

# Authoritarian State or State Authority in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Alternative Perspective for Social Change in the Absence of Political Change

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In the ever-evolving landscape of global governance, the dynamics of democracy and authoritarianism continue to shape political transitions, yet our conceptual frameworks often lag these transformations. This paper critically examines the prevailing approaches to authoritarianism in sub-Saharan Africa, challenging the conventional view that defines authoritarian states merely as negations of democracy. Through a comparative analysis of four widely recognized democracy indices, the study reveals methodological biases that overlook the nuanced roles of political authority in transitional states. By exploring the intersection of normative and positive analyses, the paper rethinks the teleological assumptions underlying the classification of authoritarian regimes. It proposes an alternative perspective on the relationship between democracy and legitimacy, arguing that this relationship is pivotal in understanding social change in contexts where political alternation is absent. The study aims to provide a more comprehensive framework for assessing political development, one that prioritizes the values and norms critical to structural transformation in Africa. This paper contributes to the debate on power dynamics in autocratic regimes, highlighting how legitimacy acts as a catalyst for democratization. Ultimately, the research seeks to refine our understanding of the mechanisms through which political power operates in sub-Saharan Africa, offering new pathways for evaluating and fostering political change. We hope to contribute to a better assessment of how best to measure the effects and impact of power, while also considering the values and norms that should prevail in assessing structural transformation in Africa and the conditions that should be considered in selecting countries that are considered “politically like-minded”.

*Keywords:* authoritarianism, democracy in Africa, democracy index, political development, political legitimacy, social change, state authority

## Introduction

Contemporary sub-Saharan Africa presents an empirical paradox that defies the dominant theoretical assumptions of comparative political science. While classical transitology postulates a positive correlation between democratization and socio-economic development (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000; Lipset, 1959), several states in the region record exceptional human development performances while maintaining undemocratic or weakly democratic political regimes by international standards. The case of Rwanda is a paradigmatic illustration of this divergence. Since 2000, the country has recorded average annual economic

growth of 7.2%, reduced poverty from 60% to 38% between 2000 and 2017, and achieved universal health coverage of 90% of the population (Republic of Rwanda, 2020; Nyandekwe, Nzayirambaho, & Kakoma, 2020). These achievements place Rwanda as 1st out of 16 among low-income countries (World Justice Project, 2024) and among the best-performing countries in Africa in terms of human development, according to the UNDP index. At the same time, Paul Kagame's regime remains characterized by strict control of political space, limited opposition, and restrictions on press freedom, earning it mediocre scores on international democracy indices (Democracy Index, Global Freedom Status, Varieties of Democracy, Global State of Democracy Indices).

Botswana is another paradox. Often presented as "the longest surviving democracy in Southern Africa, which others often seek to emulate" (Afrobarometer, 2000) and an African democratic exception (the 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) report ranks Botswana fifth in Africa with a high score of 65.8 out of 100), the country operates a dominant party system incorporating traditional consultative mechanisms, *kgotla* (Reiter, 2024), which relativize formal electoral competition. Recent Afrobarometer data confirm Botswana's inclination towards a traditional style of politics, showing moderate public support for democracy and declining electoral engagement. This reflects not only the dynamics of the dominant party system, but also of traditional institutions (Afrobarometer, 2025). Conversely, countries recognized for their "successful" democratic transitions by international standards are posting disappointing socio-economic performances. Mali, long celebrated as a model of West African democracy, failed to translate its political liberalization into substantial improvements in the living conditions of its people, before suffering a series of coups d'état since 2012. Similarly, Benin, another democratic "success story" of the 1990s, is stagnating in terms of human development despite regular elections and political alternation.

This empirical divergence reveals a fundamental theoretical gap in the dominant approaches of Africanist political science. Transitology was developed primarily based on the democratization experiences of Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). However, these presuppositions are not suitable for the contemporary African context. Firstly, transitological models postulate a linear sequence from authoritarianism to liberalization, then democratization, and finally democratic consolidation (Rostow, 1960). This teleological vision ignores the possibility of alternative sustainable equilibria, where non-democratic regimes can generate political legitimacy by means other than competitive election. Instead, African trajectories suggest cyclical or non-linear dynamics, where government performance can be an autonomous source of political stability. Secondly, transitology favors procedural conception of democracy centered on formal mechanisms (free elections, partisan pluralism, civil liberties) to the detriment of the substantive dimensions of governance. This approach neglects the endogenous institutional arrangements that can generate government effectiveness and social legitimacy without going through conventional democratic channels. Thirdly, dominant theoretical models underestimate the capacity for institutional innovation in African societies. Creative hybridization between modern institutions and traditional mechanisms, original forms of political participation, and specific ways of constructing state authority are often interpreted as anomalies, or at the very least as pathological "deviations", rarely as adaptive solutions to local constraints.

Given these observations, our study poses the following question: To what extent can state authority generate sustainable social change (i.e. all lasting transformations that affect the structures of a society—its institutions, power relations, norms and modes of organization (Giddens, 1984; Tilly, 1978; Huntington, 1968)), independently of formal mechanisms compliant with Western standards? The central question implies several analytical sub-questions: What are the alternative sources of political legitimacy that enable non-democratic

regimes to maintain their stability, without necessarily resorting to “illegitimate” violence and coercion? How can non-electoral mechanisms of political accountability generate governmental efficiency? To what extent can hybrid institutional arrangements reconcile social performance and political authority? What contextual factors favor the emergence of effective authoritarianism and sustainable social change?

The study’s central theoretical contribution lies in the analytical distinction between “political regime”, considered, from an African perspective, from the angle of the “authoritarian state”, and “state capacity”, which we examine from the angle of state authority, a legitimate authority, because it is substantial and performative. This conceptual differentiation makes it possible to overcome the frequent confusion between the institutional form of power and its actual capacity for governance. While the political regime refers to the formal mechanisms of access to power (elections, constitution, parties) (Cheeseman, 2015), certainly including aspects of formal legitimization, the capacity of state authority designates the effective ability of political institutions to produce effective public policies, maintain social order, and generate popular support. Such a distinction makes it possible to account for situations where politically non-democratic regimes develop a strong capacity for state authority, generating alternative forms of legitimacy based on performance rather than procedures. Conversely, some formally democratic regimes may suffer from weak state authority, explaining their instability despite regular elections.

The study takes a critical approach to transcending classical transitology by questioning its fundamental normative presuppositions. In contrast to dominant approaches that regard liberal democracy as the natural and desirable outcome of any process of political modernization, we adopt a more open analytical posture, recognizing the theoretical legitimacy of alternative institutional arrangements. This posture does not imply absolute normative relativism, but rather a pragmatic approach focused on the substantive effectiveness of political systems. The assessment focuses on the capacity of institutions to concretely improve people’s living conditions, maintain social stability, and adapt to contemporary challenges (Sen, 1999), irrespective of their conformity to Western democratic standards. Critical overcoming is also based on a “decolonial” approach that recognizes the diversity of historical trajectories of state formation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Mbembe, 2021; Quijano, 2000). European experiences of modern state-building are no longer the universal model of reference, but a particular trajectory among other possible ones.

The methodological originality of our study lies in the questioning of popular methodological approaches and tools, which serve as instruments for assessing social change in Africa, and in the construction of relevant arguments that can inspire the development of indices specific to and adapted to the African context. Moreover, our study adopts a comparative approach that we hope will be innovative, since it integrates the historical trajectories of Western authoritarianism with a view to shedding light on contemporary African dynamics. Through such a historical perspective, we seek to relativize the supposed exceptionalism of successful African authoritarianism, by showing that Europe itself has experienced periods of strong growth and social modernization under non-democratic regimes. The cases of Napoleonic France and the Second Empire, Bismarckian Germany and, more recently, Singapore, offer illuminating points of comparison for understanding the mechanisms by which state authority can generate social change independently of formal democratization. This comparative approach shifts the focus of analysis, showing that high-performance authoritarianism is not specific to Africa, but a recurrent political configuration in world history.

The empirical robustness of the study is based on a systematic triangulation of diversified data sources. Quantitative data are drawn from international institutional databases (World Bank, UNDP, World Justice Project)

for government performance and socio-economic development indicators. The ideas presented in this text benefited from data provided by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (also used in our previous work, Mballa, 2023), as well as Afrobarometer surveys, which provide essential opinion data on citizens' perceptions of governance, satisfaction with public services, institutional trust, and political regime preferences. These data make it possible to measure the subjective legitimacy of regimes over and above their objective performance.

The study is rooted in a post-positivist epistemology (Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Hilary Putnam, W. V. O. Quine) that recognizes the complexity of social phenomena, while maintaining the requirement for empirical rigor. The approach integrates qualitative contextualization and quantitative measurement in a methodologically complementary fashion. In so doing, we believe we are overcoming the sterile opposition between approaches that seek to discover general laws or regularities that apply to many cases (known as nomothetic approaches) and those that seek to understand a particular case in depth (known as idiographic approaches) by developing contextualized generalizations adapted to African specificities.

### **State of the Art and Theoretical Position**

Based on an analysis of the existing literature, we propose below to make a critical reading of transitology as applied to Africa, and to identify the sources of legitimacy that derive from our interpretation of state authority and its exercise. Our analysis will lead us to relativize the dominant paradigms used to evaluate social change in Africa.

#### **A Critical Look at Transitology Applied to Africa**

Before exploring some of the emerging paradigms, it may be useful to take a preliminary look, even if only briefly, at some of the paradigms generally used. Three paradigms are of particular interest to us here: the democratic teleology marked by the linear models of Huntington and Linz; the culturalist bias that has often characterized certain works with Western-centric presuppositions; and the generally forced correlations found in the analysis of discrepancies between democratic indices and development indicators.

Firstly, classical transitology, as it developed from the seminal works of Huntington (1991) on the democratic "third wave" and Linz and Stepan (1996) on democratic transitions and consolidations, rests on a fundamental teleological presupposition: Liberal democracy is the natural and inevitable outcome of any process of political modernization. Such a linear vision postulates an orderly sequence from authoritarianism to liberalization, then democratization, and finally democratic consolidation (Rostow, 1960). Applied to the African context, this paradigm proves particularly inadequate. The African transitions of the 1990s, initiated by post-Cold War democratic conditionalities, did not produce the results expected by the Huntingtonian and or Rostowian models. Unlike the South European and Latin American transitions that had inspired the theoretical model, African trajectories are characterized by remarkable diversity and a lack of linearity. Countries such as Rwanda (ranking high in the following subcategories for 2024: security and rule of law, infrastructure, business environment, sustainable economic management) and Ethiopia have achieved exceptional socio-economic performance while maintaining authoritarian regimes, calling into question the supposed correlation between democratization and development (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024; Mballa, 2023). Democratic teleology also ignores the specificity of African temporalities and trajectories. Whereas European transitions took place within consolidated nation-states with established bureaucratic traditions, post-colonial African states continue to negotiate their internal legitimacy and symbolic boundaries simultaneously. The simultaneous processes of *state-*

*building* and *nation-building* create political dynamics that escape the sequential models of classical transitology (Matshanda, 2022).

Next, we need to deconstruct some Western-centric presuppositions and recognize the relativity of universalism. Thomas Carothers (2002) has masterfully demonstrated the limits of the transitional paradigm. In his article “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, he offers an in-depth critique of the idea that any country moving away from authoritarianism is necessarily in transition to democracy according to a universal schema. Transitology is based on the idea that Western democratic institutions are universally applicable and desirable, irrespective of specific historical and cultural contexts. The one-size-fits-all approach neglects endogenous institutional arrangements that can generate political legitimacy by means other than those dictated by the Western model and its standards, including competitive elections. In Africa, this bias manifests itself in the systematic under- or even devaluation of traditional governance and legitimization mechanisms. Palaver systems, councils of elders, or consensual decision-making mechanisms are seen as “pre-modern residues” destined to disappear with political modernization. This evolutionary vision ignores the capacity of these institutions to adapt and innovate, as well as their potential role in the construction of contextualized political legitimacy. The culturalism of transitology also translates into a lack of understanding of African power logics. The personalization of power, often denounced as pathological, can be a rational strategy for aggregating loyalties in societies where primary identities remain fragmented (Bayart, 1989; Médard, 1991). Similarly, political clientelism, systematically criticized, can represent an effective mechanism for redistribution and social integration in contexts of weak formal state capacity (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

Finally, an empirical analysis has revealed that the correlations between democratisation scores and human development indicators in sub-Saharan Africa are surprisingly weak (Fambeu, 2021; Diori & NaRanong, 2023). For example, countries such as Mali and Benin, which have long been celebrated as democratic “success stories”, have a disappointing socio-economic performance (Wing, 2024; Bleck & Michelitch, 2018). In contrast, authoritarian regimes such as those in Rwanda and Ethiopia, to some extent are achieving significant progress in reducing poverty, improving access to social services and promoting economic growth (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). A such divergence suggests that standard democratic indices (Democracy Index by Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU); Global Freedom Status by Freedom House; Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) by V-Dem Institute; Global State of Democracy Indices, by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance- IDEA) imperfectly capture the governance dynamics truly relevant to African populations. As shown in Table 1 below, these indices focus on procedural aspects (free elections, partisan pluralism, civil liberties) to the detriment of the substantive dimensions of governance (effectiveness of public policies, distributive equity, social stability) (see Table 1, in 2.3).

The example of Botswana perfectly illustrates this distortion. Ranked among Africa’s most stable democracies by international indices (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024; Afrobarometer, 2025), the country has been dominated since independence by a single party, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), which governs through traditional consultative mechanisms (*kgotla*) integrated into the modern institutional system (Kiyaga-Mulindwa, 2009). Its exceptional performance in terms of governance and development owes more to this creative institutional hybridization than to formal compliance with Western democratic procedures, leading us to consider other perspectives.

To this end, the analyses of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, Peter Evans or Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard, among others, force us to reconsider our view of authoritarianism (Cheeseman & Desrosiers, 2023).

Faced with the limitations of traditional transitology, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010), for example, developed the concept of “competitive authoritarianism” to explain the persistence of hybrid regimes that hold regular elections without complying with liberal democratic norms. Their work has been extended by a series of recent analyses highlighting the rise of electoral autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), the consolidation of sustainable hybrid regimes (Diamond, 2020), and strategies of autocratic resilience that enable authoritarian leaders to adapt to international and domestic pressures. More recently, other research has highlighted trajectories of democratic regression and mechanisms of institutional circumvention in states claiming to be multiparty (Maerz et al., 2020; Tomini, Gibril, & Bochev, 2023).

Such a conceptual innovation recognizes that many post-transition regimes are neither consolidated democracies nor classical dictatorships but occupy a stable in-between space. Competitive authoritarianism is characterized by the existence of formal democratic institutions coexisting with informal authoritarian practices. Elections are held on a regular basis, but the electoral playing field is skewed in favor of the ruling party through the fabrication of a dummy opposition playing the game of pluralism, with the complicity of the ruling party, the official liberalization of the public sphere belied by informal mechanisms of the political reprisal type (assassinations and political imprisonment, revenge justice, etc.), control of the media, partisan use of public resources, and the selective restriction of opposition freedoms. Unlike classic dictatorships, these regimes tolerate a legal opposition and a partially free press, creating limited but real spaces for dissent. This paradigm is particularly relevant to the analysis of contemporary African political trajectories. Uganda, Ethiopia (before 2018), and Rwanda, among others, illustrate the configuration where electoral competition formally exists but remains controlled by subtle authoritarian mechanisms. Levitsky and Way’s innovation lies in the recognition that these arrangements can be durably stable and legitimate in the eyes of the population, particularly when they deliver satisfactory governmental performance.

Peter Evans (1995) theorized the concept of “embedded autonomy” to explain the success of Asian developmental states, arguing that effective state action requires bureaucracies that maintain both their autonomy from special interests and their integration into concrete social ties. This concept has been revisited and expanded by recent researchers, notably Wylde (2024), who examines how state capacity and autonomy interact in 21st-century industrial policy; Pellerin (2019), who shows that, despite the ambitions of the developmental state, its relations with business associations remain characterized by a “dis-embedded” autonomy that limits real cooperation between the state and the private sector; and various Africanists or African researchers specializing in development who have applied this framework to analyze emerging developmental states in such countries as Ethiopia (Pellerin, 2019), and the governments of the pink tide in Latin America (Clark & Rosales, 2022). The concept combines the bureaucratic independence needed to formulate coherent policies with the social embeddedness required for their effective implementation. The developmental state (Leftwich, 2008) possesses a strong technocratic capacity, while maintaining structured links with social and economic players. This approach is attracting renewed interest in the analysis of contemporary African trajectories. Countries such as Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Ghana are experimenting with forms of developmental state adapted to African constraints. The Rwandan model combines strong political leadership, a meritocratic bureaucracy and endogenous participatory mechanisms (Umuganda, community development councils) to mobilize social resources for development. The African implementation of the concept of the developmental state necessarily incorporates the dimension of postcolonial legitimacy (Mkandawire, 2001), in that it relies on the ability of leaders to rebuild

political authority within historical trajectories marked by colonial domination (Fukuyama, 2022). Unlike Asian states, which have been able to draw on millennia-old state traditions, African states must simultaneously strengthen their administrative capacities and political legitimacy. This dual constraint explains the importance attached to tangible social performance as a source of alternative political legitimacy (Mballa, 2023; Kelsall et al., 2022).

As for the contributions of Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard (2010), they allow us to consider the concept of “hybrid governance” to move beyond the binary opposition between the modern state and traditional authorities in Africa. Their approach recognizes that contemporary African governance is the result of complex negotiations between multiple actors and institutional logics, creating original arrangements that correspond neither to the classic Weberian model nor to pre-colonial forms. Recent research has further developed this perspective by demonstrating that hybrid governance pragmatically merges formal and informal systems to respond to local contexts and power dynamics (Justin & Verkoren, 2021), creating solutions tailored to the continent’s unique challenges by integrating the legitimacy of indigenous institutions with the bureaucratic efficiency of modern systems (Sylvester & Sikhwari, 2024).

Hybrid governance is characterized by the coexistence and interaction of multiple normative systems. State, traditional, religious and community authorities are constantly negotiating their spheres of competence and modes of cooperation. Rather than being a sign of weakness, such normative plurality can generate original forms of legitimacy and governmental efficiency. Hagmann and Péclard’s approach transcends the dichotomous view of modernity versus tradition, revealing the creative dynamics of institutional hybridization. Traditional mechanisms do not survive as “residues” of the past but are transformed and adapted to meet contemporary challenges. The capacity for endogenous institutional innovation is both a major resource for building legitimate and effective forms of governance adapted to specific African contexts, and an important element underpinning the legitimacy of political power in the African context in general.

### **State Authority and Sources of Legitimacy**

Before exploring alternative sources of legitimacy in this context, our analysis requires a brief detour into Weberian ideal types. We take the liberty of suggesting, if not a reconceptualization, at least a contextualized application. Following certain critics of the Weberian approach (including Kökerer, 2024; Netelenbos, 2021), the classic typology of three types of legitimate domination—traditional, charismatic and rational-legal—requires substantial adaptation to understand contemporary African political realities (Weber, 1922/1978). Post-colonial African states present hybrid configurations that elude Weber’s pure categories, revealing the need for a more nuanced, contextualized approach. Traditional domination in Africa is not limited to fossilized pre-colonial structures but is dynamically articulated with modern institutions. Far from being relics of the past, traditional chiefdoms are contemporary political actors who negotiate their authority with the central state. Institutional coexistence creates spaces of multiple legitimacy, where citizens navigate between different normative frames of reference, depending on the context and the issues at stake. We believe that Weber’s traditional legitimacy needs to be reinvented to take greater creative account of customary authorities.

Charisma, for its part, transcends the figure of the exceptional leader to become institutionalized in routinized political practices. “Functional charisma” manifests itself through political rituals (investiture ceremonies, formal speeches, national commemorations), national symbols, and public performances that confer a special aura on those in power, irrespective of their intrinsic personal qualities (Márquez, 2024; Kremers, 2024).

Institutionalized charismatic legitimacy must therefore place a premium on transformational leadership and national vision.

Finally, rational-legal domination coexists with neo-patrimonial logics (Médard, 1982; Erdmann & Engel, 2007) that redefine the relationship between formal rules and informal practices. Such hybridization is neither necessarily a pathology nor anomaly of the political system but may represent a pragmatic adaptation to local constraints. An analysis more focused on rational performative legitimacy enables us to better account for, and adequately measure, the effectiveness of public policies by considering tangible results. Extending the Weberian concept of rational legitimacy to a performative dimension enables us to grasp legitimization mechanisms specific to African contexts.

Rational-performative legitimacy is based on the proven ability of the state to produce concrete results in terms of socio-economic development, independently of strict compliance with formal democratic procedures. It is based on substantive rather than procedural rationality, where government effectiveness takes precedence over compliance with “Western style” democratic norms. Citizens evaluate state performance through tangible indicators: improved infrastructure, access to basic services, job creation, maintenance of social peace. We are not far from A. Sen’s perspective in terms of Development as Freedom (Sen, 1999).

The performative logic partly explains the persistence of certain authoritarian regimes enjoying relative popular support, as well as the fragility of some formal democracies unable to produce satisfactory results. The social dimension of performance encompasses the state’s ability to maintain national cohesion, manage ethnic and religious diversity, and ensure a minimum redistribution of resources. Social performance thus considered becomes particularly crucial in societies marked by high levels of inequality and latent community tensions.

Drawing on Weber’s work, we can consider a set of mechanisms for synthesizing tradition and modernity; institutional hybridization is in fact a dynamic process of compromise between traditional structures and modern institutions, generating original configurations of governance. These mechanisms are not simply a matter of syncretism, but of institutional engineering that produces new forms of political organization. Traditional parliaments illustrate this hybridization, combining customary representation and modern deliberation procedures. These institutions parallel or complement national assemblies, allowing the expression of multiple legitimacies and facilitating articulation between different levels of governance. Conflict resolution mechanisms are another example of successful hybridization, where modern courts and traditional jurisdictions coexist and complement each other. Such legal plurality, far from generating mere confusion, can offer citizens diversified and culturally appropriate remedies. Land management also reveals complex hybridization processes where customary rights and modern legislation interpenetrate, creating *sui generis* property regimes that respond to local realities while fitting into formal legal frameworks (King et al., 2025; Petrone, 2025; Rosser, Ilgenstein, & Sager, 2022). The legal pluralism approach enables us to understand how the multiplicity of rights present within a single social field constitutes an empirical reality rather than a mere theoretical anomaly.

Beyond the Weberian model, performance is an important dimension to introduce into the sources of legitimacy. Three aspects are important for our analysis: the legitimacy of outputs, the legitimacy of accountability mechanisms, and the impact of these two aspects on institutional trust. Building on Scharpf’s (1999) classic distinction between input legitimacy (participation) and output legitimacy (performance), scholars such as Bekkers & Edwards (2007), Schmidt (2013) and Wiesner & Harfst (2019; 2022) have expanded this framework by introducing *throughput* legitimacy, which focuses on the efficacy, transparency, and quality of governance processes. This tripartite distinction is particularly relevant for analyzing the contemporary African



state (Mballa, 2023). In many African countries, the relative weakness of legitimacy through inputs—due to failing electoral systems, limited representation, or fragile democratic institutions—is compensated for by an increased study of legitimacy through outputs. Such compensation is not necessarily a second-best solution but may reflect different societal priorities where government efficiency takes precedence over formal political participation. The legitimacy of outputs in Africa hinges on several specific dimensions: the ability to maintain political stability in an often-turbulent regional environment, the improvement of living conditions for populations, and the preservation of national unity and cohesion in the face of centrifugal challenges. These legitimizing outputs do not necessarily correspond to international standards of good governance but do meet the priority expectations of local populations. Performance is assessed according to endogenous criteria that consider constraints specific to African contexts: colonial legacies, security challenges, demographic pressures, economic vulnerabilities. This contextualization of performance evaluation enables us to move beyond universalist normative approaches and develop more nuanced analytical grids.

Similarly, the concept of “responsiveness without accountability” (Gruzd & Turianskyi, 2015; Bratton, 2006; 2007) captures an African political reality where rulers remain sensitive to popular expectations without being formally accountable through conventional institutional mechanisms. Such a paradoxical configuration reveals the existence of informal channels of political accountability that escape conventional analysis (Bratton, 2007). Responsiveness is linked to relevance and reflects the effectiveness of the state. It is also closely related to the concept of state effectiveness, one of the prisms of political legitimacy. According to Michael Mann, state effectiveness corresponds to its ability to penetrate society and logistically implement (transport, communication, public education, information gathering systems) political decisions throughout its territory (Mann, 1987, cited by S. Tarrow, 2018). In other words, it is the ability of leaders to anticipate and respond to social priorities, even in the absence of formal accountability mechanisms.

Political responsiveness can result from strategic calculations of political survival, diffuse social pressures, or a particular governmental ethos that values proximity to the governed. Alternative mechanisms of accountability include clientelist networks which, despite their potential excesses, create reciprocal links between leaders and the governed. These networks function as informal systems of representation in which local “big men” (informal leaders who wield considerable influence at community level, without necessarily holding official positions in the state apparatus) act as intermediaries between the state and grassroots communities (Strong, 2022). The legitimacy of these “big men” often derives from their ability to “trickle down” benefits from the state to local populations, thus compensating for the failings of formal institutions.

Social mobilization, however sporadic, is another mechanism for political accountability. Demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of collective protest exert constant pressure on rulers, creating a form of popular surveillance that partially compensates for the failings of formal institutions of control. Social media and new communication technologies are also transforming the modalities of political accountability, enabling information to circulate more rapidly and public opinion to mobilize more effectively. These digital tools create new spaces for political debate and citizen control that bypass the limitations of traditional media.

These two aspects of state performance (output legitimacy and alternative mechanisms of political accountability) play a crucial role in building social capital and institutional trust, two fundamental elements of political legitimacy. Institutional trust in Africa is built progressively through the accumulation of positive experiences of interaction with public institutions, rather than through *a priori* adherence to abstract principles of government. Institutional social capital develops when citizens see that public institutions are capable of

producing collective goods and solving concrete problems. The accumulation of institutional “credit” makes it easier for governments to navigate through crises and maintain their legitimacy even in times of economic or political difficulty (Farooqi, 2025; Besley & Dray, 2024). Trust is built through the predictability of state action and the consistency between political promises and concrete achievements. Citizens develop expectations calibrated to past experience and evaluate government performance according to these historical references rather than abstract ideals. Institutional trust also hinges on the perception of fairness in the distribution of public resources and access to services. State performance perceived as fair, even if modest in absolute terms, may generate more trust than high but unevenly distributed performance. Interpersonal trust networks interact with institutional trust in complex ways. Personal relationships can either compensate for institutional failings, or on the contrary reinforce trust in institutions when they rely on pre-existing social networks to deliver their services. Often neglected in the evaluation of politics in the African context, this dimension calls for a fresh look at conventional evaluation paradigms.

### Rethinking the Evaluation of Social Change in Africa

By examining democracy indices applied to Africa, we are led to reconsider perceptions of state authority in Africa, given the confusion often made between authoritarian political regimes and the authority of a political regime.

From the first angle, dominant democratic indices such as the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) Democracy Index; Freedom House’s Global Freedom Status; the V-Dem Institute’s Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem); and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance’s (IDEA) Global State of Democracy Indices suffer from a fundamental procedural bias in their assessment of African political systems (Osterberg-Kaufmann & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2025; Wolff, 2023). Their approaches generally and systematically privilege formal mechanisms—multi-party elections, alternation of power, political pluralism—to the detriment of a more nuanced analysis of effective governance. As Bratton (2007) points out, the focus on democratic “inputs” (see Table 1 below) leads to the valorization of countries that organize regular elections, even when these processes do not translate into tangible improvements in citizens’ living conditions.

Table 1

#### *Comparative Framework of Democracy Assessment Criteria Across Major Indices*

Democracy Index (EIU)	Freedom in the World (Freedom House)	Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)	Global State of Democracy Indices (IDEA)
Electoral process and pluralism	Electoral process	Liberal Democracy Index	Checks on government
Civil liberties	Political pluralism and participation	Electoral Democracy Index	Fundamental rights
Functioning of government	Functioning of government	Deliberative Component Index	Representative government
Political participation	<i>(Covered under pluralism and participation)</i>	Participatory Component Index	Participatory engagement
Political culture	<i>(No direct equivalent)</i>	<i>(No direct equivalent)</i>	Impartial administration

Source: Author.

The overemphasis on formal mechanisms is particularly problematic in the African context, where the adoption of formal democratic structures can mask profound failings in governance. The example of Zimbabwe illustrates this limitation perfectly: Despite the organization of regular elections, the country has seen a progressive deterioration in its human development and economic governance indicators (Dendere & Tendi, 2025;

Levitsky & Way, 2010). Traditional democratic indices thus struggle to capture the gap between formal institutions and their actual functioning.

What's more, a second major limitation of the dominant evaluative paradigms is their methodological Eurocentrism. These indices are based on Western conceptions of democracy that do not take sufficient account of the historical, cultural, and institutional specificities of post-colonial African societies (Timbuktu Institute, 2024). As Mengisteab (2019) and Gyimah-Boadi (2015) observe, the application of European reading grids to African contexts generates significant distortions in the assessment of government performance. A clear maladjustment can be observed in the insufficient consideration of traditional governance systems and their interaction with modern institutions. Western democratic indices tend to ignore the mechanisms of political legitimization rooted in local traditions, creating a gap between evaluation criteria and African socio-political realities. This Eurocentric approach leads to a systematic underestimation of alternative forms of governance that may prove more effective in certain African contexts.

Dominant democratic indices pay insufficient attention to the concrete performance of governments in terms of economic development, public service provision, and poverty reduction. Such neglect of government outputs is a major weakness in assessing the quality of African governance (Croissant & Pelke, 2022). As Cassani (2019) analysis shows, some African countries classified as undemocratic by traditional indices nonetheless perform remarkably well in terms of human development. The example of post-genocide Rwanda, which is discussed in the following section of the text, illustrates the problem: Despite relatively low democratic scores according to the criteria of indices including Freedom House, the country has made substantial progress in poverty reduction, access to health and education services, and national reconciliation (Ngcayisa, 2022; Pellegatta, 2020). Undervaluing government performance leads to a partial view of the quality of governance that fails to capture the real effectiveness of political institutions.

Empirical studies reveal often weak correlations between democratic index scores and human development indicators in Africa. Weak correlations suggest that traditional democratic evaluation criteria are not reliable predictors of social and economic well-being (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). Some analysts (Basedeau, 2023) show that some African countries with high democratic scores can present mediocre performances in economic growth and social development. The absence or inadequacy of correlation calls into question the relevance of democratic indices as tools for assessing African governance. It suggests the need to develop alternative approaches that better integrate the multiple dimensions of government performance and that are better adapted to specific African contexts. It also highlights the need for contributions from the Global South in the development of appropriate and contextualized indices, despite the often-challenging research environment.

From the second angle, that of the effectiveness of the exercise of state authority, we favour an alternative approach that relies on the evaluation of the concrete results of government action, in place of the formal mechanisms of democracy alone (Virani & Zeger, 2023). We thus echo Fukuyama (2013) in his analysis of the quality of the state, in which he proposes to measure political legitimacy through the ability of governments to meet the basic needs of their citizens (Fukuyama, Dann, & Magaloni, 2025). In the African context, such an approach enables us to better grasp the dynamics of legitimization that do not necessarily pass through formal democratic channels. Output-focused evaluation involves considering indicators such as improved living conditions, public service provision, security, and inclusive economic growth as primary criteria of government performance (Matlala, 2025). Our approach recognizes that political legitimacy can emanate from the effective capacity of governments to positively transform the lives of their citizens, irrespective of the formal modalities

of accession to power. From this point of view, a relevant assessment of African governance requires an institutional contextualization that considers the historical, cultural, and socio-economic specificities of each country. North (1990) is not far off the mark, analyzing historical institutionalism and recognizing that effective political institutions must be rooted in local realities if they are to be legitimate and sustainable. Contextualization involves considering colonial legacies, traditional social structures, ethnic and religious dynamics, as well as economic constraints specific to each African country (Bolt, Green, & Sandell, 2022; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2020). Such an approach makes it possible to develop evaluation criteria that respect the diversity of African political trajectories and recognize the validity of alternative governance models adapted to local contexts. The result is an assessment of governance that integrates a dimension of relative effectiveness, comparing the performance of governments with their available resources. Such an approach, developed by Brautigam (2000) or Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock (2017) in their analysis of the African developmental state, enables a better assessment of government efforts in contexts of limited resources. Measuring relative effectiveness involves considering budgetary constraints, administrative capacities, available human resources, as well as the structural challenges faced by African governments. Such a posture helps to value government performance which, while modest in absolute terms, represents significant achievements given the means available.

In the same vein, the posture thus considered invites the analyst to impose a longitudinal type of assessment, in that it examines trends in social and economic change over the medium and long term. We return to the works of A. Sen cited above, regarding the analogy between development and freedom, which enables us to better grasp the dynamics of social transformation that are not always visible in one-off cross-sectional assessments. Longitudinal evaluation involves tracking the evolution of indicators of human development, economic governance, social cohesion, and political stability over extended periods. This enables us to distinguish between cyclical fluctuations and structural trends, and to better appreciate the long-term efforts of African governments to build effective, legitimate states. In so doing, we recognize that building effective political institutions is a long-term process that can only be properly assessed from a broad time perspective. We are thus inclined to value the gradual progress and structural reforms that contribute to the progressive improvement of African governance. With this in mind, it is pertinent to examine how, in other historical contexts, the consolidation of state authority may have preceded, or even developed independently of, the establishment of democracy, along the lines of the Western experience.

### **Historical Trajectories of Governance and State Authority in the Absence of Political Alternation**

While France provides a good historical case study to illustrate the possibilities of state performance in a non-democratic framework, the cases of Singapore and Rwanda, already mentioned, remain relevant to analyze for the lessons that can be drawn from them.

#### **France: Administrative State and Authoritarian Modernization**

The Napoleonic State, which provides an exemplary illustration of how political authority can draw its legitimacy from institutional performance, and the Second Empire, a remarkable period of economic, social, financial, and urban modernization for France, deserve to be examined for their founding and innovative aspects.

First: The Napoleonic State (1799-1815): With its structural and structuring reforms, it is a textbook case of authoritarian modernization whose transformative effects endure to this day (Gill, 2025). The Civil Code, promulgated on March 21, 1804, represents one of the most enduring institutional innovations of the Napoleonic era. This unified legal codification replaces the patchwork of local customs inherited from the Ancien Régime and establishes a coherent legal system that guarantees equality before the law, protection of private property, and freedom of contract (Small, 2022). Institutional innovation extended to the education system with the creation of the Imperial University in 1808, which established a meritocratic system of access to public office. Such a (revolutionary) reform enabled social mobility based on merit rather than birth, creating a new relationship between the State and civil society (Markham, n.d.). Prefectoral administration was another major innovation, unifying territorial administration and ensuring the uniform application of public policies throughout the national territory. What's more, the legitimacy of the Napoleonic state rested largely on concrete, measurable social achievements that tangibly improved citizens' living conditions. Legal equality, enshrined in the Civil Code, definitively abolished the privileges of the Ancien Régime and established uniform treatment of all citizens before the law. Formal equality was accompanied by real equality of access to public careers, thanks to the meritocratic system (Godechot, 1970). Infrastructure investment was another pillar of Napoleon's performance. The construction of roads, canals, and bridges facilitated trade and national integration. The development of the road network, including the construction of strategic Alpine routes, considerably improved internal and external communications (Branda, n.d.; Bergeron, 1972). These concrete achievements demonstrate the State's ability to positively transform the daily lives of its citizens. Social mobility, made possible by the meritocratic system, was perhaps the most revolutionary social innovation of the era (Bell, 2020; Bergeron, 1972). The creation of the Legion of Honor in 1802 institutionalized recognition of personal merit, regardless of social origin. This was a far cry from the relative democratization of social excellence, which created a new type of political legitimacy based on the State's ability to reward talent and effort (Huguenaud, 2002).

In other words, Napoleon's model already offered the prospect of legitimacy through exceptional governmental efficiency, manifested in the massive popular support he received from the various French social classes. The plebiscites held in 1851, 1852, and 1870 revealed remarkably high approval rates, testifying to popular support based on tangible results rather than democratic procedures (Yudin, 2025). In other words, it's a question of the state's ability to respond to the concrete aspirations of different social groups. The bourgeoisie appreciates legal stability and the protection of property; peasants support the consolidation of revolutionary gains and the improvement of rural infrastructures; the urban working classes benefit from major public works that create jobs (Charles, Daudin, & Marzagalli, 2022). The consular, then imperial, dimension of the regime also enabled a direct link to be maintained between power and the nation, bypassing traditional parliamentary mechanisms. Such a direct relationship, fueled by propaganda and military successes, created an unprecedented type of political legitimacy that combined personal charisma with administrative efficiency (Bell, 2020).

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Napoleonic state is the durability of its institutional innovations, which survive regime change to form the backbone of the modern French state. This durability testifies not only to the non-subjective nature of power management, despite its authoritarian character, but also to the fit between Napoleonic reforms and the structural needs of post-revolutionary French society (Eymeri-Douzans, 2024). The Civil Code remains the foundation of contemporary French civil law, having also influenced many legal systems around the world. This legal codification transcends political divisions and constitutes a lasting institutional heritage. The prefectoral administration has also survived all changes of regime, demonstrating its effectiveness

as an instrument of territorial governance. The hierarchical, centralized structure put in place by Napoleon met the requirements of a modern state, which had to ensure the uniform application of its policies throughout the national territory (Grab, 2003; Broers, 2005).

Second: Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852-1870): This second case is also remarkable in terms of authoritarian modernization, where political legitimacy derives primarily from economic performance and infrastructural development. It corresponds to a period of massive transformation based on a coherent vision of economic development as a source of political legitimacy.

On the economic front, Napoleon III prioritized economic development, which translated into remarkable performance and legitimized imperial authoritarianism among the various social classes (Anceau & Branda, 2024; Price, 1997). French industrial growth accelerated considerably under the Second Empire. Iron production rose from 406,000 tonnes in 1850 to 1,178,000 tonnes in 1869, while coal mining increased from 4.4 million tonnes to 13.3 million tonnes over the same period (Millward, 2005). Industrialization was accompanied by a marked improvement in the standard of living of the working classes, particularly evident in the rise in consumption of manufactured goods and the improvement of working-class housing. Free trade, initiated by the Franco-British trade treaty of 1860, modernized France's production base by exposing it to international competition. It was a bold policy, pursued against traditional protectionist opposition, and demonstrated the imperial regime's ability to impose beneficial long-term structural reforms (Nye, 2007).

On the social front, the Second Empire developed innovative policies that anticipated contemporary concerns for social protection. The law of May 25, 1864, recognized the right to strike, marking a significant change in labor relations. This recognition was accompanied by encouragement for the development of mutual aid societies, which prefigured modern social protection systems (Aubrun, 2008). The creation of pension funds for civil servants and certain categories of workers illustrates an early social concern. The institution of civil pensions in 1853 and the gradual extension of these protection mechanisms testify to a modern conception of the State's social role.

From the point of view of political decision-making processes, Napoleon III's regime developed an original model of "consultative authoritarianism", combining strong personal power with mechanisms for controlled consultation of public opinion. Regular plebiscites (1851, 1852, 1870) periodically legitimized imperial authority without recourse to conventional parliamentary mechanisms (Anceau, 2008). The Corps législatif, although deprived of legislative initiative, retained a consultative role that allowed for the controlled expression of political opinions. It is a semi-representative body that maintains a link between imperial authority and local elites, without calling into question the pre-eminence of executive power (Girard, 1986). Administrative inquiries and imperial tours of the provinces were other channels for consulting public opinion. These informal mechanisms enabled the emperor to maintain direct contact with the population without going through traditional parliamentary channels (Price, 1997).

The French Napoleonic and imperial experiences hold several lessons for contemporary African authoritarianism, including three: the primacy of substance over form; an active rather than passive role for the state; and a concern for the long term. First, it is demonstrated that political legitimacy can derive from governmental efficiency rather than from formal democratic procedures alone. Such a lesson is particularly relevant to contemporary Africa, where many countries give priority to democratic forms without managing to substantially improve the living conditions of their populations. The priority given to concrete results—improved

infrastructure, economic development, measurable social progress—provides an alternative source of legitimacy to electoral mechanisms. The approach here is to reconcile strong political authority with popular legitimacy, particularly in contexts where formal democratic institutions struggle to take root (Goodfellow, 2020). The French example also suggests that popular consultation can take alternative forms to classic competitive elections. Napoleonic plebiscites, while imperfect by contemporary democratic standards, nonetheless enable a direct dialogue between political authority and the population.

Secondly, the articulation between economic modernity and strong political authority reflected in economic transformation reveals a model of the developing and transforming state. This development model is particularly well-suited to contemporary African challenges. The Napoleonic State and the Second Empire demonstrate that strong political authority can be a decisive asset for economic and social modernization. The ability to impose structural reforms, even in the face of corporatist resistance, is crucial to breaking down the institutional and social blockages that impede development (De Waal, 2021; Evans, 1995). This lesson is even more pertinent as many African countries face development challenges that require profound transformations of economic and social structures. The French example suggests that political authority can legitimately rely on its transformative capacity rather than solely on the mechanisms of political representation (Scharpf, 2009), which are mimetic in most cases, and therefore hardly endogenous.

Finally, the institutional continuity and durability of Napoleonic institutional innovations illustrate the importance of the quality of the “instituted” in the construction of long-term political legitimacy. The survival of institutions such as the prefecture, the civil code, etc., testifies to the ability to create institutions that transcend political cleavages and stand the test of time. Such institutional continuity suggests that authoritarian legitimacy can be transformed into democratic legitimacy when the institutions created prove durable and effective. The gradual transition from the Second Empire to the Republic, facilitated by the solidity of inherited administrative institutions, illustrates the possibility of gradual transformation of political regimes (Fukuyama, 2014). For contemporary Africa, this lesson implies the importance of prioritizing the construction of effective, lasting institutions over the formal adoption of unassimilated democratic mechanisms. Institutional quality can form a bridge between developmental authoritarianism and progressive democratization (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997), as the Singapore model tends to confirm.

### **Singapore: Developmental Authoritarianism and Exceptional Performance**

The example of Singapore is the second illustrative historical experience, which (re)teaches us how to combine technocratic governance and legitimacy mechanisms without competitive democracy. During the Lee Kuan Yew era (1965-1990), Singapore’s particular form of governance became developmental authoritarianism. From independence in 1965, Lee established a unique political system that finely balanced authoritarianism with democracy and state capitalism with the free market. His innovative approach challenged traditional Western paradigms of democratic governance.

At least four factors justify Singapore’s track record: a dominant party guaranteeing stability; an administrative meritocracy; a high-performance economy and the universalist vocation of its social policies. The People’s Action Party (PAP) has established a dominant party system that guarantees policy continuity over several decades. Unlike traditional dictatorships, this system maintains regular elections while ensuring stable political hegemony (Barr, 2013; 2016). Institutional stability enables the long-term planning essential for rapid economic development. Political continuity has facilitated the implementation of major structural reforms

without the interruptions typical of democratic alternations (Barr, 2013). Stability has also been combined with the embodiment of meritocratic technocracy. Singapore's civil service, by emphasizing meritocracy and political stability over democratic plurality, enabled the state to build a national consensus around the state-led economic development project. Such an approach has fostered the social cohesion and collective mobilization necessary for the success of Singapore's development model. The recruitment system based on academic excellence and performance in standardized examinations creates a highly qualified administrative elite. The high salaries of civil servants, initially controversial, have effectively reduced corruption to exceptionally low levels for the region. Attractive remuneration policies attract the best talent to public service, reinforcing the quality of governance. Ongoing training and job rotation maintain a high level of administrative competence. From an economic point of view, Singapore's economic transformation is one of the 20th century's most spectacular development "miracles", to use a popular media expression. In less than three decades, Singapore has transformed itself from a colonial warehouse into an advanced service economy and global financial centre. Per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product) increased more than fortyfold between 1965 and 1990 (World Economic Forum, 2023). The city-state ranks second in the world competitiveness rankings for 2025 according to the International Institute for Management Development (IMD). This performance is based on strategic state intervention in the economy. The Singaporean state has developed a unique ability to identify growth sectors and direct investment accordingly. The creation of special economic zones, the attraction of foreign direct investment, and the development of high value-added industries illustrate a proactive approach (Cheang & Choy, 2021). As far as social policies are concerned, contrary to stereotypes of authoritarianism, Singapore has developed a remarkably effective system of universal social protection. The public housing program (HDB) guarantees access to home ownership for over 80% of the population. The universal, meritocratic education system ensures equality of opportunity regardless of social background. Massive investment in technical and higher education has created a highly skilled workforce adapted to the needs of the modern economy. The universal healthcare system, based on a mixed public-private model, achieves some of the best public health indicators in the world (Naqvi, 2024).

How has technocratic governance adapted to a context where competitive democracy is absent? The systematization of consultative mechanisms, administrative transparency, a certain international standing and political realism are probably the keys to the model's success. Although not democratic in the Western sense, the Singaporean system has developed sophisticated mechanisms for popular consultation. Institutionalized "feedback loops" include regular surveys, public forums, and sectoral consultations that keep the government in tune with citizens' concerns (Forward Singapore, Ministry of National Development, 2023). Periodic "national dialogues", such as the recent "Forward Singapore" process, illustrate a consultative approach, involving large-scale exercises to gather public opinion on major policy directions, creating a sense of participation without any real transfer of decision-making power (Ministry of National Development, 2023). Singapore, on the other hand, is a developmental state renowned for its efficient management of healthcare costs, despite the absence of political freedom (Naqvi, 2024). The apparent contradiction illustrates the uniqueness of the Singaporean model: high administrative transparency coexisting with political restrictions. Although considered a failing or *Flawed Democracy* in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (EIU, for 2023) or partially free in Freedom House's Global Freedom Status (for 2024-2025), Singapore has good governance indicators (control of corruption, government efficiency, rule of law). Regular publication of detailed statistics, evaluation of ministerial performance and parliamentary accountability maintain a form of public accountability without real political competition.



Despite this rule-of-law deficit, the Singapore model has an international aura that serves its domestic legitimacy. International rankings (economic competitiveness, quality of life, governance) legitimize the system in the eyes of the local population. The external validation of the model partially compensates for the absence of traditional democratic legitimacy (World Bank, 2024b; Rodan, 2006). Singapore's regional influence and role as mediator in Asian conflicts reinforce national prestige and civic pride. Its diplomatic successes are skilfully used, objectively or pragmatically, to justify domestic political choices; the model is characterized by its focus on results rather than processes, efficiency rather than representativeness. Continuous policy adaptation based on impact assessments and empirical data characterizes the governance model in place. Reforms are implemented rapidly, without the bottlenecks typical of pluralist democratic systems.

What can African countries learn from Singapore's experience, whether in terms of governance, political, economy or political legitimacy more generally? First, in the absence of political representativeness, governance is only viable if it gives pride of place to technical expertise. For African states facing urgent development challenges, such an approach offers an alternative to democratic dysfunction. The emphasis on meritocracy and training in Singapore's public bureaucracy could inspire African administrative reforms (Quah, 2018). The creation of a meritocratic civil service, protected from partisan political interference, is a prerequisite for an effective developmental state. Excellence scholarship programs, executive training abroad, and international university partnerships can rapidly improve the quality of public administration. Another lesson: selective state intervention in an economy renowned for its freedom and keen to avoid the extremes of liberal *laissez-faire* and centralized planning. Singapore's strategies for economic diversification, industrial upgrading, and attracting foreign investment can be directly transposed to African contexts. The creation of special economic zones, investment in infrastructure, and the development of human capital are common priorities. Finally, Singapore's experience proves that performance-based legitimacy can compensate for the absence of electoral democratic legitimacy. For African regimes seeking stability, this approach offers an alternative path to political consolidation. Measurable improvements in living conditions, poverty reduction, and inclusive economic growth can generate lasting popular support. Non-electoral consultation mechanisms, citizen satisfaction surveys, and participatory fora can maintain a link between rulers and ruled without the divisions of a multi-party system. This approach avoids the ethnic and regional conflicts often exacerbated by electoral competition in Africa. The institutionalization of public policy evaluation, based on objective performance indicators, can create a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. A technocratic approach, focused on results rather than processes, corresponds to Africa's developmental urgencies. Nowhere is this focus on results over process more evident than in Rwanda, a model defined by state strengthening and top-down development.

### **Dictating Development and Strengthening the State: Post-genocide Rwanda**

The Rwandan experience is one of the few models of resilience in Africa and the world! The country did not simply play catch-up to return to the pre-genocide situation but used the trauma of the genocide to innovate and lead. Since 1994, the country's legitimization processes have been based on reconstruction and reconciliation. Starting with the genocide that claimed almost a million victims in a hundred days, destroying not only state structures but also the fundamental social fabric (Straus, 2006), this destruction paradoxically created a unique opportunity for complete institutional reconstruction, freed from the constraints of the past. The post-genocide refounding process is akin to what Bruce Ackerman conceptualizes as a "constitutional moment"—an exceptional period when the normal rules of politics are suspended in favor of radical transformation (Ackerman, 1991). In

contrast to classic democratic transitions, Rwanda prioritized stability and efficiency over competitive representativeness, justifying its approach by the urgency of reconstruction and the risks of a resurgence of ethnic conflict. The foundations of its model are unusual: charismatic-rational leadership, national reconciliation, and security performance. Firstly, Paul Kagame embodies a hybrid type of leadership combining revolutionary charisma and technocratic rationality. His supporters have built him a legitimacy based on national salvation. This initial charismatic legitimacy was gradually institutionalized through technocratic governance mechanisms (Chemouni, 2018). Kagame's leadership style combines personal authority and data-driven governance. Weekly government meetings, quantified performance evaluations of ministries, and the systematic use of development indicators illustrate the technocratic style.

Secondly, its policy of national unity (*Ubwiyunge*) is one of the pillars of post-genocide legitimacy. The prohibition of ethnic references in the public sphere and the promotion of a unified Rwandan identity aim to prevent any resurgence of murderous divisions (Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement, n.d.). Reconciliation mechanisms combine traditional and modern approaches. The *Gacaca* courts, inspired by customary law, have dealt with over 1.2 million genocide cases through community-based participatory procedures. These hybrid institutions have made it possible to manage the legacy of the genocide while strengthening social cohesion at local level (Rutayisire & Richters, 2014). Thirdly, Rwanda's exceptional stability in a region marked by chronic instability is central to its legitimacy. Unlike its neighbors (DRC, Burundi, South Sudan), Rwanda has maintained internal peace while developing significant regional military capabilities. Its security performance extends far beyond national borders, with Rwanda contributing massively to UN peacekeeping operations (International Crisis Group, 2023). The effectiveness of Rwanda's security forces is based on professionalization, discipline, and ethnic integration. The Rwandan army (Rwanda Defence Force, RDF) has become a model of modern African armed forces, combining operational efficiency and social cohesion (International Crisis Group, 2023; ACLED, 2024). Security success has strengthened the regime's legitimacy in the eyes of a population traumatized by past insecurity.

The country has succeeded in combining *nation-building* and *state-building*, relying on institutional innovation: Controlled participatory governance, economic performance, effective state action, and a coherent overall vision are essentially its foundations. Rwanda has developed original mechanisms for citizen participation that circumvent the limits of competitive democracy. *Umuganda*, a compulsory monthly community service, combines public utility work with local political discussion. As an institution, it mobilizes nearly 80% of the adult population in regular collective activities, creating a direct link between citizens and governance (Redkar-Palepu & Chen, 2023). Development councils at various levels (village, sector, district) enable systematic feedback and consultation of the population. These participatory mechanisms, although controlled, maintain a form of government accountability where multipartyism is not possible due to inherent divisions. Rwanda's institutional innovation demonstrates the possibility of inclusive governance without a competitive public space (Hasselskog, 2023). Another fundamental aspect is that, according to a report by the African Development Bank (AfDB) on the continent's macroeconomic performance and prospects, Rwanda ranks among the four fastest-growing African countries in 2024. Its reputedly exceptional economic performance is based on a proactive development strategy and prudent macroeconomic management. The World Bank confirms that, following average growth of 8.2% in 2022-2023, real GDP rose by 9.7% in the first half of 2024 (World Bank, 2024a). This data is also confirmed by Agence Ecofin, which reports that Rwanda's real GDP grew by 9.7% in the first quarter of 2024 (Agence Ecofin, 2024). Economic diversification is a cornerstone of the country's development strategy.

Rwanda has transformed its economy from subsistence agriculture to services (finance, Information and Communication Technology [ICT], tourism) and light industry. Such rapid structural transformation illustrates the ability of the Rwandan developmental state to efficiently direct resources towards growth sectors (Gaudreault & Bodolica, 2022).

Two final fundamental aspects that justify the Rwandan model: The first, and by no means least, is the efficiency of public services, which far exceed regional standards. The universal healthcare system has enabled a spectacular rise in life expectancy, from 32 years in 1994 to 69 years in 2020. The improvement achieved is the result of massive investment in health infrastructure and the training of medical staff (Digital Impact Alliance, 2024). Universal primary education, achieved as early as 2008, and the rapid digitization of public administration illustrate the effectiveness of the model. Rwanda is among the world leaders in e-government, with public services largely dematerialized. Its administrative modernization combines efficiency gains with a reduction in corruption (Digital Impact Alliance, 2024). All these transformations are taking place under a coherent strategy: the Vision 2050 (the final aspect of this view), an element of long-term strategic planning that is a distinctive feature of Rwandan governance. The Vision aims to transform Rwanda into a high-income economy by mid-century. The approach is one of planning, mobilizing the entire state apparatus and civil society around quantified objectives and precise deadlines (Government of Rwanda, 2020). Aligning sectoral policies with long-term objectives avoids dispersal of effort and optimizes the allocation of limited resources. Clearly, this strategic coherence is rare in Africa and goes some way to explain Rwanda's development performance. The ability to stay the course despite external changes illustrates the advantages of authoritarian institutional stability, which could give pause for thought to rulers in the region, and indeed across Africa.

Here, the Rwandan experience demonstrates the possibility of transcending destructive identity-based cleavages through a unifying national project. For African societies marked by ethnic, religious, or regional divisions, the Rwandan model offers an alternative path to the democratic management of differences. However, such an approach requires strong political will and effective socialization mechanisms. Rwandan schools, the army, and participatory institutions all contribute to forging a common citizenship that transcends affiliations. This is not far from social engineering, albeit controversial, which produces measurable results in terms of national cohesion. Another lesson from Rwanda is that an efficient public administration illustrates the possibility of rapidly building a high-performance administrative apparatus in the African context. Meritocratic recruitment, continuous training, and performance assessment create a high-quality civil service. According to some observers, Rwanda's post-genocide transformation has been remarkable, albeit uneven; the institutional gains, however, are undeniable (cited in Ozug, Summers, & Ermyas, 2024). The fight against corruption, the regime's top priority, has led to high levels of administrative probity for the region. Bureaucratic efficiency is a prerequisite for any ambitious developmental state. The Rwandan example proves that rapid institution-building remains possible with sufficient political will. Finally, and more broadly, the Rwandan case reveals the possibility of a composite political legitimacy combining different sources of authority. Traditional legitimacy (reconciliation based on customary mechanisms), charismatic legitimacy (Kagame's leadership), and rational-legal legitimacy (developmental performance) are mutually reinforcing. Such hybridization avoids over-reliance on a single source of legitimacy (Jennings, 2019). For African regimes seeking stabilization, the approach offers an alternative to Western models of democratic legitimization. The Rwandan government amended the constitution in 2015 to allow Kagame to run for a fourth and fifth term, enabling him to remain in power potentially until 2034. The intention here is to institutionalize political continuity, despite criticism, and ensure the stability

necessary for long-term transformations. The Kagame model does, however, raise questions about post-Kagame sustainability. Given the absolute erosion of democratic institutions during his reign, a post-Kagame era could be a recipe for instability. The challenge of institutionalization beyond charismatic leadership remains central to the sustainability of the Rwandan model.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking the State and Authority in Africa**

Our study proposes a fundamental reconceptualization of state analysis in Africa, breaking with the dominant paradigms derived from Western experience. Our theoretical contribution is articulated around four major axes that redefine the parameters for assessing state legitimacy and effectiveness on the African continent. The first major contribution lies in the development of an alternative paradigm that replaces Western democratic teleology with an approach focused on situated legitimacy and social performance. Contrary to normative models that postulate an ineluctable convergence towards liberal democratic standards (Fukuyama, 1992; 2014), our approach recognizes that the legitimacy of authority rests on accepted laws and norms rather than on the arbitrary and unconstrained power of rulers (Weber, 1978). Such legitimacy can be expressed through a variety of institutional mechanisms, including traditional authorities, community councils, and social mediation structures. Social performance, conceptualized as the state's ability to meet the basic needs of the population and maintain social cohesion, becomes the central criterion for evaluation (Social Progress Index, 2025). Here, we draw on Migdal's (2001) work on "state capacity", while integrating the specificities of the African context. Legitimacy through social performance helps us understand why certain regimes considered authoritarian by Western standards enjoy enduring popular legitimacy, as illustrated by the cases of post-genocide Rwanda or Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi (Letsa & Morse, 2023; Clapham, 2017). Our empirical analysis demonstrates, secondly, the existence of successful and enduring authoritarianism in Africa that challenges the presuppositions of democratic transition. The Rwandan case study reveals successful development trajectories under a non-democratic regime by Western standards, and merits more extensive comparative study to test what fits under the concept of "African developmental authoritarianism". The latter is based on strong state capacity, performance-based legitimacy, and unconventional mechanisms of popular participation (Ngcayisa, 2022). A long history of effective performance—in delivering economic growth and opportunity, reducing poverty and inequality, providing social services, controlling corruption, and maintaining political order and security—fills a "reservoir of legitimacy" that can support different types of political regimes (Ngcayisa, 2022; Scharpf, 1999; Lipset, 1959; Fukuyama, 2013). Finally, our third theoretical contribution draws on a rereading of Western historical trajectories to relativize the universality of the liberal democratic model. Comparative analysis reveals that the European Westphalian state was built through processes of authoritarian centralization, war, and national construction that spanned several centuries (Ahlers, Krichewsky, Moser, & Stichweh, 2021). We believe that a historical perspective helps to contextualize the contemporary challenges of state-building in Africa, and to legitimize alternative trajectories of institutional development.

Our study undoubtedly has significant geographical limitations, which call for future developments. The analysis in the African context focused mainly on Rwanda, with limited incursions into the rest of Eastern and Southern Africa. This geographical restriction limits the generalizability of our findings to the entire African continent, given the diversity of historical trajectories, social structures, and governance challenges across regions. The extension of our analytical framework to West and Central Africa, to North Africa with its Mediterranean and Arab specificities, and to Central Africa, marked by the legacies of intensive colonial exploitation, is a

priority for future studies, using a novel composite index to account for them. The definition and application of the policy against unconstitutional changes of government (Wane, 2025) are narrow, with loopholes frequently exploited by leaders, illustrating the need for a differentiated approach according to regional contexts and original measurement instruments.

The prospects for future studies are based on four priorities. Firstly, the development of indices tailored to the African context and capable of offering an alternative to standard democratic indices for assessing the quality of governance in Africa. To this end, certain dimensions will be essential: situated government effectiveness, endogenous participatory legitimacy, social cohesion, and institutional innovation. Their added value will lie in considering specific African contexts. Traditional consultation mechanisms, endogenous forms of political participation, and local methods of conflict resolution will be integrated as legitimate components of governance, rather than being considered as subaltern, primitive, or archaic practices and customs, and therefore devalued. Such a methodological stance responds to a need identified in the literature: to develop governance assessment tools that are culturally adapted and empirically relevant to African contexts. Their originality will be determined by their ability to measure and compare government performance beyond conventional democratic criteria. Their development will require longitudinal studies that will enable observers to track the evolution of institutional arrangements over several decades and identify factors of stability or change.

Secondly, an in-depth field study of local governance mechanisms will be essential to better understand how official and traditional authorities interact in practice. This approach would highlight the strategies developed by local actors to adapt to the institutions inherited from colonization.

Thirdly, comparing these phenomena with other regions of the world, particularly Southeast Asia—which has similar configurations of hybridization between colonial institutions and traditional structures—and Latin America, would greatly enrich our understanding of the different paths of institutional development in formerly colonized countries. Such comparisons would help identify universal features while highlighting the specific characteristics of each historical and cultural context. We believe that there is an increasing demand for original work that can contribute to the development of a general theory of government in postcolonial countries, one that extends beyond the African context and proposes a framework applicable to all contemporary state-building experiences in the Global South.

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