Research Report

An Overview of Political Succession in Africa from Independence to Present

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An Overview of Political Succession in Africa from Independence to Present*

The changeover from one political leader to another—or “political succession”—remains a source of potential conflict and instability in Africa. This is the first in a series of research notes on political succession in Africa. It provides an overview of post-Independence successions across the continent, including North Africa. With nearly half of the countries on the continent scheduled to hold executive elections in 2014 and 2015, there are going to be ample opportunities for succession. In fact, this investigation shows that succession has increased in the last four years: since 2010, there have been 30 new leaders, which is roughly 7.5 successions per year in the last four years, compared to 5.6 successions per year between 2000 and 2009. The investigation also shows that after 1990, regular successions (i.e., those successions that occur according to accepted mechanisms) became more common than irregular successions. While the frequency of coups has declined since 1990, they are still the most common type of irregular succession on the continent. Irregular successions that occur due to protests and rebel movements have increased since 2000, but remain less common than military coups. Importantly, after 1990, conflict appears to trend with regular forms of succession and with increased frequency in successions.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2012, the world seemed to take little notice that Mali, one of the pillars of democracy in West Africa, was crumbling. Although the underlying conditions for instability in Mali were present for years (e.g., lack of governance, political legitimacy, and security in northern Mali), the triggering events that toppled the government happened in rapid succession. First, upon returning from fighting for Qaddafi in Libya, a Tuareg secessionist movement began in northern Mali in late 2011 and spread quickly. This was not the first time that Tuaregs had staged a rebellion in Mali or in the region. But in this case, the Tuareg rebels, under the banner of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), were well-armed with weapons and experience from Libya. Their advances into Mali triggered a humanitarian crisis (further undermining the legitimacy of the government in Bamako) and embarrassed the Malian military, which the rebels repeatedly defeated. Internally fractured, lacking sufficient resources, and facing a deteriorating command structure fueled in part by corruption among senior military officers, junior officers began a mutiny in March 2012. Although presidential elections were scheduled to take place in April 2012, and the sitting president, Amadou Toumani Touré, was not running for reelection, the mutiny culminated in a coup d'état that ousted the democratically elected government. The international community did not intervene until 2013.

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Few in the United States government saw the coup coming. Further, while multiple scholars contributed to explanations of these events post hoc, a review of the open source literature finds no public academic or think tank warnings of a possible coup in Mali, prior to its occurrence on March 22, 2012. But Mali is just one instance among many where events in Africa—specifically, succession events—take the international community by surprise. This is attributable in large part to the lack of coherent and comprehensive theoretical expectations for political successions in Africa. The ultimate goal of this project is to fill this gap. This is the first research note for a much larger research project on political succession in Africa.

Succession of executive leaders remains a source of potentially deadly conflict in many countries on the continent. Even in countries that at one time were consolidating democracies—such as Mali—struggles over legitimacy and power within the political system can destabilize the country and send it spinning into violence and chaos. In some cases, leadership change results in a regime change; in other cases, it causes the state to fail (e.g., Somalia after the ouster of Mohamed Siad Barre). In still other cases, successions have no effect on stability or legitimacy, and the country carries on with the status quo. With nearly half of the countries on the continent of Africa aiming to hold elections for the top political office in the years 2014 and 2015, it is odd that the literature offers little insight into how these election outcomes may affect political legitimacy and political stability. Equally enigmatic is what might happen in those countries—such as Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe—that have had presidents in office for more than three decades and have had very few previous successions. While there is ample opinion and punditry, there is in fact little overarching theory from which to draw evidence-based, objective expectations about these successions.

PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this section is to provide descriptive statistics on the Archigos data through 2014. Future research will investigate causes and consequences of different types of succession and will test the extant theories of causes and consequences of succession that are discussed above in the literature review.

Demographics of African Leaders

The Archigos dataset provides ages and gender for each leader in Africa. As of 2014, the average age of a sitting African leader is 68.3 years, and the distribution of age is almost unimodal (median = 69 years, mode = 67 years).

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1 In fact, in a different research project I conducted in 2011, many scholars who study Africa—and, more specifically, Mali and/or civil-military relations in Africa—told me, essentially, that the era of the coup d’état was dead in Africa, even though Niger had a coup in 2010, and then multiple coups d’état were executed on the continent (e.g., Tunisia 2011, Libya 2011, Mali 2012, Guinea-Bissau 2012, Central African Republic 2013, Egypt 2013). In 2013 alone, there were six planned coups: Chad, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Guinea, and Libya. See “Security in Africa 2013: Regaining the Initiative for Peace,” in Think Security in Africa, available at http://www.apo-mail.org/140212.pdf, accessed March 21, 2014.

2 Countries scheduled to hold elections for head of state in 2014 include: Algeria, Botswana, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Tunisia, and South Africa. Burkina Faso, Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, and Togo are scheduled to hold elections for head of state in 2015. Election schedules were compiled from the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa’s and the National Democratic Institute’s electoral calendars.
The youngest sitting leader in the dataset is 43 years (Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo); the oldest sitting leader is 90 years (Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe). This distribution is almost identical to the overall age distribution of all African leaders in the dataset: the average age of all leaders is 68.4, median is 69 years, and mode is 67 years. Overall, the youngest leader is 25 (Ntare V of Burundi) and the oldest is 97 (Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia). Ninety-eight percent of the leaders are male. Eight women have held executive office in Africa. Future demographic data will include level of education, place of education, honorifics, and military experience.

**Tenure of African Leaders**

As of March 1, 2014, the average tenure of African leadership in Archigos is 2,766.31 days, or about 7.58 years. This is much higher than the average tenure of the entire Archigos dataset, where the reported mean is 1,523.24 days (about 4.17 years). The median tenure in Africa is also much higher (1,511 days, or about 4.14 years) than the overall Archigos dataset (median is 729 days, or about 2 years). The modal time in office among African leaders is 6 days. The minimum time in office is 1 day (Aboubacar Somparé of Guinea and Mohamed Ghannouchi of Tunisia), while the maximum is 15,168, or 41.6 years (Omar Bongo of Gabon).

The vast majority of African countries (33 out of the 51 countries in the dataset, or 65%) have leaders who have been in power less than 10 years. Clearly, there has been a tremendous amount of leadership turnover in Africa over the last decade. In fact, since 2010, there have been 30 new leaders (or, that is, 30 succession turns). That is roughly 7.5 successions per year in the last four years, compared to 5.6 successions per year between 2000 and 2010. Figure 1 displays total successions per decade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AFRICAN LEADERS IN POWER FOR OVER A DECADE:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Over 30 years:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea</td>
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<td>• Paul Biya of Cameroon</td>
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<tr>
<td>• José Eduardo dos Santos of Angola</td>
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<td>• Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>20 to 30 years:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia</td>
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<td>• Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso</td>
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<td>• Idriss Deby Itno of Chad</td>
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<td>• Yoweri Museveni of Uganda</td>
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<td>• Paul Kagame of Rwanda</td>
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<td>• Isaias Afworki of Eritrea</td>
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<td>• Mswati III of Swaziland</td>
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<td>• Umar al-Bashir of Sudan</td>
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<td><strong>10 to 20 years:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• José Maria Neves of Cabo Verde</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Denis Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo</td>
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<td>• Mohammed VI of Morocco</td>
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<td>• Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Between 1950 and 1959, there were 8 succession turns, or 0.8 successions a year.\textsuperscript{14}

Between 1960 and 1969 and between 1970 and 1979, there were 47 succession turns, or 4.7 successions a year.

Between 1980 and 1989, there were 41 succession turns, or 4.1 successions a year.

Between 1990 and 1999, there were 69 succession turns, or 6.9 successions a year.

Between 2000 and 2009, there were 56 succession turns, or 5.6 successions a year.

Between 2010 and 2014, there have been 30 succession turns, or 7.5 successions a year.
Types of Succession

Figure 2 displays the frequencies of regular versus irregular successions in Africa by decade.

**Figure 2: Regular and Irregular Successions in Africa by Decade**

As Figure 2 shows, regular successions become more common than irregular ones in the 1990s and remain more common through the present day. Irregular successions are relatively high in the 1950s (3 out of 8, or 38%, of all successions were irregular) and peak in the 1970s (30 out of 47, or 64%, of all successions during the 1970s were irregular). Irregular successions steadily decline after the 1970s: between 1980 and 1989, 59% of successions were irregular; between 1990 and 1999, 41% of successions were irregular; and between 2000 and 2009, irregular successions made up only 18% of all successions. However, the last four years, 2010–present, show a slight uptick in irregular successions, accounting for 27% of the total successions between 2010 and 2014.

**Regular Successions**: A leader’s entry or exit occurs through explicit rules or established conventions. Examples include direct election in democracies, hereditary succession in monarchies, designation of a successor by a dictator, party rules (such as the Chinese Communist Party), and so on.

**Irregular Succession**: A leader’s entry or exit does not occur through explicit rules or established conventions. Examples include military coups, rebellions, assassinations, and so on.
The increasing number of succession turns since the 1990s most likely corresponds to the Third Wave of democratization, which began in the early 1990s. Figure 3 shows how regular successions trend with regime type, as measured by Polity IV.

**Figure 3: Types of Succession and Regime Type**

As Figure 3 shows, as regime type increases in Africa (i.e., as African countries become more democratic), regular successions also increase, until the past four years. However, regular successions happen in both democracies and autocracies, and should therefore not be equated solely with democratic transitions. Ethiopia in 2012 provides an excellent example of regular succession in an autocratic regime: when Meles Zenawi died in office, Ethiopia’s ruling party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), elected Hailemariam Desalegn to take over the premiership. Nevertheless, regular successions are more likely to occur in democratic regimes because, by definition, democracies institutionalize the changeover of political leadership through free and fair elections.

**Variation in Irregular Succession**

The *Archigos* data allow us to investigate variation in irregular types of succession via the *exitcode* variable. Figure 4 displays the variation in *exitcode* for African countries.
Military coups are the most common type of irregular exit over time, accounting for half or more of all irregular exits over the last six decades. Protests account for very few turnovers of national office, although the ouster of leaders through mass protests increased in the late 2000s during the Arab Spring. Rebel movements are an increasing cause of irregular succession in Africa, but the total number of irregular exits has been in decline for over two decades.

**Conflict and Succession on the Continent**

Examining the trend lines between types of exit and conflict over time, it is apparent that conflict appears to trend with regular types of succession. Here, the conflict data come from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset (1946–2012).
Contrary to expectations, Figure 5 shows that after 1990, armed conflicts trend with regular successions, not irregular ones. They also trend with a general increase in succession. It is premature to speculate on the cause of these trends, but it is clear that much more research on all political successions in Africa is required in order to understand the relationship between political stability and conflict on the continent.
NOTES


5 “Tuareg Rebellion Sparks Crisis in Mali,” Al Jazeera (February 18, 2012).


9 Arieff, “Crisis in Mali.”

10 As an anecdote to illustrate the state of our ability to accurately explain or predict African politics: I had a recent conversation with one of the academic project managers for the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) Good Judgments Project, which developed a predictions market where teams and individuals compete to make predictions about various political events around the world. He told me that when they were trying to predict the Kenyan elections in 2012, he surveyed his academic colleagues who study Kenya. They all had different expectations about how the elections would go. He said that, in the end, they did no better at predicting the election outcome than someone flipping a coin. The nonspecialists who used evidence and statistical modeling to make their predictions, on the other hand, were far more accurate in predicting the outcome.

11 For exploratory analysis of political succession in Africa, I rely on the Archigos database of leaders from 1875 to 2004 (see Hein E. Goemans, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Giacomo Chiozza, “Introducing Archigos: A Data Set of Political Leaders,” Journal of Peace Research 46, 2 [2009]: 269–83; data through 2004 available at http://www.rochester.edu/college/faculty/hgoemans/data.htm, accessed March 18, 2014). Variables include the de facto leader, country, date of entry, date of exit, type of entry (regular, irregular, or foreign imposition), type of exit (regular, irregular [e.g., coup, assassination], natural death, foreign imposition), leader birth year, leader death year (if applicable), and fate of the leader after leaving office. Following the Goemans et al. data coding scheme, I updated this data for all African countries through March 1, 2014, and I added Seychelles to the dataset.

Countries enter the dataset by the following years: Algeria 1962; Angola 1975; Benin 1960; Botswana 1966; Burkina Faso 1960; Burundi 1962; Cabo Verde 1975; Cameroon 1960; Central African Republic 1960; Chad 1960; Comoros 1975; Côte d’Ivoire 1960; Democratic Republic of the Congo 1960; Djibouti 1977; Egypt 1922; Equatorial Guinea 1963; Eritrea 1993; Gabon 1960; The Gambia 1965; Ghana 1952 (independence date is 1957); Guinea 1958; Guinea-Bissau 1974; Kenya 1963; Lesotho 1966; Liberia 1872; Madagascar 1960; Malawi 1964; Mali 1960; Mauritania 1960; Mauritius 1968; Morocco 1975; Namibia 1990; Niger 1960; Nigeria 1960; Republic of the Congo 1960; Rwanda 1961; Senegal 1960; Seychelles 1976; Sierra Leone 1961; South Africa 1910; South Sudan 2011; Sudan 1956; Swaziland 1968; Tanzania 1961; Togo 1960; Tunisia 1859; Uganda 1962; Zambia 1964; Zanzibar 1961–1964; Zimbabwe 1964 (independence date is 1980). Libya and São Tomé and Príncipe are not in this dataset.
12 Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza, “Introducing Archigos.”


14 Note, however, that most African countries did not become independent until the 1960s and 1970s.


16 Polity IV is a commonly used dataset on regime type. The variable Polity2 is scaled -10 (completely authoritarian) to 10 (completely democratic). More information on how the variable is coded is available at http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/p4manualv2012.pdf. The data are available at http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm.

17 The exitcode variable is coded in the following manner:
   • 0 if the leader lost power in a regular manner
   • 1 if the leader lost power as a result of domestic popular protest with foreign support
   • 2 . . . without foreign support
   • 3 if the leader was removed by domestic rebel forces with foreign support
   • 4 . . . without foreign support
   • 5 if the leader was removed by domestic military actors with foreign support
   • 6 . . . without foreign support
   • 7 if the leader was removed by other domestic government actors with foreign support
   • 8 . . . without foreign support
   • 9 if the leader was removed through threat or the use of foreign force
   • 11 if the leader was removed through assassination by unsupported individual
   • 16 if the leader was removed in a power struggle within the military, short of a coup, i.e., without changing institutional features such as a military council or junta
   • 111 if the leader was removed in an irregular manner through other means or processes
   

18 This dataset defines “armed conflict” as “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths.” See Lotta Themner, “UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset Codebook,” Uppsala Conflict Data Program and the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (2013).