

ABSTRACT

Restraining Executive Power in Africa

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After independence, many African leaders argued that the tasks of economic development and national integration required national unity and a strong state; this came to mean the abandoning of multi-party competition and the vesting of executive power in the hands of an executive president. A pattern of personal or 'neo-patrimonial' rule since characterizes African politics. By the 1980s, this model of state building 'from above' was largely discredited as economic development faltered and many African states remained characterized by weakness (see the phenomenon of 'soft' states and failed states).

The wave of democratization of the 1990s represents an effort to rebuild the legitimacy and of Africa's political regimes through electoral participation and competition. However, multi-party competition has been largely in the context of a political system that remains highly majoritarian, with power concentrated in the executive. For that reason, one of the prime issues in today's good governance agenda, i.e. accountability, remains very problematic.

My contribution will present an overview of presidential power in Africa and the limits on restraining executive power, institutionally as well as through party politics. I will pay particular attention to the lack of separation between the legislative and executive branch of government in most African countries and the great powers assigned to presidents; moreover, the tendency for concurrent elections strengthens the pattern of one-party dominance. I will show that Anglophone African countries show least separation and most concentration of power; Francophone countries have a higher degree of separation but also high levels of presidential power, even in systems with a premier.

The formal political system not only allows but also reinforces the typically African pattern of personal rule and dominant party politics. The analysis points to areas for constitutional reform; executive power could be reduced through increased separation of powers and limiting certain presidential prerogatives. A particular political challenge resides in the creation of a viable multiparty system to replace the pattern of one-party dominance combined with a marginal and fragmented opposition. Lastly, a lot depends on the strengthening the position of parliaments, not only institutionally but also through increased budget and staff.