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Blondel's African Presidential Republics: proof presidentialism can perform even in the most challenging contexts?

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Abstract

The debate on the ‘perils of presidentialism’ has been raging for over 30 years and gone through at least three waves. It began with the influential work of Juan Linz and most recently has seen the emergence of a rich literature on coalitional presidentialism, which has demonstrated the capacity of presidents to manage fragmented multi-party legislatures, and hence overcome the dangers of political deadlock. Jean Blondel's last book (*African Presidential Republics*, Oxford, Routledge, 2019) belongs to this latest wave in the sense that he argues that presidential systems can overcome their limitations, and that certain aspects of the presidential models actually give them an advantage over parliamentary equivalents. This article reviews Blondel's argument against the latest developments in African politics. I suggest that there are fewer instances of positive presidentialism today than Blondel hoped for, in part because democratic progress has often proved to be particularly vulnerable to later autocratization due to a tendency not to entrench gains via constitutional reforms. Despite this cautionary note, however, I conclude that Blondel is right to reject the idea that African cases provide support for the ‘perils of presidentialism’. This is not only because Blondel highlights a number of presidents who played a benign or positive role in their country's political development, but also because the coalitional presidentialism literature suggests that there is little evidence that parliamentary systems would perform significantly better.

Keywords Jean Blondel · Comparative politics · Coalitional presidentialism · Legislative and voting behaviour · African politics

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The debate on the ‘perils of presidentialism’—and whether parliamentary political systems would better suit new and fragile democracies—has been raging for over 30 years (Elgie 2005; Chaisty et al. 2014). From an early focus on Linz’s (1990) famous ‘perils of presidentialism’, which suggested that presidential models might be more prone to deadlock and breakdown, more recent literature has sought to explain how and why presidents have been able to maintain stable and effective governments (Chaisty et al. 2018). Jean Blondel’s last book, *African Presidential Republics* (2019), belongs to this latest wave of the presidentialism debate, but is distinctive in going beyond the claim that presidential systems are well equipped to ensure their own sustainability to also argue that they have certain advantages over parliamentary equivalents. In a number of African countries, for example, he suggests that presidential systems helped to promote political stability and economic development when progressive leaders used their personal authority to integrate diverse communities (whether ethnic groups, classes or races) into a more cohesive nation.

In doing so, Blondel does two things that are particularly noteworthy. The first and perhaps the most valuable is to integrate African political systems into the comparative literature. This is an important task for any theory or literature that claims global coverage because the continent has more presidential political systems than any other region of the world. Of the 52 countries on the African continent with a population greater than 100,000, fully 44 are presidential and only two feature Prime Ministers.¹ As Jean Blondel (2019: 165) notes in the conclusion to *African Presidential Republics*, this figure is ‘almost double ... the Latin American presidential republics’. Despite this, efforts to fully integrate African cases into academic conversations about the nature and impact of presidential government are incredibly rare (though see Chaisty et al. 2018), in part because they are often incorrectly framed as being too different to be profitably compared with their counterparts elsewhere (Chabal and Daloz 2004).

What is perhaps most striking about *African Presidential Republics* is, therefore, that Blondel both recognizes the value of African cases, and sees that they could legitimately and profitably be integrated into a comparative approach. Thus, towards the end of his career, he did not follow the pattern of academics who continue to refine their analysis by returning again and again to the same tried and trusted case studies. Instead, he took on the hugely ambitious project of first understanding and then describing presidential rule in Africa, bringing the experience of many of these 44 presidential systems into an ongoing conversation with the work of Juan Linz, Scott Mainwaring (1993) and many more. In doing so, he stayed true to one of the core themes of his academic life: the pursuit of the comparative method. Blondel’s previous book publication had been *Presidents and Democracy in Latin America* (with M. Alcantara et al. 2017) just 2 years before.

The second particularly noteworthy aspect of *African Presidential Republics* follows from the first: By taking African politics seriously, Blondel is able to make

¹ It is important to note that in a small number of countries, including South Africa, the executive is called a president but in reality is elected indirectly via the legislature, in what is effectively a fused model that manifests some key elements of parliamentary rule.



the case for presidentialism in a particularly challenging context. Many African states are highly ethnically diverse as well as politically divided, have historically endured prolonged economic challenges that have contributed to a limited civil society and middle class and entered the independent era with particularly weak checks and balances institutions (Cheeseman and Fisher 2021). If presidential systems can be shown to have benefits against this background, the 'perils of presidentialism' might even need to be recast as the 'positives of presidentialism'. As Blondel concludes (2019: 165), 'It now seems manifestly the case that Latin American presidential Republics at least have overcome their 'failure'', while in Africa, 'the presidential republic is in the process of becoming able to overcome the criticism of failure under which it suffered from the twentieth century'.

This article reviews this claim, and Blondel's discussion of African cases, against recent developments within African politics. I argue that his core focusses on intra-continental variation and institutional design sits well with a trend in the political science literature on Africa, which has highlighted the danger of exaggerating the extent to which the continent is 'institutionless' (Cheeseman 2018), and in the process ghettoizing African politics within political science. That said, there is growing evidence that the weakness of horizontal accountability in some of the presidential systems Blondel reviewed has led to both economic and political challenges. Tanzania's Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete is cited as a particularly positive president, for example, but his tenure was followed by that of John Magufuli, who both repressed dissent and engaged in a dangerous form of COVID-19 denialism. Similarly, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni is framed as one of the 'African presidents who became democratic', but this evaluation is not tenable in the wake of the flawed 2021 general elections in which opposition candidate Bobi Wine was arrested, and hundreds of his supporters were detained and tortured (Kibira et al. 2021).

These problematic cases suggest that there are fewer instances of positive presidentialism on the continent than Blondel hoped. They also highlight a key feature of African politics, namely that democratic progress often proves to be particularly vulnerable to later erosion due to a tendency not to entrench gains via constitutional reforms. More specifically, periods of democratic opening often result from the emergence of a president less willing to abuse their authority, but rarely culminate in changes to the political system that permanently reduces the power of the executive (Cheeseman 2015). Consequently, the democratic progress secured under one president is vulnerable to rapid reversal under the next.

Despite this cautionary note, I conclude that Blondel is right to reject the idea that African cases paint a bleak picture of the impact of presidential government in divided societies. This is not only because Blondel highlights a number of presidents who played a benign or positive role in their country's political developments, such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia or Quett Masire in Botswana, but also because African presidents have rarely suffered episodes of deadlock—a core Linzian concern. Drawing on recent comparative research on coalitional presidentialism, I argue that this is because presidents have proved to be more adept at managing fragmented multi-party legislatures than comparative political scientists initially expected, in large part because they have proved able to operate like Prime Ministers and form multi-party coalitions. Moreover, although there are perils to this form of



politics, such as the institutionalization of a coalitional logic based on the exchange of favours and the blurring of lines between different political parties, there is little evidence that parliamentary systems would necessarily have performed any better. Indeed, by locating the executive within the legislature, parliamentary regimes may actually exacerbate some of the worst tendencies of coalitional presidentialism.

Blondel's contribution to the presidentialism debate

Building on the work of Robert Elgie (2005) and Paul Chaisty et al. (2014), we can say that the presidentialism debate has gone through three distinct phases. In the first, Juan Linz famously argued that parliamentarism was superior because 'the competing democratic legitimacies under presidentialism (the president and legislature being elected separately) would lead to recurrent conflicts' between different branches of government (Chaisty et al. 2014: 74). The potential for deadlock and breakdown would be exacerbated, he suggested, by the winner-takes-all character of presidential elections and the fact that presidential systems are less flexible than their parliamentary counterparts (Linz 1990). Although the broad contours of this argument were hugely influential, the specific mechanisms he identified did not convince the next generation of scholars, in part because there were a number of cases in which presidential systems proved to be comparatively durable and to lead to executive dominance rather than presidential paralysis.

The second wave of the debate, therefore, looked to identify specific conditions under which presidential systems had negative consequences. Perhaps most influentially, Scott Mainwaring argued that the problem was not just presidentialism, but what he called the 'difficult combination' of presidentialism and legislative multi-party fragmentation (Mainwaring 1993). It was the challenge of managing complex legislatures—in particular those in which the executive lacked a clear majority—that explains the weakness of some presidential systems. The unanticipated durability of multi-party presidential systems led to growing challenges to this argument, however, ushering in a third wave of the literature that emphasizes the capacity of presidents to overcome a wide range of challenges. One of the main strands within this approach, which has emerged out of the literature on Latin American politics, has emphasized the ability of presidents to make presidentialism work like parliamentarism, managing multi-party legislative coalitions as effectively as prime ministers—though not, it is important to note, in exactly the same way (Chaisty et al. 2018).

Blondel's book on *African Presidential Republics* represents a distinctive contribution to this third wave in two main respects. First, while most of the coalitional presidentialism literature has focussed on explaining the survival of presidential systems, and their ability to prosecute their legislative agendas under conditions of multi-partyism, he makes a stronger argument: Presidentialism also has distinct advantages when it comes to states in the throes of nation and state-building. This argument effectively turns the perils of presidentialism thesis on its head, and suggests that—at least in certain countries and at certain times—it is parliamentary politics that may represent the greatest threat to democratic and economic progress.



Second, as noted above, Blondel is one of the first scholars to seriously attempt to integrate the large number of African presidential systems into a global framework of analysis. This is important, because with some notable exceptions (such as Chaisty et al. 2018), our understanding of global presidentialism has tended to be limited and partial, and heavily shaped by the experience of Latin American countries and the US. It, therefore, fails to adequately take into account the full universe of presidential models.

Historically, the integration of African cases in comparative political science has been undermined by two core assumptions that, while understandable, are also misleading. On the one hand, African presidents are generally argued to have greater powers than executives elsewhere—or perhaps more accurately, that they face fewer barriers to the application of the powers that they enjoy (van Cranenburgh 2008). On the other hand, African presidential systems have been depicted as all featuring a common dynamic, namely that horizontal accountability is so weak that the precise institutional configuration in a country is less significant than the informal authority structures in African states. These structures have often been described as neo-patrimonial (Medard 1982), a theoretical framework that effectively posits that the ‘modern European state’ was never effectively embedded in African soil, and that as a result a hybrid form of government has emerged that has the outward appearance of constitutional rule but the internal logic of ‘traditional’ rule (Bonga 2021). Legislatures, judiciaries and political parties all exist on paper, but real power is seen to reside in traditional forms of authority, ethnic kinship and clientelistic forms of exchange, such that presidents can use their personal networks to subvert checks and balances institutions as and when required.

Despite the popularity of the neo-patrimonial framework, a growing number of studies have found that it is often both undertheorized and over simplified (Pitcher et al. 2009), and that as a result it implies a homogeneity in Africa political dynamics that is unwarranted. Not all African political institutions are equally weak (Hassan et al. 2022), not all states are equally corrupt and not all presidents can override formal checks and balances (Cheeseman 2018). Blondel's work fits well within this recent scholarship, not least in that the introduction and the country case studies clearly demonstrate his keen awareness that the performance of African presidential systems is shaped by a number of factors including prevailing formal and informal institutions, in addition to the social context and the personality of the president. Indeed, *African Presidential Republics* is characterized by a clear-sighted recognition that there is as much variation within the universe of African presidential systems, and within the universe of Western presidential models, as there is between these different regions. In this way, Blondel's work rejects both Afro-exceptionalism and Afro-pessimism, and can be read as a contribution to recent efforts to challenge depictions that overly simplify the continent's politics.

Positive presidencies in Africa

Blondel's claim that presidential rule in Africa has often had positive effects is based on two main arguments. The first is that there is a set of presidents who had



a desirable impact on the political trajectory of their countries. The second is that there are a number of cases in which potentially problematic presidential systems that had experienced moments of genuine crisis—coups, civil war and chronic instability—righted themselves and moved back towards stable democratic government. Although it is often left implicit, the logic underpinning Blondel's thinking appears to be that this is a particularly powerful combination where defending the value of presidentialism is concerned, because it demonstrates that in some cases presidential democracies experience relatively plain sailing, and even when they do not, there is the potential for presidential rule to self-correct. Taken together, these two sets of cases make for a powerful argument against the Linzian notion that presidential government is likely to result in political deadlock and breakdown. This section evaluates this argument, before the next section integrates recent lessons from the coalitional presidentialism literature.

Blondel identifies five 'particularly positive' presidents: Quett Masire of Botswana, Hifikepunye Pohamba of Namibia, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania and Armando Emilio Guebuza of Mozambique. In many ways, this selection makes intuitive sense, in that it features a number of the countries that have historically been viewed as the most democratic in Africa including Botswana, Namibia and Senegal. While it is a selection explicitly designed to highlight positive examples, it is also noticeable for not overly stacking the deck—it would have been easy to include a nationalist hero who led their country to independence, such as Julius Nyerere, or saintly figures such as South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

In most cases, the reason Blondel argues that these presidencies were positive is that they led or consolidated periods of democratic reform while delivering political stability. Where Masire is concerned, Blondel notes that 'the personal characteristics of that president and the nature of the close relationship which Masire came to have with Seretse Khama are indeed factors accounting for the way in which the political and social system of the country both emerged and subsequently developed under the second president before they were transmitted and became, so to speak, second nature' (2019: 20). Others are mainly praised on the basis that they allowed continuity and did not seek to divert positive processes already underway for their own purposes. Pohamba's period of leadership, for example, is said not to have been one of 'a policy of 'grand' actions but one which was based on proposals of continuity' (2019: 42). Meanwhile, in the case of Kikwete, it is argued that 'the policies of that president were truly belonging to the same 'approach' if not the same policy aim as the one which had characterised the country since independence [i.e. Nyerere]' (2019: 11).

Where 'corrective' presidents are concerned, Blondel identifies Mathieu Kerekou of Benin, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, John Jerry Rawlings in Ghana, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia and Olusegun Obasanjo in Nigeria. The common strand linking all of these presidents is that they took power during periods of intense uncertainty—and often after or amidst episodes of conflict—and brought their countries back towards political stability and some form of participatory government. Kerekou became president of Benin following a coup in 1972, and ended a damaging period of coups and counter-coups by establishing a stable



one-party state that was considerably less repressive than many of the military regimes in neighbouring West African states (Cheeseman 2015). He was also one of the first African leaders to agree to hold multi-party elections in 1990, and to agree to leave power after being defeated. Remarkably, he then returned to the political fray to win elections again legitimately in 1996 and 2001, before standing down, having exhausted term limits in 2006.

The trajectory of Ghana under J.J. Rawlings was similar, if more complicated. The domineering leader—nicknamed Junior Jesus due to his charismatic appeal—took power twice, once in 1979 and again in 1981, in response to what he saw as the chronic failings of the military government of General Frederick Akuffo and the civilian government of Hilla Limann, respectively. Like Kerekou, Rawlings went on to establish a relatively stable form of government and reintroduced multi-party politics in the early 1990s. Moreover, although his victory in the 1992 elections was controversial, he stood down when he had exhausted the two-term limit he himself had introduced, and his party accepted defeat when it lost the subsequent presidential election in 2000. For his part, Obasanjo's trajectory shares elements with both Kerekou and Rawlings—though he stands accused of egregious electoral manipulation—having first held power as a military ruler and presided over a transition to democracy in 1979, and then held power as an elected president between 1999 and 2007, when he stood down having exhausted presidential term limits.

The situation was a little different with Museveni and Johnson Sirleaf, who assumed office not against a backdrop of military coups but following episodes of intense conflict. Museveni took power through force in 1986, after a protracted bush war, and established a stable and relatively inclusive 'no-party democracy' (Kasfir 1998) before—under considerable duress—reintroducing multi-party politics in 2005. Johnson Sirleaf played a much less prominent role in Liberia's civil wars, although at one point she did offer support for Charles Taylor, who subsequently became infamous as a brutal warlord, raising money to support his attempt to remove strongman Samuel Doe from power (Cheng 2011). Nonetheless, the fact that Johnson Sirleaf was not directly involved in the fighting, along with her experience working for the World Bank, enabled her to emerge as a credible voice for change following the cessation of the conflict. Although Johnson Sirleaf lost a first election to Taylor in 1997, when his forces controlled much of the country's territory and media, she won a credible second election in 2005 after Taylor had departed the scene. Thereafter, Johnson Sirleaf's leadership held the country together during a different period of national reconciliation made all the more challenging by serious resource shortages, before standing down in 2017 having served two terms in office.

The emphasis Blondel placed on positive examples of African presidentialism and the range of cases that he considered demonstrate two important points. First, the decision to look at two groups of presidents—'positive presidencies' and 'Presidents who became democratic', and to do so through a range of cases across Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone states demonstrates that Blondel did not believe that all African countries, all African presidential systems or all presidents were at root the same. Instead, he recognized that doing justice to the great variety of presidential systems and trajectories on the continent would require no less than ten



in-depth case studies. In this way, he cast his empirical net far wider than the vast majority of Africanists, covering ten countries in considerable depth in one book.

Second, his explicit focus on success stories makes it clear that Blondel rejected the allure of African pessimism and exceptionalism. Indeed, the integration of African cases into a common analytical framework regarding the virtues (dangers) of presidentialism—the introduction starts in Africa, moves to the US, back to Western Europe and then back to Africa—demonstrates an implicit belief that the study of comparative politics is greatly enriched by taking African cases seriously. As Blondel writes (2019: 2) ‘Whatever differences there may be between Western governments and non-Western governments, it is also the case that, among Western governments, the arrangements of the national executive differ profoundly between British and most Western European parliamentary ‘countries’ on the one hand, and on the other, the arrangements which prevail within the federal American executive’. Moreover, the historically informed way in which the chapters are written, and Blondel’s concern to highlight the impact of social contexts, institutional legacies and presidential personalities, implicitly recognizes that both formal and informal institutions play a profound role in shaping African politics.

In making this argument, Blondel’s work chimes with recent scholarship that has emphasized the limitations of the literature that describes Africa as ‘institutionless’ (Chabal and Daloz 2004), and effectively assimilates almost all African political systems to a common ‘neo-patrimonial’ model. As Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel (2007) have argued, the problem with the neo-patrimonial framework is that the term is often used as a synonym for corrupt and ‘Big Man’ politics, without careful attention to its theoretical content or empirical requirements. Another weakness is that the idea that personal networks and ‘traditional rule’ are more powerful than formal institutions has led researchers to consistently overlook the significant variations that exist on the continent in terms of both the capacity and independence of institutions such as the legislature, judiciary and security forces (Cheeseman 2018). Indeed, work by the likes of Catherine Boone (2018), Leonardo Arriola (2018), and Michaela Collord (2018) has powerfully demonstrated the extent to which early institutional critical junctures have had a powerful impact on everything from systems of law, political violence and the cohesion of ruling parties through to the capacity of opposition parties to form effective coalitions.

Partly because Blondel adopted a clear-sighted approach that recognized both institutional variation and the impact of formal institutions on the continent, he had no hesitation in arguing that the experience of African states could be used to speak to major debates in comparative politics, such as the ‘perils of presidentialism’ literature. On this basis, Blondel makes a powerful case that African cases add weight to his long-standing argument (Alcántara et al. 2017) that the dangers of presidential rule have been overstated. Indeed, he goes beyond this to explicitly make the case for presidential systems having certain advantages. Arguing back against Linz’s hugely influential (if dated) essay on the ‘Perils of Presidentialism’ (1990), Blondel suggests that African cases demonstrate that the presidential republic is one of the ‘key institutional arrangements likely to lead societies towards development’ (2019: x). This was not only a firm rejection of defeatist interpretations of the continent’s trajectory, it also represented a strong refutation of the commonplace idea that the



concentration of power in one individual that is inherent to presidential systems was one of the biggest barriers to democracy and development in African states (van Cranenburgh 2008). While recognizing that presidential power could be abused, Blondel also saw that the tendency of presidential systems to confer authority and prestige on one individual meant that they might have advantages for countries seeking to simultaneously achieve nation-building and rapid development.

Evaluating presidential trajectories in Africa

Blondel is surely right that certain features of presidential rule enabled the leaders he discusses to promote national stability. An overriding focus on one individual and the ability to govern for long periods with limited legislative interference empowered figures such as Museveni and Rawlings to present themselves as unifying figures whose main goal was to promote stability. It is also hard to disagree with his conclusion that Johnson Sirleaf played a positive role in rebuilding her country after a prolonged period of conflict and instability, despite facing significant challenges both in terms of keeping the peace and of managing a 'major process of institutional legitimisation' (2019: 14). Moreover, the idea that the concentration of authority and removal of veto players can be beneficial to rapid development is integral to the developmental state literature (Öniş 1991). While democracy has consistently been found to lead to higher levels of economic growth in Africa (Masaki and van de Walle 2015), it is, therefore, feasible that powerful presidents can use their authority to force through productive change.

There are two potential caveats to Blondel's framing of the ten cases reviewed in *African Presidential Republics*, however. The first relates to his description of the individual cases, and the second relates to the impact that 'positive presidents' had on the political systems they helped to create. Where the record of the likes of Rawlings and Kikwete is concerned, Blondel is perhaps a little too quick to see what leaders have done well, and to overlook their limitations. Obasanjo is a very good example of this tendency. It is true that he was one of the military leaders who proved to be most committed to returning power to civilian hands. When serving as a civilian president, however, Obasanjo set about creating a dominant party state in which his People's Democratic Party monopolized power. Moreover, he did not simply agree to stand down at the end of his two terms in office as Johnson Sirleaf did, but actively sought to remove term limits to allow for a third term in office. It was only Obasanjo's failure to win a crucial vote in the Senate that ensured the Nigerian constitution would be protected, at which point, he set about manipulating the 2007 elections to ensure victory for his handpicked successor, Umaru Yar'Adua. That election was so heavily rigged, with results being posted for polling stations that did not even open for voting, that it was once described to me by the former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, as an 'election type event' (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018). In embarking on this course of action, Obasanjo demonstrated a reluctance to genuinely share power that endangers the stability of Nigeria's presidential republic. By rigging elections while also constraining the ability of opposition parties to win power at the sub-national level, he undermined popular support for the



wider political system and increased the risk that disgruntled leaders would seek to secure power through non-democratic means.

The example of President Museveni is also problematic. It is true that Museveni delivered stability to a previously unstable country. However, it is also true that he was a reluctant democratizer and as soon as he had reintroduced competitive elections he set about manipulating them. In many cases, this has involved the use of considerable violence, including arresting opposition leaders such as his former doctor Kizza Besigye, and intimidating voters through the deployment of both the security forces and claiming that he was the only figure capable of preventing a return to violence. He is also a leader whose commitment to the rule of law and the constitution that he introduced has clearly waned the longer he has been in power, despite his fierce criticism of leaders who ‘overstayed’ earlier in his career. Having first removed presidential term limits in 2005, Museveni then removed age-limits in 2018. After the ruling party stated that he will be its candidate in 2023, Museveni is now set to become a president for life. At the same time, economic stagnation has led to growing discontent among the wider population, which has been dealt with through repression rather than reform. The 2021 presidential election campaign, for example, not only saw the arrest and harassment of Museveni’s main rival, Bobi Wine, but also the arrest and torture of hundreds of Wine’s supporters, with at least 54 killed and the whereabouts of many more unknown.

The 2021 election occurred after *African Presidential Republics* was published, and so Blondel could not take it into account. It is nonetheless instructive, because it speaks to the fleeting gains secured by many of the presidents that he reviews. This reflects a broader trend in African presidential systems, in which even reforming presidents relatively rarely introduce the kinds of constitutional change that would constrain the power of the presidency thereafter. In part because presidents face resistance within the ruling party to watering down the advantages of incumbency, and in part because presidents are often keen to ensure that power transfers to a loyalist, they are often reluctant to make any changes that could impact their ability to determine the outcome of the next election. This is a common feature of presidential rule in contexts where the executive does not trust that agreements made with the opposition—for example to protect the outgoing government from prosecution or persecution—will hold. The changes implemented by many of the presidents discussed by Blondel were, therefore, incremental and tightly bound rather than far-reaching and transformatory. Partly as a result, the positive political practices that they introduced have often turned out to be extremely vulnerable to reversal. This helps to explain why of the ten cases that Blondel identifies, the last 5 years has seen growing concerns about autocratization in six: Benin, Botswana, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda.

Take the case of Kikwete, Tanzania’s fourth president. Whether or not one agrees with Blondel’s take that Kikwete sought to sustain the broad focus of the country’s influential founding father and Philosopher King Julius Nyerere, there is little evidence that he strengthened Tanzanian democracy in the long term. During the time of Kikwete’s rule, he won praise for reducing the high levels of corruption that characterized the presidencies of Ali Hassan Mwinyi and Benjamin Mkapa, and for presiding over a period in which political competition was open enough for



the main opposition party, CHADEMA, to make gains. Yet he was also a former military ruler who believed in what E.S. Atieno Odhiambo (1987) called the ideology of order. Consequently, he did not seek to change the underlying structure of the Tanzanian state, leaving in place many of the repressive institutions that had been used to maintain the political control of the ruling party. This meant that when opposition gains came to represent a threat to the government's political hegemony, there was nothing to prevent a rapid deterioration in the quality of democracy. It is, therefore, no accident that Kikwete's rule was immediately followed by a wave of authoritarianism under John Magufuli (Bamwenda 2018). Nicknamed the Bulldozer, Magufuli's brand of faux populism—which Paget (2021) has labelled 'elitist plebeianism'—saw him clamp down on dissent, use anti-corruption drives to target his rivals within the ruling party and launch a brutal crackdown on the opposition (Cheeseman et al. 2021).

The limited checks and balances on some African presidents, and the ability of leaders in countries such as Burundi, Cameroon, Uganda, Rwanda and the Republic of Congo, to remove term limits has led H. Kwasi Prempeh (2008) to warn about the danger posed by 'presidents untamed'. Yet while it is clear that a lack of effective checks and balances facilitates the abuse of power, the fact that some of the presidents Blondel discusses did not fulfil their early promise does not necessarily invalidate his argument regarding the (dis)advantages of presidentialism. For that to be the case, it would need to be true that parliamentarism could be reasonably expected to be more effective at constraining the abuse of power, and as I discuss in the next section, there is little evidence to support such a conclusion.

Conclusion: would parliamentarism be better for Africa?

The different impacts of presidential and parliamentary models in African states are difficult to assess, as no large sub-Saharan African country currently operates a parliamentary model. Botswana and South Africa have parliamentary systems in the sense that the executive is indirectly elected by the legislature rather than by the popular vote. However, that executive is called a president rather than a prime minister and enjoys a range of powers that prime ministers would typically lack. The South African president, for example, is both the head of state and the head of government, and is also the commander-in-chief of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). There are thus no purely parliamentary systems to compare with the fate of the continent's numerous presidential governments.

There are good theoretical reasons, however, to doubt that parliamentarism would generate more responsible and balanced leadership. Perhaps most obviously, parliamentary systems such as those employed in the UK and Germany do not have term limits for the Prime Minister, which means that one of the main institutional developments to restrain the executive would not be in place. While Prempeh (2008) is right to point to the number of countries in which presidents have been able to remove term limits, it is also true that they remain in place in states including Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Zambia. This is particularly significant, because the rotation of the presidency has been an important part of a wider



process of political institutionalization (Posner and Young 2007) that has facilitated the transfer of power and strengthened democratic transitions (Cheeseman 2010).

Less obviously, one of the reasons that presidential political systems have not led to political deadlock is the ability of presidents to effectively operate like prime ministers by forming multi-party coalitions. In general, this has happened through co-optation, the conferral of cabinet positions on opposition parties and the ‘exchange of favours’ (Chaisty et al. 2018). While MPs in African countries such as Benin, Kenya and Malawi view this process of ‘coalitional presidentialism’ as being productive in that it enables decisions to be made, and laws to be passed quickly, they also highlight a number of problems with this model, namely that it tends to weaken party identity and encourage clientelistic relations within the legislature. One consequence of this has been to undermine the emergence of a strong and disciplined opposition. This helps to explain why presidents who lead parties that do not secure a majority in the legislature often appear to have the same degree of power as those whose parties win a large majority. Contrary to the concerns set out by both Linz and Mainwaring, fragmented multi-party systems have not generated institutional deadlock between presidents and legislatures. Instead, as Prempeh has argued, the main concern in the African context is that presidents have been able to exert too much power over parliament rather than too little.

Switching to a parliamentary system would be unlikely to significantly alter this picture, because the executive would continue to be able to use co-optation and clientelism to manufacture majorities in the legislature. Indeed, the presence of the executive in the chamber is likely to strengthen its parliamentary control by making it easier to directly manage the pro-presidential alliance. It was in part concern that having ministers sitting in parliament had a pacifying effect on the legislature in Kenya’s fused political system—which was presidential but retained elements of the previous Westminster style model—that led the drafters of the 2010 constitution to propose that the cabinet should be recruited from outside the National Assembly. Returning powerful patrons to the legislature could serve to actually enhance the government’s ability to maintain a majority, undermining the evolution of more effective mechanisms of horizontal accountability.

Blondel is, therefore, right to challenge the notion that presidentialism is responsible for the limited progress towards democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, and right to point out the many positive examples of presidential leadership that are so often overlooked in the literature. By staying true to his comparative spirit, and recognizing the relevance of African cases and the variations between them, he made a distinctive contribution. For its willingness to go against the grain, and its understanding of the different roles that political institutions can play in different contexts, *African Presidential Republics* deserves to be read by all those interested in African politics and African political institutions.

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