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## **Political Fluidity and the Power of Incumbency among Africa's Governing Elite**

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### **Abstract**

The last quarter of the 20th century in Africa's political landscape was enveloped to a suffocating point with the phenomenon of incumbent re-elections. Scholars attribute this ubiquitous tendency to incumbency power. However, just about two decades into the 21st century, at least fifteen (15) incumbent African Heads of State/Government have lost re-elections. The study, therefore, interrogates whether incumbency power still plays a

determinant role in African elections and political transition in the 21st century. While the logic of political fluidity provided the conceptual cum analytical framework for the study, documentary evidence and informed unobtrusive/non-participant observation complemented each other in generating data for the study. The paper concludes that the role of incumbency power in the political transition process in Africa is over-hyped, arguing instead that the effects ascribed to it are both the consequences and manifestations of overall non-sophistication of the political culture and low level of political institutionalization in Africa.

**Keywords:** *Political fluidity, incumbency power, performance politics, political transition, Africa's governing elite*

## Introduction

The beauty of modern democracy lies in its amenability to smooth and peaceful change of power. It is the overwhelming belief that a non-performing regime can be changed via election and a new one instituted that has placed democracy above and beyond other forms and systems of government that have hitherto existed. In comparatively recent times, regrettably, this magic wand that sustains and sponsors the glamorous appeal of democracy has come under murderous attack in Africa. In their insatiable appetite for power, Africa's governing elite gratuitously evolved a new but infamous political orientation that threw a monkey wrench into the democratic transition process. It is imperative at this juncture to conceive of political orientation as an inclination that characterizes the thinking of a collectivity or group, particularly as it affects what Lasswell (1936) describes as "who gets what, when and how" within the political system. This new orientation found expression in what has come to be known as the "value of holding office" or incumbency power (Cox & Shapiro, 2024, p.3).

Incumbency power is, therefore, one of the many fallouts of electoral democracy; indeed, a deleterious political orientation popular among Africa's governing elite. By way of definition, incumbency power is the presumption or belief that the positional resources of an interested sitting leader or ruling party (incumbent) could be brought to bear or leveraged to influence both the processes and outcomes of a supposedly open electoral contest to the incumbent's advantage (see Cox & Shapiro, 2024; Milyo, 2001). In other words, it is the belief in the possibility of strategic activation and instrumentation of the advantages of an electable office/position by such office-holders in such a way as to favour

themselves, and their party in a scheduled poll for the determination of who occupies the office, and to which they or party (incumbent) are interested, too.

In recent times, the phraseology of “incumbency power” has gained sudden popularity in political science literature, especially those on electoral politics and democratization. Thus, scholars like Hainmueller and Kern (2008), Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart (2000), Katz and King (1999) have documented the seeming advantages of incumbency and subsequently found it almost hard to wean themselves from the proclivity of ascribing to incumbency power some analytic potentials and explanatory valence when analyzing broader politics and political transition processes across the globe. This paper, therefore, attempts to demystify the myth and uncritical assumptions that surround incumbency power in the political transition processes of emerging democracies in Africa in order to unmask the true, yet unpopular, situation in the continent.

### **Incumbency and political transition: A contextual discourse**

Factors often identified by scholars as accounting for the sources of incumbency advantage are many and varied. Macdonald (2014) highlights some of them including: ‘Signaling and information manipulation’, ‘Political targeting and clientelism’, and ‘pre-electoral resource mobilization’, which coheres with Gordon and Landa’s (2009) ‘campaign discount’ and ‘endorser bias’ models. These demonstrate the relative ease for the incumbent to mobilize “campaign funds and political endorsements through stronger political networks and the incentives of potential contributors to align themselves with the expected winner” (Macdonald, 2014, p.51). There is also the ‘deterrence effect’ in which a high-quality/strong challenger, out of perceived fear of incumbency benefits, feels deterred and abandons his/her ambition. This leaves the incumbent with weaker challengers who easily lose out to the former, eventually.

While studies on incumbency advantage have dominated extant literature for a long time, those on its very antithesis—incumbency disadvantage—started surfacing in comparatively recent times. Studies in India (Fisman, Schulz & Vig, 2012; Uppal, 2009), Brazil (Titunik, 2011; Brambor & Ceneviva, 2011); Japan (Ariga, 2015) have demonstrated strong evidence of organic incumbency disadvantage in competitive electoral contexts. Although relatively few and scanty, this

latter effort has concentrated analysis on factors such as deteriorating economic conditions, weak party and opposition system, rent-seeking and attendant ‘pessimistic politics trap’, increasing voters’ assertiveness, etc. (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis, 2017; Peskowitz, 2017; Macdonald, 2014). Gordon and Landa (2009), however, attempt to balance the analysis by examining how the often advanced sources of incumbency advantage can either truly advantage (benefit) or disadvantage the incumbent in practical terms. They develop three models, viz: the campaign discount model; the endorser bias model, and the partisan bias model. Their observation is that the answer to the question of whether supposed sources of incumbency advantage do favour or disfavour the incumbent is not straightforward. While the two models of ‘campaign discount’ and ‘endorser bias’ can potentially favour both the incumbent and the opposition/challenger in several nuanced ways, “pro-incumbent district partisan bias benefits incumbents at all levels of quality and enhances challenger deterrence” (Gordon & Landa, 2009, p.1493).

However, across Africa, scholars seem to have conceded the apparent irrefutability of incumbency power in the political transition processes of their emerging democracies. Okoye, Egbo and Chukwuemeka (2012, p.14), for instance, concede in somewhat defeatist candour that “the critical role of incumbency influence in political processes in Nigeria is profoundly indubitable”. They thus blame incumbency power/influence for such negative political developments as elite factionalisation, misuse of funds, political apathy, defection, and political violence. Similarly, after a comparative study of electoral politics and its outcomes in the Gambia, Zambia and Uganda, Cheeseman et al (2017, p.102) note that “victories for incumbent leaders in poor-quality elections in Uganda and Zambia in 2016” was an illustration that “the power of incumbency remains formidable”. This is consistent with Cheeseman’ (2010, p.1) submissions seven years earlier that “presidents’ ability to control state institutions and the flow of patronage has generated an incumbency bias so strong that numerous countries in Africa have witnessed elections without change”. However, the phenomenon of “election without change” can still be a manifestation of poor voter information or absence of multi-party competitiveness, and not necessarily a function of incumbency.

What stands out most markedly from the foregoing is that the case of Africa is particularly very interesting, as scholars tend to offer a blanket appraisal of the incumbency advantage. Indeed, as Macdonald (2014) rightly observes, the predominant characterization of African

politics as ‘neopatrimonial’ and ‘semi-authoritarian’ implies that incumbents are in a strong position to systematically manipulate the political process to their advantage. This *leviathan* portrayal of African incumbents tends to create a false sense of electoral invincibility of African incumbents, and to vitiate the centrality of other variables which matter as much in the predominantly plural African society.

## **Methodology**

The article typifies an exploratory multiple-case study of referenced African states. According to Baxter and Jack (2008, 545), the above method is best suited for studies where the focus is on “how” and “why” questions; behaviour of those involved cannot be manipulated, and “relevant contextual conditions” must be covered. Unobtrusively, we maintained a sustained observation of the socio-economic and political build-ups to the elections, as well as the elections themselves and the transition processes in the fifteen (15) referenced African states (see Table 2). This was possible through constant media-supported audio-visual and on-the-spot reports which we were attentive and intent to observe disinterestedly. Again, through a critical review of relevant literature, we analyzed existing documentary/archived evidence on elections and transition processes in Africa. This analysis meets all the three criteria stated above for a case study. First, the article answers the “how” and “why” questions through a brief exploration of the various determinants of the efficacy of incumbency power and how the latter has influenced electoral outcomes over time in Africa (Owen & Usman, 2015). Secondly, it explores the effects of performance politics in injecting fluidity into the political system, thereby posing an effectual threat to incumbency power. The essence of all this is to “cover contextual conditions” in about 26 African countries (see Table 2), which are “relevant” to the understanding of “the phenomenon under study” (political fluidity and the power of incumbency among Africa’s governing elite). Critical observations, however, complemented this method.

## **Political fluidity, performance politics and incumbency power: Lessons from the US and UK**

The concept of fluidity has been extensively used in the Social Sciences, especially in the analysis of racial relations. In this connection, Davenport (2020) deploys the concept of racial fluidity to stress the idea

that race is flexible and impermanent by tracing the evolution of racial classifications and boundaries in the United States (US) and Latin America. While Saperstein and Penner (2012) rely on the same concept to investigate the reinforcing relationship between race and inequality in the US, Sanchez and Garcia (2012) examine how socio-economic situations tend to shape and determine racial fluidity. However, Leong (2015) contends that the whole issue of racial fluidity and reliance on the same for distinctive purposes rather complicate the assignment of value to race. The operational elasticity of the concept of fluidity in politics extends to such a matrix that makes for changes, variability and discontinuities in the political system (Volpi & Gerschewski, 2020; Dorby, 2015). It underscores the inherent mutability of the electorates in the expression or exercise of their support and allegiance to a political leader or party, especially in the face of orientation that either exposes the weakness or strength of the hitherto recipient of such political support or allegiance. Also, it emphasizes the degree to which nothing is guaranteed or said to have been settled beyond alterations, thereby exposing the indeterminacy of political phenomena. Therefore, political fluidity substantially coheres with the logic of dialectics vis-à-vis the inevitability and constancy of change in political systems (Brincat, 2014). One of the political phenomena that both triggers off and equally gets affected by political fluidity is performance politics, the sad corruption of which in Africa has come to be christened incumbency power. Performance politics in this context is the totality of the electoral advantages that accrue to an incumbent by the reasons or virtues of his exceptional political performance while still in office. In other words, it is the qualitative return on an investment that comes back to incumbents for their credibility, which is often expressed by the electorate through massive re-election of such incumbents back into the office to which they seek re-election. Perhaps in no other polity has the phenomenon of performance politics been given greater attention than in the US congressional politics. Between the 1960s and 1970s, it was found that the success rate of incumbent members of the US House of Representatives seeking re-election averaged 93.5 per cent (Canter, 1974). Political analysts in the US dubbed it the *sophomore surge*. This 'first-term incumbency bonus', as it is alternatively called in the United Kingdom (UK) (see Cowley & Stuart, 2005; Jackson & Shubber, 2015), is a coinage used in referring to a spike in votes that candidates for the House of Representatives tend to gain when re-contesting for the first time. In 1998 precisely, fresh candidates re-running for the first time

secured 8 to 10 per cent votes above the votes they were elected with during their first term. Unprecedented in the US history, all the 28 incumbent Senators seeking re-election in 2022 were all returned (Hall-Jones, 2023).

While a political party which has served its constitutional two-term limit (especially given the fast-establishing tradition of swapping parties for the office of the president), may not worry so much should it lose, a representative member who may be interested in retaining his/her seat continually will be reluctant to face the same fate as an outgoing party. So, being a non-term limit mandate or political opening (unlike in the executive counterpart that is two-term limited), the US congressmen seem to have figured out how to run personal campaigns rather than party campaigns.

In its original and purest sense, therefore, incumbency power/advantage is both a product and an expression of political/electoral reward for congressmen who made themselves popular among their constituents through various ways, including the distribution of socio-economic and political largesse. Of course, several studies on incumbency find evidence that incumbents who have greater district presences and provide local public goods or more pork-barrel spending to their constituents, thereby shoring up support for themselves, are more successful in their re-election contests (see Hall-Jones, 2023; Klingensmith, 2019; Klingensmith, 2015). This is where the re-election advantage of a serving parliamentarian/congressman which has come to be widely referred to as ‘incumbency power/advantage’ emanates from.

What the preceding paragraphs are re-echoing, in effect, is that the re-election of an incumbent is not entirely a manifestation of authoritarianism or autocracy. It is, in fact, a practical demonstration by the electorates of the popular expression that ‘one good turn deserves another’. In most advanced democracies of the world, as exemplified by the US, the re-election of an incumbent is generally regarded as a reward for positive political accountability (exceptional performance). In other words, sophomore surge and the resultant incumbency advantage are, in their purest forms, a pattern of performance politics, whereby re-election is a modality of awarding pass marks to deserving incumbents.

However, while this pure form may have gradually eroded in some advanced democracies, it has diametrically slipped off the precipice in emerging democracies. In Africa, there was a distortion of the gestation and incubation periods of this pure form that is not entirely

unconnected to the untimely integration of the continent into the global capitalist mode of production. The decomposition of capitalism and liberal democracy into the single cocoon of colonization, in addition to many years of military incursions into politics, evidently did not allowed Africa's political leaders and institutions to blossom democratically. Conceptualizing democracy/democratization as a fundamentally political culture discourse, Ejiofor and Udeogu (2017) contend that many years of military rule have promoted a political culture of impunity and arrogance that have become antithetical to the very doctrines of democratization in Africa. Even at independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, African leaders had already habituated themselves into a colonial master-like authoritarian posture that gave no heed to respect for institutions. They became more powerful than the established political institutions. It is in this regard that President Obama of the US excoriated Africa for having strong men in place of strong institutions (*Agence France-Presse*, 2009). Electoral democracy is about respect for institutions. It thrives on the recognition that political institutions should shape and condition the behaviour of political leaders. Owen and Usman (2015, p.2) contrast this in their insightful observation of African politics where "incumbents tend to win elections frequently as a result of weak institutions, preferential access to state resources, financial and otherwise, control over law-making and law-enforcement, and the weak economic base for opposition politics outside the state system".

With African leaders exercising a reversal of control over political institutions, they feel unrestrained by these institutions. Thus, the institutional requirement of submitting oneself for assessment through electioneering campaigns for possibilities of subsequent re-election have been rendered mere rituals for the legitimization of stolen mandates. Ideally, a campaign is an organized process of begging the electorates or constituents for their support and vote. Other strictures and undercurrents that accompany campaigns are only targeted at the same eventual end. Being aware, however, of their colossal records of abysmal performance and the implications of overseeing the conduct of a credible election, African incumbents would rather short-circuit the process, leading to a travesty and mockery of elections. So, incumbency power in its purest US congressional form is not the same as incumbency power in Africa. In the former, it connotes the ability and wisdom of incumbents seeking re-election to use the benefits of their position (in line with institutional requirements) to appeal to the conscience and emotion of their constituents, and shore up support for



themselves towards re-election. In the latter, it implies the crash and inordinate deployment of the personalized institutional powers by incumbents to perpetuate themselves and their anointed candidates in office through a contrived farcical legitimization process dubbed 'election'. Indeed, there is the dominance of the abuse of power of incumbency in African electoral and party politics by those in power (Nwanegbo & Alomuna, 2011).

### **Determinants of the efficacy of incumbency power in influencing electoral outcomes**

In addition to the strong points of anti-incumbency, the degree to which the power of incumbency can influence electoral outcomes in Africa is contingent upon some pre-existing structural contingencies before the election. Some of these conditions, although interrelated and touching upon many shared concerns, include the effects of 'Term Limits' and 'Open-seat Elections' (see Cheeseman, 2010). One of the major gains of modern democracy is its gradual victory over sit-tight syndrome (a tendency to want to stick to power against all odds) in Africa and other emerging democracies (Ukoha, 2024). Whereas it may not have entirely won the battle over opportunistically mangled elections for self-perpetuation agenda among African leaders, it has arguably succeeded in ensuring that term-limit clauses are visibly included in many constitutions of African states. In keeping with this, a minimum of thirty (30) countries in Africa now have term limits provisions in their constitutions (Cheeseman, 2010).

In Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, Cape Verde, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, etc., the minimum term limit for the occupants of elective executive positions/offices, especially the president is two terms of four years each, making a maximum of eight years at a stretch. However, these eight years are not contiguously continuous. The incumbent(s) in question are constitutionally required to present themselves for re-election at the expiration of the first four years, if they wish to continue in office for the remaining four years of the second term/tenure. This, inevitably, results in an open-seat election, which is a form of poll in which the current officeholder (incumbent) is not contesting or seeking re-election into the same office by the end of the eight years. As Cheeseman (2010, p.142) rightly notes in connection with Africa, "over the last two decades, the enforcement of term limits in a range of countries has resulted in a significant number of open-seat polls, making

it possible for the first time to examine the impact of incumbency on electoral outcomes in Africa”.

However, the wish of every political party, generally, is to remain in power for as long as power remains. For this reason, the ruling party usually would field another candidate to contest elections to the effect of replacing the outgoing incumbent at the expiration of the constitutionally guaranteed two-term limit. Studies have shown that open-seat elections are likely to end up in opposition victories or non-incumbent elections. In other words, oppositions/challengers tend to perform abysmally when running against a sitting president. According to Cheeseman (2010, p.140):

Although open-seat polls have been relatively rare, they account for half of all presidential transfers of power from one party to another between 1990 and 2009, demonstrating that most of the elections cited as evidence of real democratic gains in Africa—such as the Ghanaian election of 2000 and the Kenyan election of 2002—occurred after term limits forced presidents to step down.

Meanwhile, Table 1 shows some transfers in open-seat elections in selected African countries.

**Table 1: Transfers in open-seat elections in selected African countries**

Country	Year of Election
Niger	1993
Cote d'Ivoire	2000
Ghana	2000
Cape Verde	2001
Mali	2002
Kenya	2002
Benin Republic	2006
Sierra Leone	2007
Ghana	2008

**Source:** Adapted from Cheeseman (2010, p.140)

Term-limit imposition and the attendant open-seat election jointly and significantly diminish the power of incumbency and offer fresh contestants, especially those of the opposition parties, a certain degree of level playing ground. Among others, the curve of unrestrained access to state resources, coercive state apparatuses and institutional control to which the incumbent often reclines to edge out co-contenders are

significantly flattened to the advantage of the challenger(s). These may not be entirely obliterated given the fact that the outgoing incumbent still reasonably oversees and midwifes the electoral process through its relative control over the electoral management body (EMB). In this connection, many scholars, including Udeogu and Onwuanabile (2022), Mbaegbu (2018), Macdonald (2014), and Cheeseman (2010) have decried the weakness of political institutions in Africa. As Lifongo, van Wyk and Graham (2023, p.1) acknowledge concerning Togolese electoral body and electoral system, “most political actors continue to question the legitimacy of elections held, and the alternation of power remains highly unlikely”. Similarly, Cheeseman (2010, p.141) remarks that “the weakness of political parties, the salience of ethnic identity, and the importance of neopatrimonial politics combine to create an electoral landscape in which institutions are typically weak, and power is concentrated in political leaders”. This manifested in Nigeria’s 2007 general elections and elsewhere in Africa.

There is, however, an aspect of the ruling party’s internal politicking that tends to greatly impinge on the powers of both the outgoing incumbent and the ruling party itself in shaping the outlook of the transition process in Africa’s electoral history. It is what comes close to an ‘intra-party succession tussle’. Depending on the party’s level of internal democracy and unity of interest, intra-party tussles tend to rear up their ugly heads at that critical juncture of deciding on which candidate to be fielded in the election. Where interests differ among the ‘strongmen’ of the party in question and where vestiges of godfatherism lurk around, party primaries, usually turn out to have a debilitating impact on the incumbent’s party’s success. Intra-party tussles almost always tend to undermine the electoral fortunes of incumbent parties in Africa. In Kenya’s 2002 presidential election, for instance, the imposition of Uhuru Kenyatta on the Kenya African National Union (KANU) by Daniel Arap Moi (the outgoing President) culminated in the abandonment of the party by some of its prominent leaders to join the opposition National Alliance Rainbow Coalition (NARC), which eventually defeated the ruling KANU.

This is not markedly different from the events that unfolded in Sierra Leone’s 2007 elections. Here, issues over the choice of the party’s flag-bearer (Solomon Berewa) led to the defection and formation of a new party—People’s Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC)—by some aggrieved members of the ruling Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) led by Charles Margai. This move eventually led to the defeat of

the SLPP by the opposition All People's Congress (APC) of Ernest Koroma, which before the final election had secured the support of Charles Margai and his newly formed PMDC members. In Ghana and South Africa, the same internal succession tussles ensued within the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the African National Congress (ANC), respectively. Although this did not lead to the defeat of the incumbent party, it sowed deep-rooted internal infightings and divisiveness. While in the former, it led to the loss of parliamentary seats originally occupied by the ruling NPP, in the latter, it resulted in the exodus of notable ANC leaders who decided to form the Congress of the People (COPE) and, in May 2024, the uMkhontoweSizwe (MK) Party.

### **Power of incumbency in Africa on the decline**

Recent experience in many African countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, the Gambia, etc., indicate that performance politics appears to be taking precedence over the hitherto overarching influence of incumbency factor in determining political events, especially electoral victories (Ukoha, 2023). Several factors offer explanations for this. According to Bola (2011), effective opposition, credible election, excessive reliance on godfatherism, autocratic style of leadership and increased political consciousness on the part of the citizenry are some of the underlying factors sounding a death knell to the significant role of incumbency in the political equation of Nigeria, nay, Africa.

There has been an unprecedented progression in the frequency at which incumbents lose re-election and subsequent turnover since 1967 when the first African leader—Somalia's Aden Abdullah Daar lost to Abdirashid Shermake. For twenty-four (24) years (1967-1991), Somalia's case was generally thought of as an unrepeatable mistake of history, as incumbents consistently won elections and perpetuated themselves in office across Africa. However, the cycle was broken in Cape Verde's 1991 Presidential elections held on 17 February, when incumbent Aristides Pereira of the African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde (PAICV) suffered a landslide defeat from Antonio Mascarenhas Monteiro of the Movement for Democracy (MpD) to become the President of Cape Verde. Like a wildfire, African incumbents began losing their incumbency, from Cape Verde through Benin to Zambia within the same year (1991). Since the magic of Cape Verde, African incumbents have lost elections on a conservative average of one

incumbent per year, a hitherto unthinkable phenomenon. **Table 2** below shows African incumbent presidents who lost re-elections between 1967 and 2021.

**Table 2: African incumbent presidents who lost re-elections between 1967 and 2021**

Country	Incumbent who Lost	Challenger who Won	Election Year
Somalia	Aden Abdullah Daar	Abdirashid Shermake	1967
Cape Verde	Aristides Pereira	Antonio M. Monteiro	1991
Benin Republic	Mathieu Kerekou	Nicephore Soglo	1991
Zambia	Kenneth Kaunda	Frederick Chiluba	1991
Congo	Denis Sassou	Pascal Lissouba	1992
Madagascar	Didier Ratsiraka	Albert Zafy	1993
Central African Republic	Andre Kolingba	Ange Patasse	1993
Burundi	Pierre Buyoya	Melchior Ndadaye	1993
Malawi	Hastings Kamuzu Banda	Bakili Muluzi	1994
Madagascar	Albert Zafy	Didier Ratsiraka	1996
Benin Republic	Nicephore Soglo	Mathieu Kerekou	1996
Cote D'Ivoire	Robert Guei	Laurent Gbagbo	2000
Senegal	Abdou Diouf	Abdoulaye Wade	2000
Madagascar	Didier Ratsiraka	Marc Ravalomanana	2001
Cote D'Ivoire	Laurent Gbagbo	Alassane Ouattara	2010
Zambia	Rupiah Banda	Michael Sata	2011
Senegal	Abdoulaye Wade	Macky Sall	2012
Somaliland	Dahir Riyale Kahin	Mohammed Silanyo	2012
Malawi	Joyce Banda	Peter Mutharika	2014
Nigeria	Goodluck Jonathan	Muhammadu Buhari	2015
The Gambia	Yahya Jammeh	Adama Barrow	2016
Ghana	John Mahama	Nana Akufo Addo	2016
Somali	Hassan Sheikh Mohamud	Mohamed Abdullahi	2017
Guinea-Bissau	Jose Mario Vaz	Umaro Cissoko Embalo	2019
Malawi	Peter Mutharika	Lazarus Chakwera	2020
Zambia	Edgar Lungu	Hakainde Hichilema	2021

**Source:** Compiled by the authors from: Owete (2016) and non-participant observation

### Spatiotemporal spread of incumbency defeats in Africa

A critical examination of **Table 2** shows that there is a spatiotemporal dimension to the defeat of incumbents in Africa that has a significant

socio-political undertone. Very obvious is the point that recorded incidents of incumbency defeats have occurred only in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Without affirming or denying the claims of decolonial scholars like Poesche et al (2019), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), etc., on the coloniality of SSA, two strands of SSA can be distinguished. They are: the ethno-cultural cum geographical SSA and the United Nations SSA. The former includes all the African countries that lie south of the Sahara. In other words, the ethno-cultural SSA is the rest of African countries, excluding the traditional North Africa or what loosely corresponds to the Maghreb region plus Egypt. To the United Nations (UN), however, SSA includes all 54 African countries, excluding Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia (UNDP Africa, n.d.). The exclusion of Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan and sometimes Mauritania and Comoros is not entirely unconnected to their membership of the League of Arab States or the ‘Arab Maghreb Union’ (see Maddy-Weitzman, 2011).

**Table 3** presents a sub-regional spread of incumbency defeats in Africa. It shows that within the SSA, the West Africa sub-region accounts for about 70 per cent of the continental incumbency defeats. Out of the twenty-six (26) recorded cases, twelve (12) occurred in nine (9) West African countries, with Benin Republic and Senegal alone recording the highest frequency of two each. Whereas East Africa came a distant second with four cases of incumbency defeat, Central and Southern Africa sub-regions trail behind with two cases each.

**Table 3: Sub-regional spread of incumbency defeats in Africa (country-specific)**

African Sub-Regions	Countries where Incumbents Lost
North Africa	Nil
West Africa	Nigeria, The Gambia, Ghana, Benin Republic, Cote D'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Cote D'Ivoire, Cape Verde
East Africa	Burundi, Somalia, Somaliland, Malawi
Central Africa	Central African Republic, Congo
Southern Africa	Zambia, Madagascar

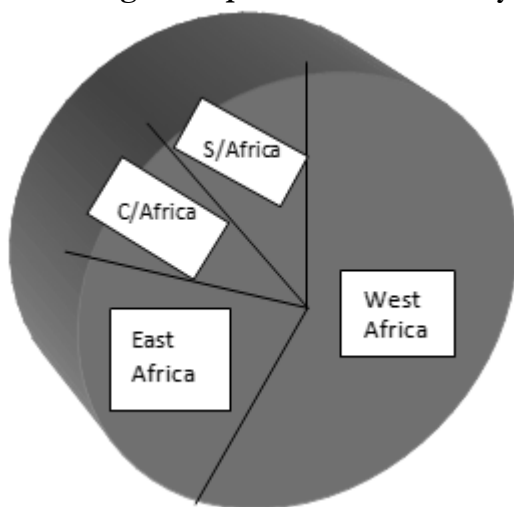
**Source:** Authors’ compilation

At this juncture, it is important to state that the chances of defeating an incumbent are only possible in a bi-or multi-party electoral democracy. This accounts for the situation in North Africa noted for its long-

standing authoritarian regimes (Omotola & Onuoha, 2018; Mauduit, 2012; Maddy-Weitzman, 2011). Censorship, restricted press freedom, suppression of opposition and clampdowns on dissenting groups all of which are characteristics of authoritarian regimes further deterred the people from challenging incumbents. Until the North African Revolutions of 2011, variously referred to as the “Jasmine Revolution” and the “Arab Spring”, which was both a product and an antithesis of authoritarianism, the region had been less attracted to competitive elections and sundry other democratic ethos. What is more, the general orientation in North Africa is the uncritical association of democracy and all of its appurtenances with Western culture and civilization. Therefore, the sub-region’s disposition to elections and democracy, seen as artefacts from the West, is very understandable, and so also is the difficulty of defeating an incumbent in a region where this mindset dominates.

Unlike the situation in North Africa, the political landscape of the West African sub-region is much more favourable for democratic experimentation. Whereas they are not yet in their full swing, there is at least a modicum of competition, inclusiveness, and civil liberties which, according to McFaul (2002), constitute the major requirements of any democratic system. Out of the eleven African states listed by the Human Freedom Index (HFI) in 2019, five of them—Cape Verde, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria and the Benin Republic—are West African states. The HFI finds a strong relationship between human freedom and democracy. There is, therefore, a very strong correlation between freedom and democracy on the one hand, and chances of incumbency defeat on the other hand. This relative freedom, which has gradually but consistently pushed many West African countries from authoritarian regimes to mixed regimes (*The Economist*, 2020), is not unconnected to the rising curve and frequency at which incumbents are defeated in multi-party competitive elections in West Africa.

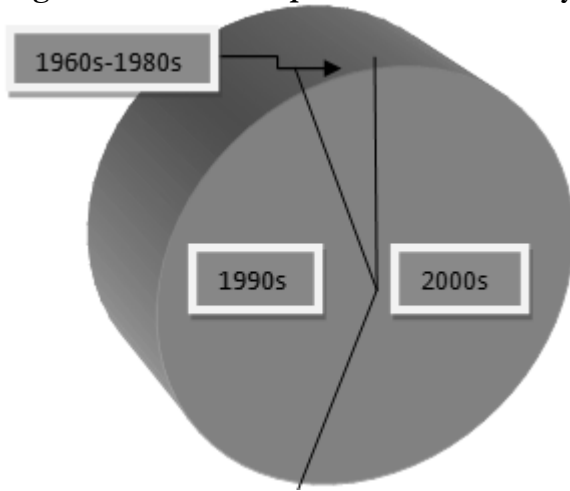
**Figure 1: Sub-regional spread of incumbency defeats in Africa**



**Source:** Drawn by the authors

**Figure 1** shows the sub-regional spread of incumbency defeats in Africa. It captures vividly that West Africa accounts for 70% of incumbency defeats in Africa, while East Africa, Central Africa and Southern Africa are responsible for 15%, 8% and 7%, respectively. Second and third to North Africa in the rank of “not free” and “authoritarian regime” are Central Africa and the East Africa sub-regions, respectively. This has also reverberated in the number of occasions incumbents got to be dislodged out of offices in competitive elections in these sub-regions. The case of the Southern Africa sub-region is paradoxical. It is arguably the sub-region some of whose popular states, namely: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa (except Swaziland or Eswatini) are ranked either “free” or “partly free” and whose political systems are adjudged to be either “full democracy” or “flawed democracy” by the HFI (2019). Yet, the rate of incumbency defeat has remained low. The only two cases in this region came from Madagascar and Zambia. While the inability of the Southern African states to successfully defeat incumbents with all the favourable ingredients remain puzzling, the hybrid political systems and limited freedom in Madagascar and Zambia are themselves capable of initiating and sustaining incumbency defeats in the two countries.



**Figure 2: Historical spread of incumbency defeats in Africa**

**Source:** Drawn by the authors

Graphically, **Figure 2** shows that since the early 1960s when most African countries started gaining their political independence to the end of the 1980s, only one incumbent African national leader lost to his challenger. That was in 1967. Notably, the periods of the late 1950s and the early 1960s via the 1970s largely constitute Africa's decolonization and independence era. The combined effects of multiple factors such as delayed independence, inherited colonial monarchical system of government, military coups and interventions in governance, etc. made elections and democratic transition rather difficult.

The 1990s, however, marked a departure in the continent's electoral democracy after decades of suffocating authoritarianism (Omotola & Onuoha, 2018). This period, otherwise referred to as Africa's 'springtime' or 'second independence' (Schraeder, 1995, p.1160), witnessed a dramatic intensification of the wind of democratization, which began blowing since the global third wave of democracy. It was characterized by demilitarization of governance with unprecedented emphasis on electoral democracy, competitive multi-party politics, inclusiveness, and civil liberties. The gross consequence of this became the subsequent emergence of an era where military authoritarianism was vigorously de-emphasized, followed by massive formation of political parties and conduct of elections for the recruitment of political leaders at all levels of governance. It was, indeed, an era in which "the normative value of a democratization process replaced economically stagnant, authoritarian, single-party systems with more economically

vibrant, democratic forms of governance” (Schraeder, 1995, p.1161). These developments arguably accounted for the surge in the frequency at which incumbents lost to oppositions/challengers in the 1990s. There were nine (9) instances where and when incumbent national leaders lost elections.

These democratic gains have consistently increased, even into the 21st century with somewhat renewed vigour that has further emboldened oppositions. With just two decades into the century, at least fifteen (15) incumbent African Heads of State and/or Government have lost re-elections. The pattern is becoming more and more palpable, informing, therefore, a very high probability of a prognostic avowal that many more African incumbents are likely to lose their seats to organized opposition in future elections.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The role of incumbency power in the political transition process in Africa is over-hyped. Whereas the existence and marginal effect of the phenomenon cannot be entirely denied, the analytico-explanatory valence often ascribed to the phenomenon are, *stricto sensu*, both the consequences and manifestations of sundry other factors. Prominent among these are the overall non-sophistication of the political culture and the low level of political institutionalization in Africa. As evident from the preceding expositions, what is generally seen as the power of incumbency is only a product and reflection of weak political institutionalization. Of course, this weakness of political institutions and the rules either embedded in them or emanating from them further reflect Africa’s stage in the historical evolution of global democratic political culture. Therefore, the seeming influence of the power of incumbency in the transition processes in emerging democracies will never remain resiliently so, given that it is only but a phase in the historical evolution of democratic political culture that will eventually yield itself to the pervasive global wind of democratization and all its trappings. Recent electoral, indeed political developments, in which power has smoothly and successfully changed hands from incumbents to opposition/challengers, have shown that the power of incumbency is either a mirage or a dying reality.

It is our informed recommendation, therefore, that the ongoing crusade for global democratization be vigorously pursued in Africa and with sustained tempo, too. The success stories in many African

countries have also buoyed up the hopes of oppositions across Africa to stoutly challenge the incumbents and their inflated sense of powerfulness. This audacious spirit and tempo must not waver. So that in the end, African citizenry will not only marvel at the rapidity with which the 'beauty' of incumbency power has been slain upon its high places (Africa), they shall also gleefully ask: 'O power of incumbency, where is thy sting?'

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