

# The 2008 APSA Workshop on Political Participation: Dakar, Senegal, July 6–27, 2008

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The APSA Workshop on Political Participation was convened in Dakar, Senegal, from July 6–27 and is the first of three annual residential workshops APSA will be organizing in Africa from 2008–2010. The workshop series is generously supported by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and is a key part of increasing APSA efforts to support the development of applied research networks linking U.S.-based scholars with colleagues overseas and supporting political science communities outside the United States. All sessions took place at the facilities of the West African Research Center (WARC), and APSA collaborated closely with WARC to manage the workshop. APSA staffer Helena Saele spent the month of July in Dakar overseeing all related administrative and logistical matters and providing direct support to workshop leaders and participants.

The Dakar workshop brought together a diverse group of 28 political scientists from the United States and nine African countries. The 20 African participants were selected from the over 70 applications received by APSA last spring and included four women and 16 men as well as scholars ranging in age from their twenties to their early fifties. The full roster of participants included:

1. Emmanuel Etienne Messanh Ahlinvi, Benin
2. Alfred Babo, Ivory Coast
3. Camary Bakaray, Mali
4. Sergio Inacio Chichava, Mozambique
5. Eduardo Dargent, Peru/United States
6. Fatima Diallo, Senegal
7. Fatou Drame, Senegal
8. Raphael Arthur Ekotou Engono, Cameroon
9. Pelagie Chantal Belomo Essono, Cameroon
10. Habibou Fofana, Burkina Faso
11. Awasom Fru Ngum, Cameroon
12. Robin Harding, UK/United States
13. Mathias Hounkpe, Benin
14. Azizou Chabi Imorou, Benin
15. Matthew Fitzrobert Kirwin, United States
16. Denis Alexandre Lahiniriko, Madagascar
17. Felicien Kabamb Mbambu, Democratic Republic of the Congo
18. Celestin Musao Kalombo Mbuyu, Democratic Republic of the Congo
19. Julien Koulega Natielse, Burkina Faso
20. El Hadji Abdoul Aziz Ndiaye, Senegal
21. Moussa Ndior, Benin
22. Gustavo Rivera, Mexico/United States
23. Andre Tassou, Cameroon
24. Adama Tiendrebeogo, Burkina Faso

The Dakar workshop leaders were:

1. Catherine Boone, University of Texas, Austin, United States

2. Alioune Badara Diop, Universite Gaston Berger, St.-Louis, Senegal
3. Augustin Loada, Universite de Ougadougou, Burkina Faso
4. Leonard Wantchekon, NYU, United States

The workshop covered seven modules over the course of three weeks. The following sections provide a brief description of what transpired in each module and have been adapted from an more detailed report of the workshop proceedings (written by participating U.S. graduate students Eduardo Dargent, Robin Harding, Matthew Kirwin, and Gustavo Rivera) that will be released in the fall. For more information on the 2008 workshop, including the full syllabus and reading list, visit the project web site at [www.apsanet.org/africaworkshops](http://www.apsanet.org/africaworkshops) or contact us at [africaworkshops@apsanet.org](mailto:africaworkshops@apsanet.org).

## Module 1: Introduction

The first session consisted mainly of comments by participants dealing with experiences from their respective countries. This approach allowed participants to relate their own experiences to the main themes of the workshop. Subsequent sessions consisted of broad discussions about whether political participation and democracy can be conceived in minimalist and liberal terms. It was noted how definitions are central to the study of political phenomenon, and theoretical discussions about the most appropriate definition of democracy were linked to practical issues concerning the characterization of African regimes. Particular attention was paid to the impact that adopting certain definitions would have on such characterizations. Participants considered the wide variation in the degree and quality of democracy across Africa and noted that even a minimalist conception of democracy would exclude several countries where elections are regularly held, due to the institutional guarantees necessary for elections to be fair.

A second topic discussed in this module was the way in which poverty affects the consolidation of democratic values. It was argued that demands for liberal rights are very often subordinated to socioeconomic demands for improved living conditions. In addition, it was suggested that poverty reduces both the strength of civil organizations and the time citizens can spend in political organization without expecting something in return. Finally, the role of culture and low levels of education were also stressed as key variables to be considered when studying politics in Africa.

## Module 2: Institutions: Voting, Elections, Parties, and Party Systems

The second module's opening discussion concerned the value of relating the experiences of other regions to the analysis of political parties in Africa. Most participants described political



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parties in Africa as active only during electoral times, centralized, and based on ethnic linkages rather than ideology, religious, or class cleavages. The particularities of African parties, it was argued, make them difficult to fit into categories developed for Western party systems. Moreover, taking these Western models as a point of departure for analysis may predispose researchers and make them look for or find characteristics not really present in African parties. Other participants suggested that even if these differences exist, typologies developed for other regions can be used to highlight the particularities of African party systems.

A second topic of discussion was the authoritarian heritage of dominant parties in the region. Several participants expressed their doubts that dominant parties such as those found in several African countries can become democratic actors due to their heritage of authoritarian rule and extensive use of state resources to maintain their support basis. The strength of these dominant parties has made several African party systems non-competitive—that is, party systems in which incumbents easily win elections against weak and fragmented opposition parties. This close linkage between the dominant party and the state makes the political opposition highly disadvantaged.

The causes for the high levels of fragmentation found in African party systems were another important aspect of the discussion. This fragmentation affects democracy by reducing competitiveness. Weak and fragmented opposition parties, it was argued, are no match for a dominant party in power. Electoral rules in several countries were identified by some participants as the cause for this fragmentation. Other participants felt that these rules were maintained precisely because fragmentation is functional to the parties in power.

Two main problems were identified as impediments for free and fair elections: the weakness and lack of independence of electoral institutions and the extensive use of clientelism and vote buying as electoral strategies. This discussion focused on possible institutional reforms to guarantee fair elections and reduce the effects of clientelism. Several participants pointed out the poor design of electoral institutions and the lack of adequate mechanisms to guarantee the secret ballot as causes of democratic weakness in the region. Participants also agreed on the limited effect that international electoral observation missions have on encouraging fair elections.

Final topics discussed in this module focused on the link between ethnic cleavages and electoral preferences. Ethnic divisions were described as better predictors of voting in several countries than other cleavages such as ideology or class and the process by which elections may lead to ethnic violence in regions where

these divisions were not previously politicized was also analyzed. Finally, participants examined how social and institutional arrangements have prevented the emergence of ethnic divisions in other regions where cross-ethnic voting is common.

### Module 3: Methods

The discussion of methodology began with a debate about the meaning of “science” in political science. This debate was enriched by the lively contributions of historians, sociologists, and political scientists, all discussing their work and respective methodological approaches. The main point of general interest was the ongoing debate between qualitative and quantitative methods.

Another interesting aspect of the discussion on methodology was the importance of thinking in terms of cause and effect when studying political phenomena. The workshop leaders emphasized the importance of differentiating between independent and dependent variables in order to understand the causality of events and how different variables can contribute independently to a single outcome. The participants were notably interested in and engaged by discussions of experimental methods.

### Module 4: Civil Society, Social Movements, and Citizenship

The first theme of this module was that civil society is a contested concept in Africa. On the one hand, the workshop leaders and participants agreed that African civil society—as elsewhere in the world—is constituted by a vast array of voluntary organizations that operate independently from the state. On the other hand, they also differed on the elements that make African civil society distinct from European or American civil society. On this latter point, a recurrent theme was that African civil society has generally evolved in opposition to authoritarian rulers and repressive states; however, evidence on the wide variation across time and space in the forms and expressions of civil society in Africa made it difficult to make any valid generalizations. The general conclusion reached on the meaning of civil society was that, at least in Africa, this concept is still contested and that one major source of its controversy has been the dubious independence of some organizations—particularly those pursuing an international agenda that does not necessarily reflect the demands of the majority in Africa.

A second and closely related theme was the role of foreign actors in the development of social capital and the organization of civil society in Africa. One major concern raised was the need for “organic” civil society organizations in Africa—that is, civil society organizations that reflect the voice of the majority of citizens across the African continent, particularly the voice of those living in poverty or not belonging to a new class of African professionals that have found in external networks a source of employment. According to the majority of participants, the ubiquitous intervention of foreign actors in African civil society poses a major challenge to the development of social movements and the (re) definition of citizenship in the region. While foreign intervention in civil society organizations is regarded as undesirable by the majority, it is also clear that many of these organizations depend heavily on foreign capital to operate and accomplish their goals.

A third theme of this module was an unsettled debate about the extent to which civil society actors and organizations should get involved in politics. It was unclear to the discussants whether civil society actors step into the political arena with the hope of fostering genuine democratic values or with an undercover political agenda instrumentalized from the moment they decide to participate in civil society. This discussion made clear that distrust of individual intentions is a common denominator across Africa.

The workshop leaders and participants alike recognized this latter point as a major problem, particularly because, to function properly and accomplish its goals, civil society must be organized on the bases of transparency and trust. The general conclusion was that unfortunately it is not uncommon to see civil society leaders change their discourse immediately after reaching a position of power, becoming “status quo” politicians in the eyes of African citizens.

## **Module 5: Ethnicity and Clientelism**

The overarching themes of this module were the concepts of ethnicity and clientelism, with discussion focusing on how they can be employed to better understand and evaluate political participation in Africa. The module addressed the twin problems of how best to conceptualize and measure the impact of ethnicity, considered in terms of ethnic groups, ethnic fragmentation, and ethnic (or cultural) diversity. Participants offered a variety of perspectives on what might constitute the core aspects of a conceptualization of ethnicity, with arguments given in defense of differentiation by language, religion, and culture. For example, while language has so often been an important dimension of inter-group differentiation in places such as Benin and Burkina Faso, it plays no such role in Madagascar where cultural and territorial divisions are salient. Consideration was also given to various measures of ethnic fragmentation, with debate focusing on the problematic distance separating the measures and the concepts in question and the difficulties this raises for assessing any theoretical claims about possible causal effects of ethnicity.

This debate led to a second key theme: the politicization of cultural identities. A recurrent issue was the important role of elites in politicizing ethnic cleavages. Participants highlighted the fluidity and multi-dimensionality of ethnic identities and the ways in which elites seek to manipulate such identities to serve their own political ends—while constructing and utilizing political constituencies based on particular identity dimensions. One particularly interesting example in this regard was that of the Marabouts in Senegal, who have built remarkably strong clientelistic networks based on religious ties that over time have made them central political actors.

The module also addressed the theme of clientelism. Although all participants recognized the importance of clientelism for understanding the dynamics of political participation in Africa, there was a diversity of opinion over what exactly the concept means. While some defended a general definition of clientelism resting on relations of particularistic conditional exchange, others argued that an element of dependency should be present for such a relationship to be deemed clientelistic. Beyond the conceptual debate, discussion focused on the variety of types of clientelistic relations that exist in Africa, with consideration given to the types of particularistic goods involved (including minor individualistic consumption goods, government jobs and contracts, money for schooling and healthcare, and public services provided at the village level, etc.), and the channels through which these relations may operate (including local intermediaries such as traditional chiefs and religious leaders as well as party functionaries and activists). This discussion connected the concept of clientelism back to that of ethnicity, leading the participants to consider the ways in which ethnic ties and divisions both affect, and are affected by, clientelistic relations, and how this in turn shapes political participation.

## **Module 6: Territorial Dimensions: Urban/Rural, Regionalism**

The central theme of this final substantive module was that politics at the local level in Africa are deeply contested. There has been the emergence of new political actors, and the experiences of Senegal, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mozambique were discussed to illustrate the state of local politics in Africa. In some cases traditional leaders have become important political actors. In Burkina Faso, for instance, traditional chiefs are highly involved in the political process, often to the detriment of democracy. Another approach recognized the existence of two main political actors: the central state and local authorities. After more debate, however, participants argued that citizens should be considered political actors, particularly through the way that they use associations and traditional structures to leverage political power. Other political actors that should be considered are those that have serious economic strength.

This module also explored the relationship between decentralization and governance. In theory these two notions are complementary: decentralization permits the involvement of local populations in public affairs and governance is the exercise of political power in the management of public affairs. The actual results of decentralization were of much debate. In the eyes of some participants decentralization was like fiction in that its achievements have been illusory. One example is in Cameroon, where the central government has continued to keep a strong hand on local politics and the government has delegates that are still more powerful than the communal advisers who govern at the local level.

On the other hand, some participants argued that decentralization has brought about a better management of public affairs. Local populations are now more willing to speak up and demand good governance. In some cases local populations have denounced local authorities and protested for better management of public resources. The case of Burkina Faso, in which the mayor of a regional capital was forced to step down due to apparent impropriety, is one good example. The case of Benin was cited as a good example of regional politics in the era of democratic reform. With the installation of democratic processes new actors have appeared on the local political scene. In Benin there is not a region that can be considered as being immune from political competition. This has an effect on the strength of political parties, where the more power at the local level is fragmented the more difficult it becomes for political parties to be institutionalized. Thus, after elections many parties disappear while others remain. This, in the opinion of some, is why we are unable to have a clear interpretation of the dynamics of local elections.

## **Module 7: Conclusion**

In the final module of the workshop, participants expressed their impressions about what they had accomplished in the course of the workshop both individually and as a group. The workshop leaders received useful feedback on their role as instructors, mentors, and discussion facilitators. In general, the final comments of the participants were positive. The common denominator in their feedback was that they regarded the workshop as a unique opportunity to learn from new approaches, present their own research, and receive useful feedback to improve it going forward.