea of benevolent dictatorship. In this regard, learning from successful cases of resistance against dictatorship can inspire hope. While so much reporting has been done on the successful attempts by African leaders to eliminate caps on presidential terms, very little reporting is often done of the successful attempts by civil society organisations and oppositional political voices to pushback against these attempts. For instance, in 2001 and 2003 respectively, a robust coalition of civil society voices and political parties brought the requisite pressures to bear on Zambian President Frederick Chiluba, and Malawian President Bakili Muluzi, thwarting their attempts raise presidential term limits. In Nigeria, the senate rejected a 2006 attempt by President Olusegun Obasanjo to run for a third term. In 2012, a crowd of protestors in Senegal forced the electoral defeat of President Wade who was running for a highly disputed third term, and in Gambia in 2017, crowd power played a decisive role in creating the conditions for dictator Yahya Jammeh's ouster after 23 years in power. The lesson here is that greater investment should be directed towards organising and mobilizing civil society organisations to hold democratically elected governments to account for their stewardship and to prevent the emergence of dictators.

B. **Renewed commitment to democratic governance is needed at the level of regional actors and organisations.** The role that regional organisation such as the African Union, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) play as bulwarks against undemocratic governance in Africa cannot be overstated. In West Africa, ECOWAS' demarches have continued to be crucial in curating recent military regimes to commit to returning their countries to civilian rule. Through measures including diplomacy and as needed sanctions, regional organisations wield significant clout in the inducement of incumbents to respect democratic standards and processes. ECOWAS, for instance, has considered amending, so far unsuccessfully, its Democracy Protocol to check against the constitutional changes aimed at eliminating presidential term limits. This capacity and orientation ought to be strengthened by pan-African and international development partners.

C. **There is need for democracy-promoting Western partners to practise what they preach about democracy in Africa**. While the United States and Western European partners frequently appear vocal around the need for democratic governance in Africa, they are known to notoriously prioritize their security and economic interests over human rights and antidemocratic concerns. For instance, the United States was quick to congratulate the DRC's president Felix Tshisekedi, despite widespread reports of electoral malpractices and fraud that marred the 2019 polls. They also failed to sanction important security allies like Cameroon, Chad and Uganda despite brutal crackdowns these regimes have meted against their people leading to thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced.

8. Conclusion

The democratic model of governance is facing crisis in Africa, and indeed around the world. Yet despite the challenges confronting democracies, they remain the best governance model so far, for safeguarding human security, human rights, the rule of law, and for unleashing the realisation of the freedoms and aspirations that are fundamental to meaningful growth and development in all societies. Despite the Rwandan outlier in Africa, it is abundantly clear that the so-called benevolent dictatorships cannot serve as viable development-seeking governance alternatives for Africans for the mere fact the dictators tend to govern according to their whim and to serve their interests. Benevolence and dictatorship are almost always antithetical. The challenge is how to re-engage and capacitate democracies to deliver more effectively on the hopes of better lives for citizens. The policy reflections provided in this paper are by no means conclusive in this regard. But they do point the way to start a meaningful conversation around making democracies work for Africans in the 21st century.

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[iii] T. L. Friedman "Our one-party democracy", *New York Times,* 8 September 2009, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/opinion/09friedman.html (accessed 26 June 2023).

[iv] See N Birdsall and F Fukuyama, "The Post-Washington Consensus: Development After the Crisis", (2011) *Foreign Affairs*, pp. 45-53.

[v] M Van Standen "Benevolent dictatorship is not an easy egg to unscramble"*, BizNews, 3 March 2023,* https://www.biznews.com/thought-leaders/2023/03/03/illusion-benevolent-dictatorship-south-africa (accessed 10 July 2023).

[vi] M Van Standen (as above).

[vii] E. K. Baliddawa (2023) "To Transform, Uganda Needs a Benevolent Dictator", *NilePost,* 8 April 2023, available at https://nilepost.co.ug/2023/04/08/opinion-to-transform-uganda-needs-a-benevolent-dictator/ (accessed 26 June 2023).

[viii] J. E. Wanki "Reclaiming African democracy on the crossroads of 21st Century global geostrategic reconfiguration" (forthcoming).

[ix] Peter Anyang' Nyong'o (Ed.), *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa*. New Jersey & London: United Nations University & Zed Books, (1987), p 288. See also Chole Eshetu and Jibrin Ibrahim, *Democratisation Processes in Africa: Problems and Prospects,* CODESRIA Books Publication System. CODESRIA (1995).

[x] J Campbell and N Quinn, "What's Happening to Democracy in Africa?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, (2021) available at https://www.cfr.org/article/whats-happening-democracy-africa (accessed 26 June 2023).

[xi] Based on results on Regime Type (Polity IV), Civil and Political freedom (Freedom House), Government Effectiveness (World Bank), the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International) and the Index of African Governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation).

[xii] A Olukoshi and L Laaka (eds), *Challenges to the nation state in Africa*. (1996) Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, in co-operation with the Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki.

[xiii] G.B.N Ayittey, *Africa in Chaos*, (1998) Basingstoke: Macmillan.

[xiv] J Campbell and N Quinn (note 10 above).

[xv] As above.

[xvi] C Klobucista, "Africa's Leaders for Life: Backgrounder", *Council on Foreign Relations*, (2021) available at. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/africas-leaders-life#chapter-title-0-3 (accessed 26 June 2023).

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[xviii] A Cascais, "20 Years Under Rwanda's Benevolent Dictator", (2020) *DW-Politics¸* available at https://www.dw.com/en/20-years-under-rwandas-benevolent-dictator-paul-kagame/a-53159121 (accessed 26 June 2023).

[xix] Cascais, as above.

[xx] As above.

[xxi] As above.

[xxii] As above.

[xxiii] P Mwai, "Are Military Takeovers on the Rise in Africa?", (2022) *BBC Reality Check*, available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46783600 (accessed 26 June 2023).

[xxiv] Mwai (note 23 above).

[xxv] Following the Thompson criteria, as subsequently applied by Jackman, McGowan, and Powell and Thyne, a coup is defined as successful if the perpetrators seize and hold power for at least seven days. See R.W Thompson, "Regime Vulnerability and the Military Coup." (1975) 7(4) *Comparative Politics* 459–487; R.W Jackman, "The Predictability of Coups d'état: A Model with African Data." (1978) 72(4) *The American Political Science Review,* 1262–1275; J. McGowan, "African Military coups d'état, 1956-2001: Frequency, Trends and Distribution" (2003) 41(3) *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 339–370.

[xxvi] Mwai (note 23 above).

[xxvii] Mwai (note 23 above).

[xxviii] Klobucista (note 16 above).

[xxix] Klobucista (note 16 above).

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[xxxi] M Ndiloseh, "Diagnosing Africa's "Demonarchies": The Case of Togo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, DRC, Congo and Chad", (forthcoming).

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xlii Klobucista (note 16 above).

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