

The National Conferences and Their Outcome and the Future of Democracy in Africa: Evidence from a Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990, taking advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Empire, many African States, mainly French speaking countries, the opposition elite in alliance with the civil society took to the streets for a national encounter in order to set new grounds for the political competition in almost 30 years.

This paper tries and analyzes the impact of the so-called National Conferences on the current shape on the democratic transition and the democratic process in some of the States that hosted these public discussions. In contrast, it argues that countries failed to take advantage of these National Fora are less prone to embrace democracy, with for all of them a failure to bring substantial social changes in terms of well-being.

Keywords: democratic transition, africa, national conference, peace

Published Online: March 29, 2021

ISSN: 2736-4534

DOI :10.24018/ejedu.2021.2.2.44

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I. INTRODUCTION

The early 1990s remain a turning point in the history of international relations. Indeed, since the end of the World War II and the beginning of the Cold War¹, this period brought about an opportunity for democracy to spread, especially with both the fall of the Soviet bloc and the Berlin Wall, considered being the symbol of the communist ideology.

As a powder trail, Africa began experiencing for the first time ever in 30 years after independence, the democratic process aptly named the Eastern Wind². Following that period, there was a rising in the awareness of political matters across the continent sometimes with tragic consequences. As a matter of fact, the dictatorships in power could not help opening up their regimes to much liberty to political parties and civil society. Of course, added to that major reason, other factors must not be ignored, such as the international pressure both from the bilateral and multilateral donors³.

From that historical date up to now, most of the old one party regime has relatively abided by the democratic rules. However, democracy defined as the participation of the civil

society in all matters about their future cannot and should not be reduced to going to the poll⁴. Democracy in Africa has, in fact, suffered a big blow ab initio, because in most of the African leaders' views democracy equals organizing elections to legitimize their power, often based on rigged elections.

Instead, some African states such as Benin, Ghana and Mali, among quite a few, can be described as democratic states. Therefore, such a situation raises a crucial interrogation. Why under the same political and historical circumstances, some countries reacted positively toward the democratic process and others not?

The general idea is based on the framework developed by Bunce about elites bargaining through what is called pacting⁵. Indeed, although the national conferences were held in Francophone States, the 1990s had proved hard for all the African countries threatened with economical collapse. Called in for help, the international community with the major financial institutions, both international community and incumbent authoritarian elites agreed on reforms based on good governance. At that time, as Bunce pointed out political elites as the sustainers and under miners of democracy, took favourably advantage of the circumstances

¹ The Cold War is symbolized by the ongoing tension between the United States and the ex-Soviet Empire, along with their respective allies from the mid-1940s until the early 1990s.

² The phenomenon is called the Eastern Wind because it began firstly with the dismemberment of what was the Soviet Empire, composed of most of the Eastern Europe countries.

³ One recall the 16th France-Africa La Baule Summit in 1990 (19-21 June) named incentive to democracy, and the Political Structural Adjustment

Policy imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank as both political and economic measures.

⁴ Diamond argues that contrary to all that can meet the eyes democracy across the continent is being extensively "rolled back".

⁵ Following V. BUNCE's idea, the argument of elite's pact for a smooth transition can also apply in the case of Africa in the early 1990, even though Van de WALLE does not consider it that way (Van de Walle, 1994, p.149).

to constraint the authoritarian incumbent for more political justice. As Bunce pointed out, "In periods of political and/or economic difficulties, they can use their power to either protect or destroy it". (Bunce, 2000), and the national conference provided them with this historical opportunity.

However, this forum did not spread equally across the continent. It only took place in 11 French speaking States. This explanation is that, according to Bratton and Van de Valle the countries where the National Conferences happened were countries with previous "multiparty" election record (Bratton and Van de Valle, 1997). Nevertheless, it does not mean that States that did not experience it are less democratic. One way or another, these national forums impacted the political setting in such a way that they prepared they paved the way for true and fair political competition.

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This short paper aims at trying to compare and contrast two country cases where democracy has been a success due to national conference, and two others where it collapsed; and point out why, based on various readings. Namely, it will highlight, on one hand, countries such as Mali⁶ and Benin as democratically successful, and on the other hand countries such as Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

So far, the central hypothesis is that national conference demanded by civil society in the early stage of the democratic process in 1990 played a big part during the transition and further for the success of democracy in the above-mentioned countries. It has to be brought to attention that this study's far from applying to all cases where national conferences took place; it remains a modest exploration in its scope.

III. NATIONAL CONFERENCES AS A BREAKTHROUGH IN THE DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

A. Brief historical background of the National Conferences

The National Conferences, although they acted as a political breakthrough, have not yet attracted the attention of many analysts. Coming to its definition, let's put that National Conferences are the terms associated with the wave of protests brought about by the democratic process in the early 1990. Some would call them national dialogue, but the fact was that after almost 30 years of unique party system, the civil society viewed the transitional period as an opportunity to brainstorming all the summon all the driving force to make recommendations for constitutional change, in some cases, and in other to deprive the dictators of power and hand it to representative governments (Heilbrunn, 1993). Civil society was a key action in this watershed. According to Fatton, civil society can be loosely defined as "the private sphere of material, cultural and political activities resisting the incursions of the state" (Fatton, 1992, 4-5). In this context, it ran from the Non-governmental organizations (NGO), the journalists, the grassroots' associations, including the students, to the trade unions⁷.

Although, if for the first time ever, international

circumstances coupled with local activism forced the incumbent authoritarian who have been leading the countries for about 30 years, to convene such a national dialogue, Bratton and Van de Walle argued that the National Conferences were a way to get out of a stalemate between protesters and incumbent elites. Indeed, after months of protests rallied by the opposition, the National Conferences set the ground for negotiation for both parties to bring peace (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997). In fact, if we follow the argument of Bratton and Van de Valle, the National Conferences concept erupted in a crisis of illegitimacy suffered by the authoritarian plebiscitary one party regime. On the other hand, the opposition was longing for a political change, remained divided and ill-organized in its political actions and ideology. Being aware of this fact, the incumbent even prodded the venue hoping to finally gain the so-called legitimacy that will ascertain their regime (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997).

With such a divergence in objective and understandings, what would have come out of the National Forums?

Bratton and Van de Walle contended that the outcome of the first National Conferences that turned out to be National "Confrontations" scared other incumbent leaders to lean to such a forum that visibly threatened their power.

At any event, the National Conferences brought about some political changes where they occurred.

IV. THE LEGACY OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCES

A. Political transition

The National Conferences defined as public discussion forums brought for the first time in about 30 years after the political independence of most of African States, ruling elites and opposition to discuss the general matters for a new starting point. It has to be said that early in the 1960, when these States attained independence, they discarded multiparty as a way to reinforce national unity. However, 2 decades of ruling marred by corruption, nepotism, favouritism and waste of public resources have undermined the economy and the social conditions, along with the credibility of the ruling elite. As immediate solution, the international financial institutions urgently recommended drastic economic reforms, known under the name of Structural Adjustment. On the political level, things were not better, because the same parties had been ruling the countries for about 3 decades. So, when the democratization wind blew in it found a favourable environment of thrive. Therefore the opposition, viewing that as a lifetime opportunity to negotiate a transition to democratization. One may argue that they are not a success as such given the expectations they held.

However, it brought in some dividends, and the least one is the political transition in most of the countries toward they led. Bratton and Van de Walle contended that opposition rallies and public protests resulted in regimes change in Benin, Congo and Niger, while they put intense pressure on authoritarian rulers in ex-Zaire and Togo to hold a National Conference (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997)⁸. And where

⁶ In fact, contrary to the other countries under consideration here Mali convened it National Conference after the incumbent regime of Moussa Traore was overthrown through public protest

⁷ It is important to point out that before that period; there were generally one big national trade union for all workers, managed by the one party government.

⁸ some leaders of countries such as Cameroon, were unwilling to host the National Conferences due to their inquisition style in the first place, could not help yielding to the public wish for a public discussion.

they did not cause a regime change, they helped authoritarian leaders make concession to the protesters in order to calm down their eagerness for such a public discussion.

As such, the National Conferences could be considered as a success even though some of countries that held National Conferences have slid back into authoritarian, such as Burkina Faso; which can be viewed as a feat in an era when only the dominant unique party held the reins of the power for almost 30 years.

The National Conference's scope was just a political transition allowing the opposition elites to compete in fair and free election, actually it is far reaching. It has shaped the political future of some of the countries where it primarily took place.

B. The now- democratically successful countries

The National conference acted in some countries as levers to the democratic transition. In fact, the national gathering had been the opportunity to set the conditions for a new constitution in some countries, launch a fierce combat against corruption and nepotism, the major plagues of the continent. For the first time ever in 30 years, the dirty linen had been brought to the public place. As Bratton said the National Conferences remain a major organizational of African regimes transition. Patterned on both traditional village assemblies and the Estates General of the French Revolution, they brought together the national elites to address the country's political problems and attempt to formulate new constitutional rules

(Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997). In other words, it put together all the living forces of the countries to brainstorm in order to set a new basis for a new political life. One can guess how groundbreaking and important they were. Of course, because of their novelty and their aim, no wonder why some the incumbent leaders held them in contempt. Nonetheless, the countries that had the sufficient gust to make the necessary political and economical reforms definitively engaged in a long-lasting process of democratization.

Among these success democratization stories, two states spring out, Benin and Mali. Mali and Benin are interesting cases, firstly because; as the general assumption goes, democracy goes hands in hands with economic growth, or at least democracy thrives on favourable economic conditions. However, as we know Benin and Mali⁹ are among the poorest countries in the world, and since the 1990s when they turned on the new democratization leaf, they may not look back any longer. (Houngnikpo, 2007). One of the obvious outcomes of the National Conferences is that over time it has helped sharp political awareness. According to the findings from an Afrobarometer political study in July 2005, "though 85% of Beninese can define democracy and 90% actively participate in elections, they do not fully understand the notion of accountability and how the choice of a political leader has some bearing on their livelihood" (Houngnikpo, 2007).

Reversely, there was a group of countries for which national dialogue was superfluous. As a matter of fact, with the breakout of the National Conferences demanded by civil society as the only way toward democratic transition, some heads of states along with some political leaders argued that national dialogue would be another venue to waste public money. Even some of them termed it as a fashion effect. We

can easily understand the effects of the assumptions of the former French president that Africa was not yet ready for democracy¹⁰. The result was that these countries missed out on the chance to discuss through the national matters in order to implement thorough reforms on a consensus ground. The consequences are that there exist the so-called democratic institutions to regulate the political game, but at closer look they do not really play their role, for all of them are controlled by the government in power. Such example countries are Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

The table below highlights the main political and social changes brought about by democratic transition as a result of the National Conference in Benin and Mali as directly opposed to Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.

	Benin	Burkina Faso	Côte d'Ivoire	Mali
Political Changes				
Economic Changes				
Social Changes				

	Successful Transitional Countries
	Unsuccessful Transitional Countries
	No Significant Changes

First and foremost, it might be relevant to point out that Burkina Faso hosted the National Conference; nevertheless it appears in this paper as a testing case meaning that holding the National Conference in a country does not warrant that democracy will occur. But then again, the general trend is that where it happened to be hosted it acted a springboard for political openness.

One, for the first time, both elites from the ruling party and the opposition, along with the major representative of the civil society, agreed to meet up to discuss what should be the basic ruling laws for a fair political competition. As outcome, some of the constitutions were changed in order to fit the new political setting.

Second, as a matter of fact, the National Conferences sparked a political conscience among even the common people.

In Benin, it is argued that in 2005, President Kérékou as the chef of the executive tried to manipulate the constitution which would allow him to stay in power beyond April 2005.

But as expected, he met a strong opposition from civil society. This coalition of NGOs initiated a billboard campaign "Ne touche pas à ma Constitution" (Don't touch my constitution) (Houngnikpo, 2007).

Third, economically, the National Conferences providing a fair and clean ground for the political competition succeeded in addressing the corruption plague. Following the National Conference, the government in some countries such a Benin made the battle against corruption and economic mismanagement one of its priorities (Houngnikpo, 2007).

As it can be noticed none of the countries, democratic or non-democratic fail to comply with the social changes embedded in democracy.

transition. One can easily imagine the two-sided interpretations given the circumstances of such an assumption

⁹ Mali is poorer than Côte d'Ivoire, in terms of economic performance.

¹⁰ Jacques CHIRAC, former French President, uttered in the early 1990 that the African states due to poverty were not ready yet for democratic

V. CONCLUSION

This short essay has showed that public dialogue through the National Conferences as a way of reaching consensus has contributed to a better democratic transition in the 1990s in most of the African countries where it happened. Based on the theoretical framework developed by V. Bunce about Elites Bargaining, it compares and contrasts 4 countries case study, one can notice that National Conferences were not just to settle personal problems like many authoritarian leaders conceived them; on the contrary, they helped shape the political future for the states that engaged themselves on the democratic path.

Nevertheless, the results of the essay should not be broadened, because republic Democratic of Congo (ex Zaire) at that time organized a big national conference that came out with resolutions as well as Burkina Faso, but for the time being these countries are still paddling on the democratic path. In fact, only Mali and Benin are doing well even if there still is some glitch, which could account for the fact that democratization is in its infancy.

And again, there remain the big question, how long are they going to hold on if the economic conditions continue worsening? Because democracies without good health care, food and employment may run the risk to backfire and trigger social unrest sooner or later.

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