

Working Paper No. 157

Political risks facing African democracies: Evidence from Afrobarometer

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Abstract

Where are African countries headed politically? How resilient are Africa's governments, regimes, and states? What are the characteristics of political risk? This paper is motivated by a desire to discover whether it is possible to identify early-warning indicators of risk to African political systems. We suggest that Afrobarometer survey data may be used to systematically track trends in mass political support – such as approval for incumbent governments, satisfaction with political regime performance, and the popular legitimacy of state institutions. Where trends in dimensions of popular disapproval turn sharply upward, we infer increasing political risk. The paper is anchored empirically with 15 years' worth of public opinion data for selected African countries and offers interpretations of what these observations might mean. The analysis is both retrospective – connecting empirical trends to known episodes of instability in Mali, Kenya, and Zimbabwe – and prospective – raising red flags for countries like Ghana, among others, once considered stable but currently facing new political strains.

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Introduction

Where are African countries headed politically? How resilient are Africa's governments, regimes, and states? What are the characteristics of various dimensions of political risk? Assuming that intermittent political instability is an inevitable adjunct to political development, when and where are risks of instability most likely to arise? These questions are as important to practitioners of democracy promotion as they are to political scientists.

Yet analysts are understandably uncomfortable about their inability to anticipate unexpected events. The most dramatic instance in recent world history is our collective failure to predict the sudden collapse of Soviet communism and the end of the Cold War (Gaddis, 1992; Hopf, 1993). In retrospect, it now seems that most observers accepted an ideologically driven portrayal of the USSR as "a totalitarian, atheistic monolith, imperial and expanding" (Singer, 1996, para. 11). We overlooked the country's unproductive economy, stultified bureaucracy, and a citizenry that was "dissatisfied, sullen, and ready for change" (Singer, 1996, para. 7). In short, a deteriorating Soviet system was losing its capacity to deliver desired political and economic goods, and only those analysts with a finger on the pulse of popular opinion had a good appreciation of its likely demise.

There are lessons in the rapid unravelling of the Soviet system for analysts interested in democracy and development in Africa. Take the case of Mali. Many observers – perhaps in search of a political success story – readily embraced encouraging accounts of this country's trajectory as a vibrant example of African democracy (Bingen, Robinson, & Staatz, 2000; Halperin, Siegle, & Weinstein, 2004; Pringle, 2006; Wing, 2008). Three open elections and two peaceful transitions of power after 1992, anchored by a growing economy and relative social stability, seemed to set the stage for Mali's democratic consolidation. Yet with remarkable speed during 2012, the country succumbed to a multidimensional political crisis marked by a separatist insurgency, a military coup, and the breakdown of state control over northern territories. Many citizens celebrated when soldiers ousted civilian rulers. Yet few analysts saw the crisis coming.

This paper is motivated by a desire to discover whether it is possible to identify early-warning (or "leading") indicators of risk to African political systems. As a proposed entry point, we suggest that Afrobarometer survey data may be used to measure emerging risks facing African polities, at least as reflected in the perceptions of African citizens. We recognize that public opinion is only one of many ways to assess the emergence of risk. But at a minimum, Afrobarometer data allows analysts to track systematically whether various dimensions of mass political support – such as approval for incumbent governments, satisfaction with political regime performance, and the popular legitimacy of state institutions – are growing or shrinking. Where trends in dimensions of popular *disapproval* turn sharply upward, we infer increasing political risk.

There is evidence of precisely such early warnings in Mali. Malians began to express unhappiness with the incumbent government of Amadou Toumani Touré (president from 2002 to 2012) well before the political crisis of 2012. Disapproval of the job performance of elected leaders jumped upward between 2002 and 2008. Only in retrospect, however, do we recognize that a rapid rise in popular disapproval of leadership performance may have been a harbinger of a subsequent collapse of parts of the political system. There was simply too little popular commitment to elected government once citizens concluded that rulers, increasingly regarded as inept and corrupt, were incapable of maintaining the country's political order.

Without implying equivalence in conditions across countries, we think there may be lessons from the Malian experience for other parts of Africa. For example, U.S. President Barack Obama chose Ghana as a destination for his first official visit to Africa in part because of its strong democratic credentials; he later described the country as a model for political development on the continent. The latest Afrobarometer surveys in Ghana, however, report a drastic increase in job disapproval for the incumbent government between 2008 and 2014.

This data strongly suggests that swelling budget deficits, frequent electricity blackouts, and slowing economic growth have fuelled public resentment (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015; Minter, 2015). The government of John Dramani Mahama may therefore encounter difficulty in its bid for re-election in Ghana's 2016 polls. More importantly, public disillusionment with the government of the day also raises the spectre of broader possible risks for Ghana's regime of democracy and the legitimacy of its state.

This paper represents an exploratory effort to assess risk factors in African political systems. We start by discussing key concepts, identifying potential risk indicators, constructing composite indices, and weighing approaches to comparison. The next section describes past trends in public opinion in three African countries – Mali, Kenya, and Zimbabwe – that unfolded in advance of landmark political crises. We use these retrospective cases to demonstrate “proof of concept” for applying public opinion data to the measurement of political risk. The paper then asks whether these indicators can be used prospectively. We search for early-warning signs of popular political disaffection – first in contemporary Ghana and then with reference to a dozen other African countries – on the working assumption that these might predict emerging political risks.

We candidly admit the preliminary nature of our forecasting enterprise by concluding with a number of unresolved issues for future reflection and research. Our modest purpose is not to claim definitive results. Instead we wish to initiate a debate on whether public opinion data can be used to detect political risk factors that undermine the resilience of governments, regimes, and states in Africa.

Framework

What is risk? This four-letter word refers to an elusive concept; analysts are yet to agree on what it entails, how it can be identified, whether and how it can be measured, and whether it can be mitigated. Broadly speaking, “risk is inevitably some form of engagement with uncertainty” (Althaus, 2008, p. 12; see also Slovic, 2000, 2010; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999; Taleb, 2012). Uncertainty, however, is inherently unpredictable, even unknowable. By contrast, risk is a probabilistic phenomenon that, at least in principle, is subject to observation, measurement, and perhaps even statistical modelling (Knight, 1921; Langlois & Cosgel, 1993; Spiegelhalter & Reisch, 2011). From a political perspective, risk implies an unexpected disturbance to a prevailing institutional order. In other words, political risk implies an impending breakdown in the orderly management of power.

The term “risk” therefore carries a built-in normative assumption that the existing order is desirable and that uncertainty should be avoided. But this may not always be the case. Viewed through an economic lens, risk is not exclusively dangerous; while it always involves potential for loss, it may also hold opportunity for gain. Politically, however, the term usually refers to downside hazards such as disputed elections, street violence, rebel insurgencies, or military coups. These manifestations of political instability clearly have negative connotations for democratic regimes. But even so, some analysts consider that the essence of democracy is to “institutionalize uncertainty,” for example by setting competitive rules for elections and pluralizing policy debates (Przeworski, 1991; Alexander, 2002). Moreover, a measure of uncertainty may help to destabilize entrenched authoritarian regimes and lead (on the upside) to positive consequences for democratic development.

This paper considers *political risk*, that is, the likelihood that actors wielding power will face political or policy circumstances that exceed their management control. Before actors can seek to ameliorate this kind of risk, they first must correctly identify the type of risk and the part of the political system to which it applies. As we see it, a political system is composed of several nested structures, as follows (Fishman, 1990; Karl, 2005; Cummings, 2013):

- An incumbent *government*, that is, the ruling group of leaders, who may be elected or unelected;

- A political *regime*, or the “rules of the political game” for choosing leaders and exercising power; simply conceived, regimes fall on a continuum from democracy through hybrid arrangements to autocracy;
- A *state*, that is, an established set of institutions of public authority; at the core of the state are coercive and extractive institutions such as courts, armed forces, and tax agencies.

Of these political structures, governments are the most ephemeral; groups of political leaders come and go as a result of elections or other forms of elite contestation. Regimes are somewhat more durable; while regimes may sometimes change, democracies routinely (and autocracies sometimes) survive the circulation of governments. The most permanent edifice in the political system is the state. As a structure of domination and coordination, its institutions almost always persist through time regardless of regular changes of government and even despite occasional regime transitions.

In this paper, we seek to measure three dimensions of political risk: to the incumbent government, to the political regime, and to the state. We expect that these elements, which embody differing levels of political institutionalization, represent a scale of escalating risk. Political systems can most readily absorb risk to a particular government; indeed, some alternation of governments is to be expected in democratic regimes. Risk to a political regime, however, has more far-reaching consequences, especially if it signifies backsliding from democracy to autocracy. Finally, the most serious risk to a political system is when state institutions begin to break down and the state itself becomes fragile or – worst-case scenario – fails completely.

How, then, to measure political risk? Afrobarometer¹ offers numerous indicators of public attitudes toward incumbent leaders, democracy, and alternate regimes, as well as the legitimacy of the state. Since all these indicators measure political support for various parts of the political system, they measure resilience rather than risk. Thus, we invert these indicators in order to make them operational for the purposes of the present research; in each case we record the proportion of the adult population that does *not* extend approval or support.

¹ Afrobarometer is a cross-national survey research project managed by a network of African social scientists. It measures public opinion on key political, social, and economic issues. In each of the most recent Afrobarometer surveys – Round 5 (2011-2013) and Round 6 (underway 2014-2015) – data covers more than 50,000 respondents in face-to-face interviews in 35 African countries. The survey protocols require nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 per country selected randomly using a multi-stage cluster design. Data is weighted to represent each respondent proportionally and each country equally. Depending on sample size, results for each country are reliable within margins of sampling error of +/-3% or +/-2% at a level of 95% confidence. Results for all 35 countries represent the views of approximately three-quarters (76%) of the continent’s population. The average level of wealth in these countries in 2011 (GNI per capita = \$2,033) closely approximated the average wealth level of all African countries (\$2,296). In addition, the proportion of “free” – that is, liberal democratic – countries was close to the continental norm (22%). As such, Afrobarometer surveys accurately represent not only individual countries but also the continent as a whole. For further information, visit www.afrobarometer.org.



The indicators² are:

Risk to the government: the proportions of all survey respondents who:

- Disapprove of the job performance of the incumbent national president over the previous year;
- Disapprove of the job performance of the respondent's parliamentary representative (e.g. member of Parliament or National Assembly deputy) over the previous year; and
- Disapprove of the job performance of the respondent's local government representative (e.g. district or municipal councillor) over the previous year.

Risk to the regime: the proportions of all survey respondents who:

- *Are *dissatisfied* with the way that democracy works in their country; and
- *Consider that their country is *not* a democracy or is a democracy with major problems.³

Risk to the state: the proportions of all survey respondents who:

- *Do *not* agree that the courts have the right to make binding decisions;
- *Do *not* agree that the police always have the right to make people obey the law; and
- *Do *not* agree that the tax authorities always have the right to make people pay taxes.

Table 1 justifies the construction of composite scales that summarize the above types of political risk at the conceptual level. Factor analysis (principal components method) produces three factors. We label these factors as risk respectively to government, regime, and state. For the most part, each cluster of indicators coheres around the concept that it purports to measure.⁴ Each scale explains two-thirds or more of the variance in a particular type of risk and is reliable above standard levels of reliability. Importantly, too, the three types of risk are related to one another. A factor analysis of all eight indicators yields a single valid and reliable dimension. Thus, we can also verify the existence of a master concept of political risk, of which risk to the government, regime, and state are subsidiary dimensions.

² Survey questions (and reported response categories) were as follows:

- Risk to the government:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? ("Disapprove" or "Strongly disapprove")

- Risk to the regime:

Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [your country]? ("Not very satisfied" or "Not at all satisfied")

In your opinion, how much of a democracy is [your country] today? ("Not a democracy" or "A democracy with major problems")

- Risk to the state:

For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

The courts have the right to make decisions that people always have to abide by.

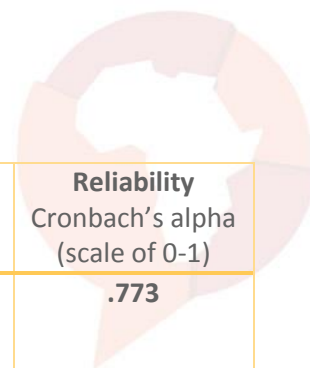
The police always have the right to make people obey the law.

The tax authorities always have the right to make people pay taxes.

("Disagree" or "Strongly disagree")

³ This construct – popular satisfaction with democracy plus the perceived extent of democracy – is used widely in other Afrobarometer analyses, often labelled “the supply of democracy.”

⁴ A dimension of risk to the state clearly stands alone. But there is some overlap between the scales for risk to the government and risk to the regime, which offers a first hint that citizens may not clearly differentiate these concepts.

**Table 1: Types of political risk, results of factor analysis**

| Scale | Indicators | Validity Variance explained (percentage) | Reliability Cronbach's alpha (scale of 0-1) |
|--|---|--|---|
| Risk to the government | | 69.0 | .773 |
| | Job approval of president | | |
| | Job approval of parliamentarian | | |
| | Job approval of local government councillor | | |
| Risk to the regime | | 82.9* | .791* |
| | Satisfaction with democracy | | |
| | Perceived extent of democracy | | |
| Risk to the state | | 64.7 | .725 |
| | Courts have right to make decisions | | |
| | Police have right to make people obey | | |
| | Tax office has right to make people pay | | |
| Political risk (master concept) | All indicators | 71.4 | .709 |

Source, Afrobarometer Round 5, circa 2012 (N= 51,605 respondents, 34 countries)

*Strictly speaking, the regime scale is a two-item construct: Pearson's $r=0.658$ ($p<.0001$)

We propose to measure the various types of political risks in several ways:

- Our main approach is to trace *trends over time* within each country. As stated, a sudden and sustained increase in the proportion of the public offering negative opinions is taken as a sign of the emergence of risk. Therefore, the most relevant point of comparison for assessing current risk is the level of any given political scale or indicator during an earlier period. At least initially, the extent of political risk faced by any African country is best viewed, interpreted, and understood within the setting of its own recent history.
- Having measured risk *relative* to a country's own experience, we are also interested in *absolute* levels of risk. Generally speaking, we consider the existence of absolute majorities or minorities of public opinion to indicate whether risk is high or low.
- Lastly, we seek to situate political risk measurement in cross-national *comparative* context. We make selective comparisons across countries in order to anchor results against continental standards using both quantitative contrasts and qualitative judgments.

Which type of political risk is likely to predominate? We expect to find more risk to incumbent governments than to political regimes. It is logical to assume that turnover will be more frequent for particular leaders than for whole forms of government. One test of a functioning democracy, for example, is whether citizens can peacefully change a country's leadership team without endangering the democratic dispensation itself. By contrast, autocracies are especially vulnerable when an entrenched dictator exits the political scene, because these regimes lack proven rules for negotiating a leadership transition.

However, to the extent that hybrid African regimes have not yet become consolidated democracies, citizens may well conflate disaffection with incumbent leaders with disillusionment with the political regime.⁵ On the safe assumption that citizens rarely

⁵ See previous footnote.

conceptualize the world like political scientists – that is, distinguishing between governments and regimes – we intend to explore this hypothesis, which may prove important for the survival of democratic regimes. Finally, we expect to discover the least amount of risk at the level of the state. This is so because African states, while often possessing weak institutions, have nonetheless proved remarkably durable (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982). As stated earlier, states inherently enjoy a structural inertia that tends to persist through time. Moreover, as Pierre Englebort (2009, 2013) argues, all actors in the African political arena – whether elite or mass, ruler or rebel – share as an article of faith a profound commitment to the preservation of the independence and sovereignty of the existing African state system.

Proof of concept

Risk assessment addresses practical political problems: Are rulers losing support? Is democracy declining? Will states fail? The evaluation of risk is therefore best conducted with reference to specific cases. Hence we present evidence – both quantitative and qualitative – in the form of brief country overviews selected to illustrate the proposed methodology. Because proof of concept is a first requirement, we begin with retrospective cases. Is there evidence in Africa that past crises of political order were preceded by observable declines in public approval of political system performance?

Mali

Having experienced a full-blown political crisis, Mali constitutes an important test case. Were there early-warning signs of impending risk that political observers, ourselves included, overlooked in the pre-crisis period?

President Amadou Toumani Touré (known as “ATT”), a former military officer who had steered Mali through a transition to multiparty democracy in 1991, entered office in 2002 via a moderately free election with the endorsement of a well-regarded outgoing president. Western governments welcomed the peaceful transfer of power from one civilian leader to another – an event rare in the region – by increasing already high levels of development and military aid to the Malian government (van de Walle, 2013; Bergamaschi, 2014). At the outset, ATT enjoyed high popular approval ratings of more than 80%, and almost seven in 10 Malians commended the performance of elected National Assembly and local government representatives. To all appearances, the government of the new incumbents initially looked resilient.

Yet these advantages were squandered as the political insiders lapsed into “long-standing anti-democratic practices” (Whitehouse, 2012, para. 7) as well as “systemic corruption and broken promises” (Thurston, 2013, p. 1). The president used his support base in several political parties to ram legislation through the National Assembly and to stifle political debate in the mass media and civil society. He negotiated a controversial peace accord with a loose alliance of Tuareg rebels in 2006 that included the withdrawal of the national army from large swathes of the North but failed to bring development to that long-neglected region. In the meantime, civilian officials and military commanders went on a spree of nepotism and embezzlement, pocketing aid intended to fight tropical diseases and to pay and equip soldiers. Leading figures in the government were implicated in scandals involving illicit trade in drugs and the forced seizure of private properties in the capital city. As the rule of law dissolved, vigilante killings rose in Bamako.

Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that the sitting government experienced an erosion of political support. [Figure 1A](#), reflecting [risk to the government](#), shows disapproval of the job performance of elected leaders, which jumped by 17 percentage points between 2002 and 2005 (to 28%) and then rose a further 13 percentage points (to 41%) between 2005 and 2008. Malians reserved their most intense displeasure for representatives in the National Assembly, whose disapproval ratings grew even more sharply than for local government councillors and the national president. By 2008, citizens were equally split (45% each) in praising and denouncing the job performance of Assembly members. Further Afrobarometer



measurements of political risk were taken in December 2012 and December 2014, when results refer to an interim successor government. But extrapolating the observed growth in risk to the incumbent government beyond 2008, it seems likely that ATT and his legislative allies would have experienced difficulty in winning the next open election.

As it happened, the election scheduled for April 2012 was never held. Catastrophic events intervened. In January, ethnic separatists proclaimed a breakaway state of Azawad, a rebellion soon hijacked by religious extremists pursuing *jihād* from bases deep in the Sahara desert. The loss of central state control over Mali's vast northern territories triggered a military mutiny in March 2012 that turned into a coup when ATT promptly fled the country. In the end, Mali's vaunted democratic regime simply crumbled, and the Malian state itself partly collapsed. The southward march of the insurgents was only reversed by the intervention of a French expeditionary force and the establishment of a stabilization regime by the United Nations. And only with fresh elections in 2013, driven again by sponsors in the international community, was a fragile democracy tentatively restored.⁶

What does the Afrobarometer data say about regime risks in Mali? [Figure 1B](#) traces a gradual upward trend in the scale of risk to the political regime during a period when, formally at least, Mali was a multiparty democracy. Between 2002 and 2008, the proportion of the adult population who thought that political elites were not supplying democracy rose modestly, from 30% to 40%. Popular dissatisfaction with "the way democracy works" grew more sharply, rising 14 percentage points over this period. Interestingly, the impact of regime risk was even more evident in retrospect, that is, after democratic rules had been smashed by a military coup; by December 2012, almost two out of three Malians were dissatisfied with democracy.⁷

By this time, almost half of all citizens also thought that "all" or "most" government officials were "involved in corruption" (Afrobarometer Round 5, not shown). The degree to which they expressed satisfaction with democracy was negatively associated with these widespread perceptions of official graft, which suggests a possible causal mechanism for rising perceptions of regime risk.⁸ It is noteworthy that, as Malians lost confidence in democracy, their tolerance of authoritarian alternatives such as military rule began to rise. True, a majority (58% in 2012) rejected the idea of a regime in which "the army comes in to govern the country." But the proportion that approved of military rule rose from 25% in 2008 (before the coup) to 34% in 2012 (after the coup). Relative to other places in Africa, popular support for military rule (which averaged just 16% across 33 countries in 2012) has always been high in Mali. In this regard, risk to democracy in Mali emanates not only from a corrupt political elite, but also from elements within the populace who apparently remain nostalgic for authoritarian forms of rule.

What about risk to the state? In [Figure 1C](#), a basic trend of rising risk over time is again evident. The values on the Afrobarometer scale of risk to the state almost doubled between 2002 and 2008 (from 10% to 19%), though from a low base. And in attributing causes to the political crisis in Mali, citizens cite "the weakness of the state" (16%) second only to "a lack of patriotism among leaders" (31%). We take these responses to mean that people recognize that the institutions of the state – whether public bureaucracies, courts of law, or the armed forces – were unable to respond to challenges from the political environment, including the external shock of foreign invasion, and had eroded from within.

⁶ Figures for Mali in December 2014 are drawn from a draft data set (prior to final cleaning and weighting) and are therefore provisional.

⁷ The survey sample for the 2012 survey was truncated. Due to armed hostilities, coverage was restricted to six southern regions (Bamako, Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou, and Sikasso). Three northern regions (Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu) were excluded. The latter regions constitute half of the country's land area but contain only one 10th of the population.

⁸ Pearson's $r = -0.129$, $p < 0.001$



Figure 1A: Mali: Risk to the government | 2001-2014

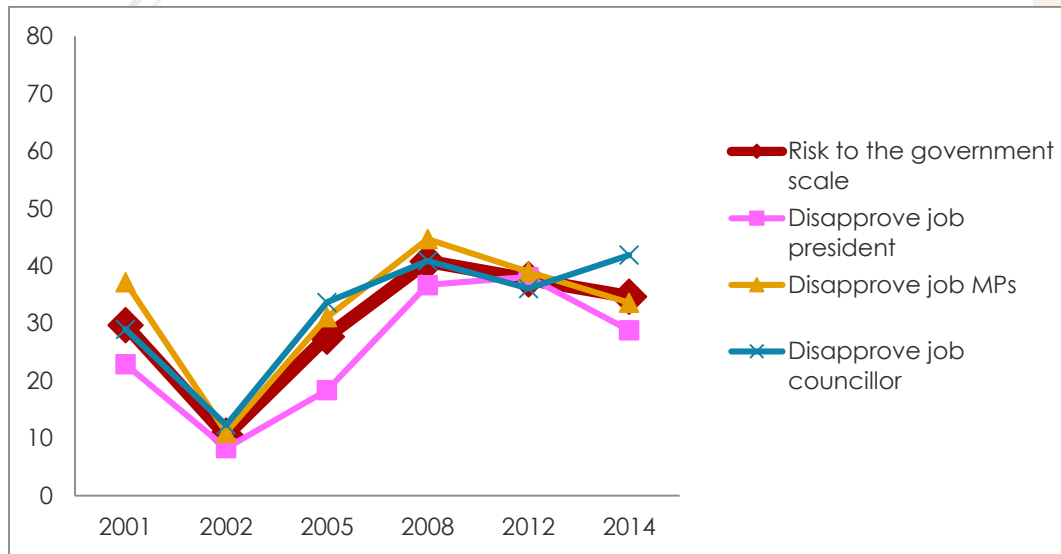


Figure 1B: Mali: Risk to the regime | 2001-2014

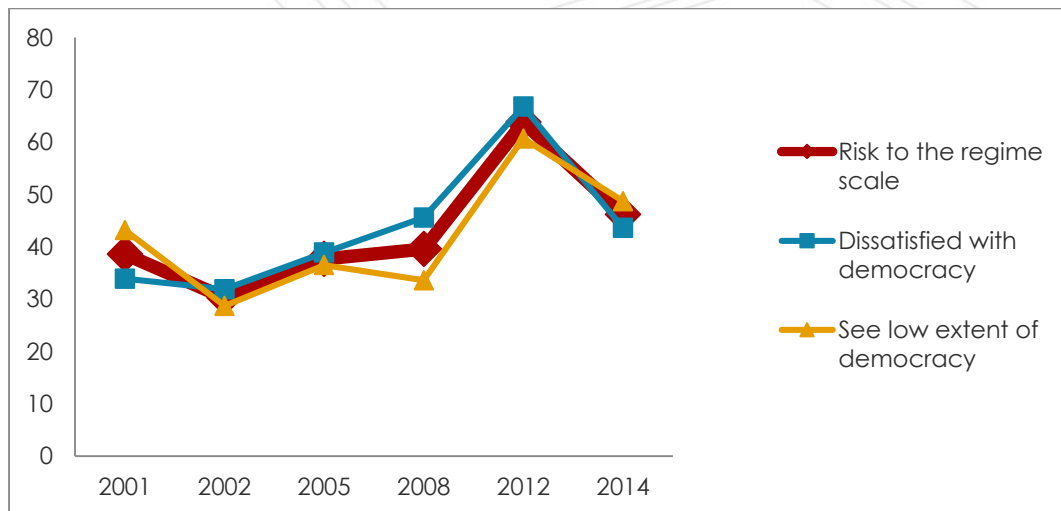
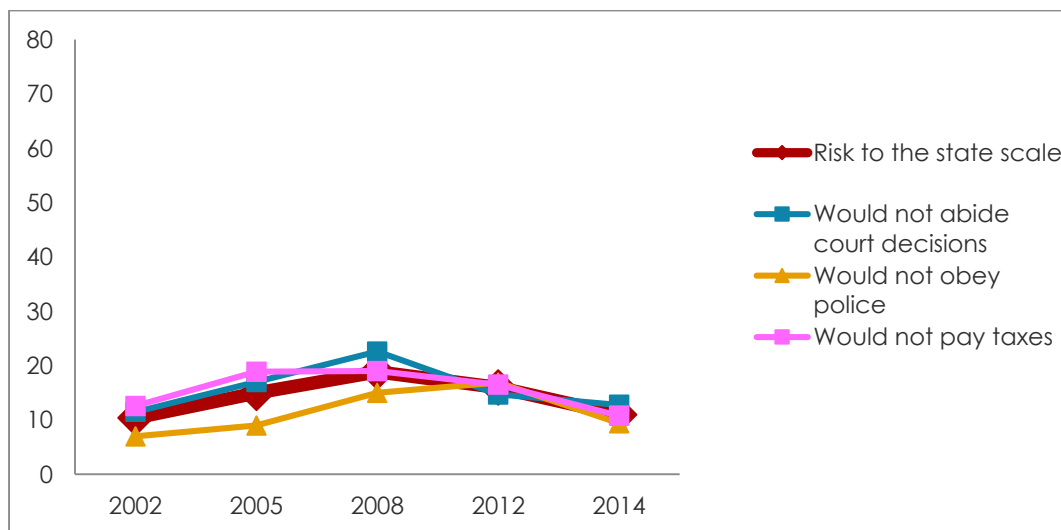


Figure 1C: Mali: Risk to the state | 2002-2014



But for two reasons, citizens in Mali seem to express less concern about the legitimacy of the state than about the rules of democracy. First, even if popular willingness to disobey state institutions has risen in recent years, levels of perceived risk to the state remain low. Second, even before the northern insurgency was pushed back and an elected government was restored, Malians thought that state structures were on the mend. By the end of 2014, just one in 10 (11%) thought the state itself was at risk; instead, the vast majority of citizens continued to confer legitimacy on public institutions. The 2012 and 2014 surveys reveal a “rally round the flag” effect, with increasing numbers of citizens showing a willingness to voluntarily comply with the commands of the central state. In this regard, at least for the moment, a weak Malian state survived a profound political crisis.

By 2014, risk to the regime had also eased significantly (down from 64% to 46%), perhaps due to the reconstitution of an elected civilian government by the end of 2013. We take this as evidence that even fragile democracies can make a relatively quick recovery from political instability, at least in the eyes of ordinary citizens. That said, it is still noteworthy that almost half of the electorate remained dissatisfied with democracy, a level some 17 percentage points higher than in 2002, when risk to the regime was at its lowest.

Kenya

Formally, Kenya transitioned from a *de jure* one-party system to multiparty democracy in 1991. But another decade passed before opposition parties were able to unify in a National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), led by Mwai Kibaki, and win national elections in 2002. This historic alternation of power broke the long-standing electoral dominance of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), the party of independence previously led by Jomo Kenyatta (1963-1978) and Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002). But the question remained whether a new government would be able to escape a legacy of semi-authoritarian governance fuelled by ethnic favouritism, political patronage, and electoral violence (Mueller, 2008).

The performance of the Kibaki administration was mixed. On one hand, the new government presided over an economic boom (reaching record 7% growth in 2007), an improvement in the quality of public management, and the introduction of free primary education. On the other hand, the government allowed official graft to assume grand proportions and failed to punish miscreants, a record that led to the resignation of John Githongo, the respected head of the government's anti-corruption commission. Moreover, the ruling coalition was dogged by intense internal disagreements over the distribution of cabinet positions (mainly to the president's allies from the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru ethnic groups) and the content of a draft constitution (which failed to curtail presidential powers and was defeated in a 2005 referendum). The successful mobilization of a “no” vote by Raila Odinga and his Luo, Kalenjin, and Luhya allies effectively signalled the break-up of the National Rainbow Coalition.

Elections in December 2007 presented the country with a national crisis. When, after a considerable delay, the Electoral Commission of Kenya declared Kibaki the winner of the presidential contest, Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), which had secured a majority of seats in the National Assembly, cried foul. The dispute escalated into full-scale inter-ethnic conflict from late December 2007 to late February 2008. Some of the violence was spontaneous, but a significant proportion was allegedly planned, organised, and financed by political leaders. At first Kalenjin and Luo were the main perpetrators, but Kikuyu victims quickly regrouped and retaliated. The fighting, which claimed the lives of about 1,500 people and displaced at least 300,000, was the worst since independence and shattered Kenya's reputation as one of Africa's most stable new democracies.

Was the political crisis foreseeable? Do trends in public opinion raise warnings about the emergence of political risks? As before, we start by examining risk to the government, a scale measured by the evaluations of ordinary Kenyans concerning the job performance of elected officials. As shown in [Figure 2A](#), people initially expressed heady optimism about the entry into office of a united opposition via the landmark 2002 elections. In August 2003, a

remarkable 92% approved of Kibaki's performance as president; only 7% disapproved. But by September 2005, after revelations that corruption had cost U.S. \$1 billion, Githongo's flight into "voluntary" exile, and the approach of a controversial constitutional referendum, the bloom was off the rose: 33% disapproved of the president's performance. Thereafter, through the controversial 2007 elections and its violent aftermath, Kibaki's popularity settled on a plateau and never recovered. Moreover, public sentiment was starkly divided along ethnic lines: Whereas only 20% of Kikuyu survey respondents disapproved of the president's performance, a majority (54%) of Luo respondents did so.

Throughout this period, citizens were less enamoured of members of Parliament (MPs) and local government councillors. From the outset in 2002, almost one in three disapproved of their job performance, and by 2005, more than half did so (59% and 54% respectively). In the case of MPs, the sharp increase in negative evaluations may have resulted in part from Parliament's approval of huge salary increases for its members in 2003, ostensibly to inoculate them against bribery by the executive branch. Across the various Afrobarometer surveys in Kenya, the risk to the government scale was driven mainly by public sentiment about MPs and local councillors.

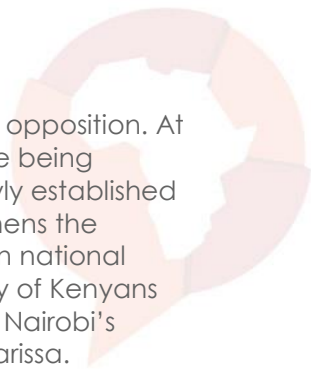
The fact that risk to the government seemed to moderate and stabilize after 2005 was a hint that the election of 2007 was destined to be closely contested. This outcome was especially likely if voters chose to overlook performance considerations and instead voted on the basis of ethnic solidarity. Under these circumstances, it was unclear whether even an unpopular Kibaki government would be rejected by a polarized electorate that was deeply divided along identity lines.⁹

Trends are much clearer with regard to risk to the political regime. Figure 2B shows the proportion of citizens who were concerned about the quality of Kenya's democracy, which rose steadily during the 2000s. Whereas in 2003, just 17% of Kenyans worried about the nature and extent of their country's democracy, almost half (49%) did so by 2008. A commission of inquiry into the disputed 2007 presidential election concluded that a true winner could never be determined because the integrity of the count was irretrievably polluted. And a commission of inquiry into the post-election violence concluded that the winner-take-all electoral system encouraged political extremism and that state security agencies were ill-prepared to contain political violence in an even-handed manner. In 2008, as Kenyans waited anxiously to see whether reforms would be forthcoming to correct these institutional deficits, democracy hung in the balance (AfriMap, 2014).

The task of restoring public confidence initially fell to a government of national unity (GNU) inaugurated in April 2008 with backing from the United Nations, the African Union, and the United States. Kibaki retained the presidency, while Odinga became prime minister. The GNU did not put an end to political struggles over government positions, reduce the drumbeat of corruption scandals, or cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in prosecuting the perpetrators of electoral violence. The economic outlook, on the other hand, was boosted by the discovery of oil and water resources and the launch of a major new port project at Lamu. Perhaps the GNU's greatest achievement was the passage of a new constitution designed to strengthen rights, bolster the legislature in relation to the executive, restore credibility to the judiciary, strengthen the independence of the electoral and anti-corruption commissions, and devolve power to the local level. Approved in a national referendum in 2010, the new constitution gave Kenya its best chance yet to effectively manage ethnic inequality, official abuse of power, and legal impunity (Barkan, 2011).

General elections (Kenya's fifth since the return to multiparty democracy) were held in March 2013 under the new constitution. In the main contest between Uhuru Kenyatta's National Alliance (NA) and Odinga's ODM, Kenyatta won slightly more than half of the presidential votes. Unlike the violent aftermath of the 2007 polls, claims of fraud were taken to

⁹ In 2008, some 70% of Kenyans felt that their ethnic group was at least "sometimes ... treated unfairly by the government." Whereas just 57% of Kikuyu felt this way, fully 86% of Luo did so.



the courts, and the judges' verdict in favour of Kenyatta was accepted by the opposition. At the time of writing, devolution arrangements envisaged in the constitution were being implemented, and financial resources were being gradually transferred to newly established county governments. However, the passage of an anti-terror law, which lengthens the amount of time that terror suspects can be detained and restricts the media on national security grounds, poses a severe challenge to civil liberties. Threats to the safety of Kenyans have hardly abated, as dramatically highlighted by militant Islamist attacks on Nairobi's Westgate Mall, hotels and police stations on the coast, and the University of Garissa. Concerns persist over continuing security force abuses, including extra-judicial killings and torture of suspects. And the Kenyatta government has shown little interest in holding accountable perpetrators of the 2007 post-election violence (Mueller, 2014).

Figure 2A: Kenya: Risk to the government | 2003-2014

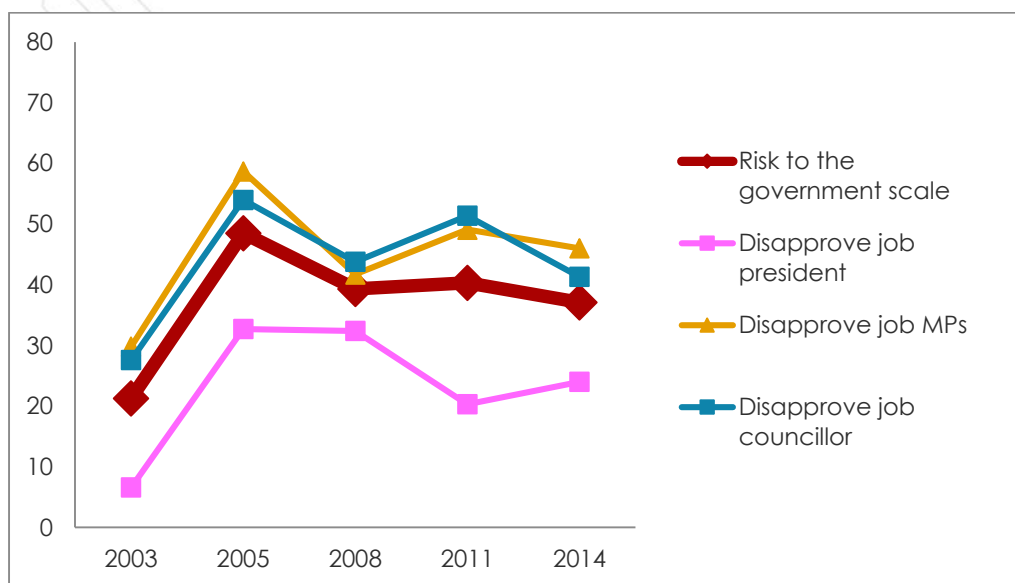
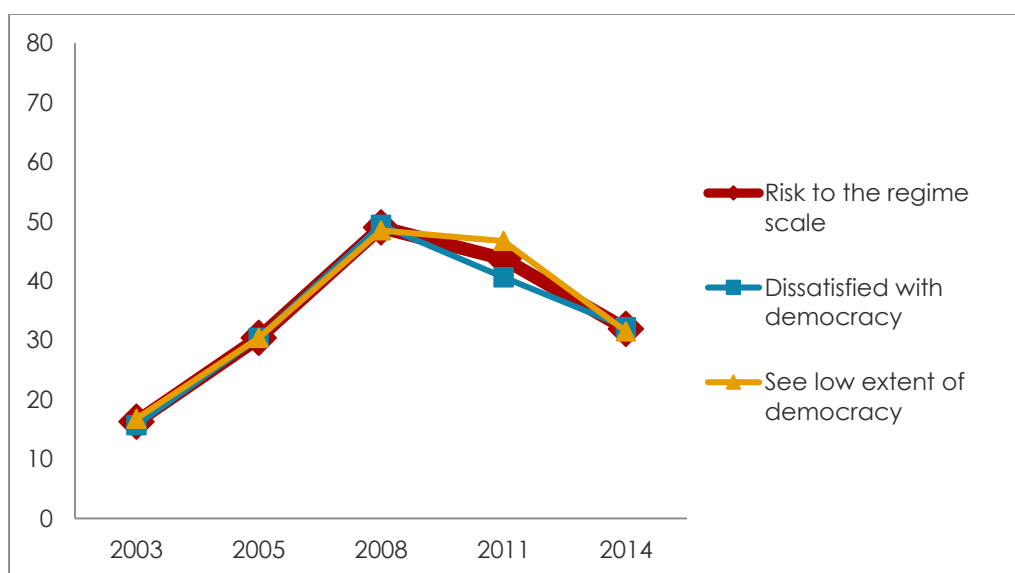
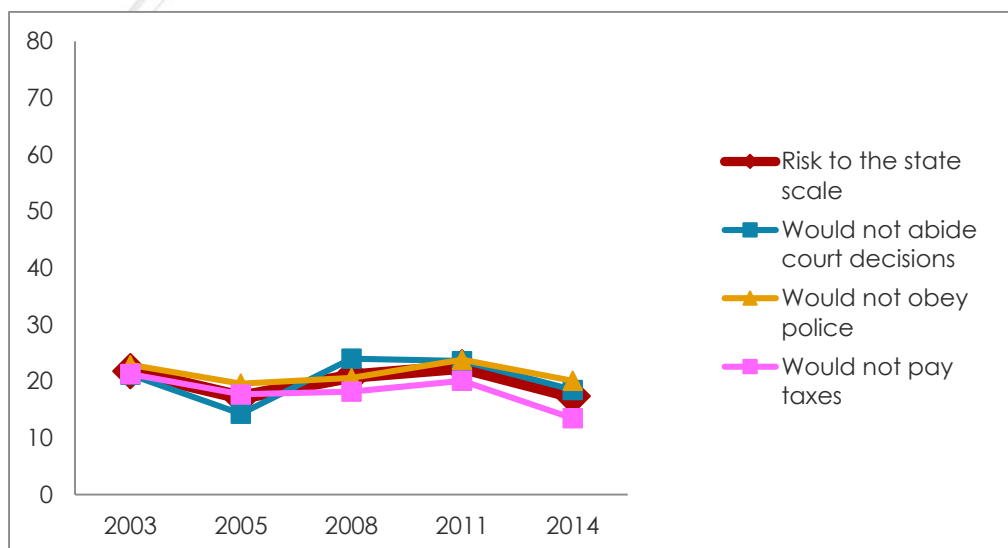


Figure 2B: Kenya: Risk to the regime | 2003-2014



**Figure 2C: Kenya: Risk to the state | 2003-2014**

On balance, this mixed record has reduced past political risks, at least in terms of our interpretation of public opinion trends. Between 2008 and 2014, risk to the incumbent government held steady at moderate levels. Importantly, post-conflict reforms and the peaceful election of 2013 seem to have reduced risk to the political regime, with only one-third of the citizenry now expressing dissatisfaction with how democracy is working or seeing a low level of democracy in the country. Finally, Figure 2C suggests a low and stable level of risk to the state. In five surveys over more than a decade, an average of four out of five Kenyan citizens have affirmed that they would comply with directives from the courts, the police, and tax authorities. This public vote of confidence in state institutions is a major resource for Kenya as the country faces growing external (and possibly internal) threats from violent extremists.

Zimbabwe

From 2000 onward, Zimbabwe suffered a profound political and economic crisis from which, by 2013, the country had only partway emerged. The political crisis was triggered by the refusal of President Robert Mugabe's ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) to cede authority to a growing Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Even after losing a constitutional referendum in 2000 and a string of parliamentary and presidential elections through 2008, ZANU-PF resorted to patronage, violence, and manipulation to cling to office. By using state power to reallocate economic resources – notably land, minerals, and foreign exchange – incumbent rulers inadvertently undermined economic production and sent the national currency into an inflationary spiral. Key public services collapsed, especially in the health and education sectors, and the quality of everyday life plummeted.

Public reactions to these disastrous developments are evident in Afrobarometer data. Even though the approach here is again retrospective rather than predictive, the observations about Zimbabwe's crisis lend additional credence to our claim that political risks are measurable using public opinion data.

Starting with risk to the government, Figure 3A shows that in three surveys conducted between 1999 and 2009, clear majorities of Zimbabwean citizens (ranging between 58% and 68%) disapproved of the performance of incumbent leaders, especially of Mugabe. Of all the trends noted in this paper, no other period in any country matches the decade-long record of public dissatisfaction with the sitting government in Zimbabwe. We conclude that, until 2009, ZANU-PF rulers were exposed to considerable political risk, which led them to believe that desperate measures were required to maintain their supremacy.

ZANU-PF reluctantly bowed to international pressure by entering a power-sharing agreement with the MDC in September 2008, which yielded a coalition government in February 2009. Citizens welcomed the move; seven out of 10 had agreed as early as 2006 that “problems in this country can only be solved if the MDC and ZANU-PF sit down and talk with one another” (Bratton, Chikwana, & Sithole, 2006, p. 105). By May 2009, two-thirds (66%) of all adult Zimbabweans concurred that “creating a coalition government was the best way to resolve the country’s recent post-election crisis” (Masunungure & Ndapwadza, 2010, p. 2), a proportion that rose to 72% by October 2010. This clear popular preference for a compromise political settlement no doubt helped to reduce the level of political risk. In the 2012 survey, public disapproval of incumbent performance – now for Zimbabwe’s so-called “inclusive” government of national unity – for the first time became a minority sentiment, professed by just 39% of the electorate. Even Mugabe benefited; his personal approval ratings turned positive and became indistinguishable from those of other elected officials.

On the other hand, as shown in [Figure 3B](#), power sharing did not reduce risk to the regime of democracy. Having directly experienced political repression and economic mismanagement, Zimbabweans had long recognized that they lived in an authoritarian regime: In 2008, a majority of 58% felt that their country was not a democracy or, at best, a democracy with major problems. After three years of coalition government, the popular perception of risk to the regime unexpectedly rose slightly (to 62% in 2012). The Round 4 Afrobarometer survey offers insight into why: A plurality of citizens regarded power sharing as an elite bargain that fell short of their preferred method of choosing governments via regular, free, and open elections. More than four out of 10 saw power sharing as “a second-best solution, to be used only when elections fail.” The rest of the electorate was divided, with one quarter seeing power sharing as “a good alternative to elections, which rarely work well” and another quarter seeing it as “a bad alternative that should never replace competitive elections.”

The power-sharing regime in Zimbabwe lasted five years (2009-2013), a full electoral cycle, which was longer than originally intended. This transitional arrangement failed to flourish for several reasons: Mugabe and his military backers never fully acknowledged the authority of MDC Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai; once in office, Tsvangirai proved a reactive, rudderless, and overly accommodating leader; and, most important, ZANU-PF retained control of the coercive agencies of the state, including the armed forces, provincial administration, and judicial system (Masunungure & Shumba, 2012; Bratton, 2014; LeBas, 2014). As a result of institutional deadlock, the main parties abandoned efforts to work together by mid-2010 and returned to electioneering for a contest that each side thought it could win. But repeated conflicts over constitutional and political reforms postponed presidential and legislative elections until July 2013, in which ZANU-PF eventually prevailed – using control of the electoral machinery – in a questionable, lopsided victory (Election Resource Centre, 2013; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2013; Zimbabwe Election Support Network, 2013).

The uneven division of power within Zimbabwe’s coalition government, which favoured ZANU-PF, provides insight into the resilience of the state. [Figure 3C](#) indicates a low level of risk to the state regardless of whether risk is measured in absolute terms (only a small minority of 12% of Zimbabweans saw risk to the state in 2012) or in comparison to other states (e.g. 16% in Mali, 23% in Kenya). In concrete terms, the government authorities in Zimbabwe retain strong residual capacity to deploy a security apparatus, to confiscate property, and to control elections throughout the country’s territory. For this reason, we find it difficult to accept conventional portrayals of Zimbabwe as one of the world’s most fragile – if not failed – states (Fund for Peace, 2014).

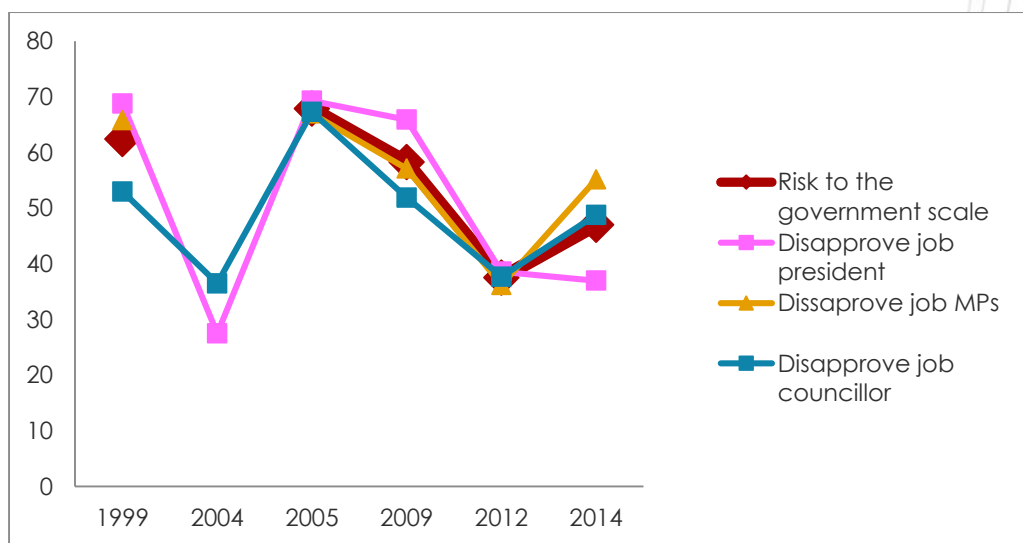
Rather, apart from an anomalous blip in 2005, the downward trend in Zimbabwe’s risk to the state scale suggests that citizens were increasingly willing over time to obey the commands of the state. Stated differently, people were apparently increasingly unlikely to challenge court decisions, refuse to pay taxes, or disobey the police. This does not automatically mean that they saw the state as legitimate, but rather that they resigned themselves to accepting

ZANU-PF's inevitable resurgence. Indeed, one can plausibly paint the party's unexpectedly strong showing in the July 2013 elections in precisely this light. The ZANU-PF election campaign, which relied heavily on formal military and informal militia, was designed explicitly to rebuild a dominant party-state and to signal to challengers that opposition was futile.

Since 2013, when ZANU-PF resumed sole control of the Zimbabwean state, the risk situation has been mixed. On one hand, risk to the incumbent government again started to rise. Mass disapproval of leadership performance went up 9 percentage points between 2012 and 2014 (from 38% to 47%), which reversed the improving trend from the power-sharing period. In this instance, growing popular displeasure was directed more at ZANU-PF legislators than at the seven-term, 90-year-old president. Disapproval of legislator performance was correlated with downturns in popular views about the condition of the national economy, both in the present and in relation to its condition one year earlier.¹⁰ These concerns reflected ZANU-PF's clumsy management of a stalling economy marked by business closures, rising unemployment, and the government's growing inability to meet the public payroll.

On the other hand, the political atmosphere eased. In a large shift of opinion, a majority of citizens no longer worried about the quality of Zimbabwe's democracy (the risk to the regime scale dropped from 62% in 2012 to 45% in 2014). Judgments about the extent of democracy were strongly correlated with perceptions of the availability of civil liberties, such as freedom to say what you think, freedom to join any political organisation, and freedom to choose for whom to vote.¹¹ Perhaps this air of political relaxation was due to the fact that the tense and controversial 2013 election had come and gone. But in a sign that Zimbabweans had not completely shrugged off the political fears of the past, more than nine out of 10 citizens (92%) continued to believe that "you must be very careful what you say about politics," the highest level so far in the current round of Afrobarometer surveys.

Figure 3A: Zimbabwe: Risk to the government | 1999-2014



¹⁰ Pearson's $r=0.141$ ($p<0.001$) and $r=0.127$ ($p<0.001$), respectively

¹¹ Pearson's $r=0.378$ ($p<.001$), $r=0.302$ ($p<.001$), and $r=0.229$ ($p<.001$), respectively

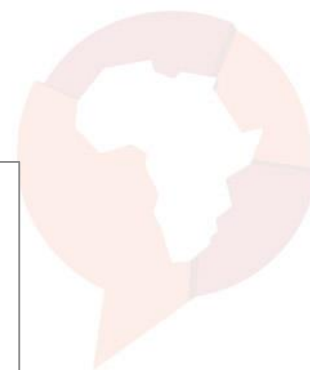


Figure 3B: Zimbabwe: Risk to the regime | 1999-2014

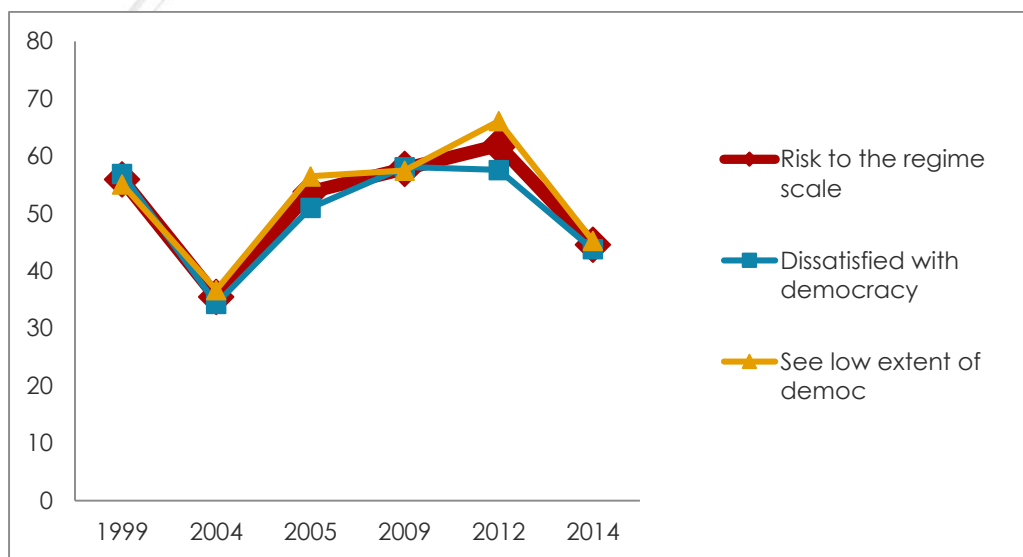
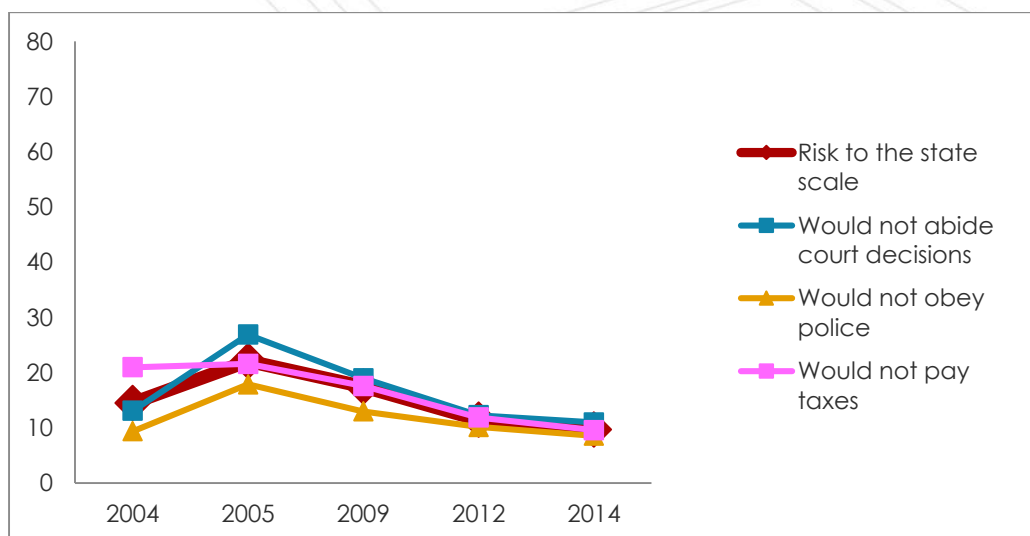


Figure 3C: Zimbabwe: Risk to the state | 2004-2014



Early warnings?

In the previous section, we have tried to show how trends in public opinion plausibly served as leading indicators of past political crises in several African countries. Changing gears from retrospective to prospective cases, we wish to propose that similar trends in public opinion might provide early-warning signals of possible oncoming instability in the political systems of selected African countries.

Ghana

From the late 1990s onward, conventional wisdom and expert studies depicted Ghana's democratic governance record as largely positive and on a broadly upward trajectory (Gyimah-Boadi, 1997, 2009; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2014; Lenhart, Menocal, & Engel, 2015). In particular, Ghana won widespread praise for its record of regular, transparent, and credible elections (which produced two peaceful electoral turnovers, in 2001 and 2009) and for its vibrant media and civil society. Public opinion, captured in Afrobarometer surveys



during the period, was largely consistent with these descriptions. From 2002 through 2008, most indicators were rising or holding steady at high levels, thus substantiating Ghana's position as one of Africa's premier democracies and leading economic performers.

However, the findings of the latest Afrobarometer survey in Ghana (Round 6, 2014) give considerable cause for worry, especially when placed side by side with results from previous survey rounds. Unlike in the past, popular opinions and perspectives on key indicators of democratic development and governance progress are negative or deteriorated. All told, Ghana between 2008 and 2014 registers increases in all political risk factors in a pattern reminiscent of Mali between 2002 and 2008.

What is the nature of the amber warning lights that seem to be flashing in Ghana? And what are the substantive developments in the Ghanaian political and economic environment (whether episodic or structural) that may be driving negative trends in recent popular perceptions of Ghana's political development?

Under the right-of-center John Kufuor-New Patriotic Party (NPP) administration (2001-2009), Ghana deepened its record of prudent economic management and multiparty democracy, whose foundations had been laid in the preceding decade under the Jerry Rawlings-National Democratic Congress (NDC) administration). In addition to presiding over a quadrupling of the gross domestic product growth rate between 2001 and 2008, the government launched widely popular social protection programs such as a national health insurance scheme, a school feeding program, and a national youth employment program. The introduction of people's assemblies and forums at which the president or his ministers fielded questions from citizens and the expansion of consultations with civil society over budgetary and other macroeconomic decisions represented a new era of government openness to the media and public at large. International development partners appeared to acknowledge these achievements in democratic governance and socioeconomic development in the early 2000s, awarding Ghana a massive cancellation of external debts (totalling more than U.S. \$4.5 billion under the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) debt relief program) and more than U.S. \$500 million under the Bush administration's Millennium Challenge Account.

The NDC returned to power in 2009 with John Atta Mills as president (having beaten his main opponent, Nana Akufo Addo, by less than 0.5% of presidential votes). And following Mills' death in office in July 2012, his vice president, Mahama, was sworn into office to serve the remainder of the four-year term. Mahama and the NDC retained the presidency and control of the legislature in December of the same year. To outward appearances, Ghana's system of constitutional democracy continued to flourish. The independence of the judiciary and other key democratic governance institutions remained largely intact; and a vibrant media and civil society continued to prevail.

Yet all has not been well. The NDC had ridden to power on an effective election campaign that raised public expectations about improvements in economic and living conditions, an end to power blackouts, significant reductions in official corruption and impunity, and increases in government accountability and responsiveness. But in office, the Mills administration proved largely ineffectual. Its initial years were characterized by chaos. It presided over dramatic breaches in the rule of law, reminiscent of Rawlings' "revolutions" of the late 1970s and '80s, by condoning vigilantism by ruling party cadres whose extra-legal law enforcement included confiscating public toilets, automobile parks, and government offices and locking staff out of government agencies. The government sought to muzzle the media and restrict free speech by resurrecting criminal defamation laws and arresting people for allegedly causing "fear and panic" under Section 208 of Ghana's criminal code.

At the same time, the government shielded its functionaries and ruling party officials, including those the U.K. Serious Fraud Office had recommended for prosecution for their part in conniving with the British company Mabey and Johnson to defraud the Ghanaian state in public work contracts executed in the 1990s. The Mills administration suffered its worst embarrassment in 2011 with the "leakage" of details of millions of dollars paid out to ruling-

party financier Alfred Woyome to honour a dubious “judgment” debt awarded against the state, ostensibly for wrongful termination of state contracts. The administration’s reputation suffered further damage in subsequent months with the resignation of the attorney general and justice minister in protest against what he described as “gargantuan crimes” by government officials and the emergence of details of other “judgment” debts. It is doubtful that Mills would have succeeded at the polls in December 2012; by that time he faced widespread public disillusionment with his presidency and poorly disguised ill health.

Mahama’s December 2012 campaign to become president of Ghana benefited greatly from his relative youthfulness, affable personality, and appearance as a new breed of NDC leader who related positively to the private sector, civil society, and the media. In addition, he made firm promises to stem corruption, investigate and punish corrupt officials from the previous administration, and end frequent power outages, among other reforms. However, the Mahama administration has proven equally disappointing in the delivery of promised political and economic goods. A slowdown in economic growth from 15% in 2011 to 5.4% in 2014 (caused in part by a drop in the prices of oil and other commodities that Ghana exports), rising inflation and cost of living (caused in part by increases in tariffs on state utilities), a weakened national currency (31% depreciation against the U.S. dollar in 2014), and intensification of power blackouts aggravated by haphazard management of the state electricity agencies’ own load-shedding arrangements (ensuring job cuts), has fuelled deep public disillusionment with the incumbent government.

With a severely weakened fiscal position (widely blamed on massive election-year overspending amounting to 12% of GDP in 2012), the Mahama administration was unable to meet payments on statutory obligations (e.g. to the Ghana Education Trust Fund, the national health insurance scheme, the school feeding program, and local government assemblies) and non-statutory payments (to government contractors and suppliers). On top of this, the government was dogged by allegations of massive corruption involving the president’s close relatives and cronies. Some of the reported kickback schemes, memorably described by a Supreme Court justice as “create, loot, and share,” go back to Mahama’s time as vice president and bear close similarity to abuses experienced under President Mills. Together, these failures of good governance feed the popular belief that the benefits of Ghana’s recent economic gains have gone to enrich political insiders.

Does the Afrobarometer data capture these substantive developments in Ghana’s political economy? Do current trends in public opinion signal an accumulation of political risks? We begin with risk to the government. As [Figure 4A](#) indicates, former President Kufuor enjoyed popular approval of his job performance; on average, only about one in five Ghanaians disapproved of the president’s job performance between 2002 and 2008. By contrast, nearly two in five Ghanaians (38%) expressed a negative assessment of President Mills’ job performance in 2012. Under Mahama (2014), a solid majority (60%) of Ghanaians did so.

Popular evaluations of the job performance of other key elected government officials (MPs and local councillors) largely mirrored those of the presidents. An average of 31% of adult citizens disapproved of the job performance of legislators during Kufuor’s time in office. Negative appraisals of MP job performance rose to 46% in 2012 (under Mills) and shot up to 63% in 2014 (under Mahama). Rising disapproval could be partly attributed to prolonged delays in the disbursement of constituency development funds and a widespread belief that the legislature had failed to effectively oversee the executive branch. Popular job performance appraisal of members of Ghana’s local councils – metropolitan, municipal, and district assemblies (M/M/DAs)¹² – were no better in the Mills and Mahama eras. Negative ratings of the councillors’ job performance stood at 43% in 2012 and rose further to 58% in 2014, compared to an average of 33% recorded in the three survey rounds in Kufuor’s time. Ghana’s local councils rely overwhelmingly on central government grants-in-aid. Persistent

¹² Two-thirds of the members of Ghana’s M/M/DAs are elected, while the president appoints one-third of the members and the chief executive.

delays in the release of district assembly common fund allocations by the government during the Mahama administration in the past three years and consequent incapacitation may be a factor in the growing negative appraisal of councillors' job performance.

To be sure, the giddy public expectations raised by the discovery of commercial quantities of oil and gas in 2007, and the beginning of exports in 2011, may have contributed to increasing popular disapproval of the performance of key government officials. Indeed, seven in 10 Ghanaians averred in 2014 that the government has been ineffective in using oil revenues to improve living conditions. The figures for government performance in the reliable delivery of electricity are even more telling: Positive ratings dropped from 76% in 2008 to 48% in 2012 and plummeted further to 23% in 2014.

We suggest that these sharp increases in negative popular appraisals of presidential, MP, and local assembly member job performance generate a corresponding rise in the scale of risk to the NDC government. It is instructive to note that the scale of risk to the incumbent government was generally low under Kufuor-NPP (between 27% and 29%); under Mills, it rose to 43%; and for the incumbent Mahama government, it stood at an alarming 60% in 2014 – more than double the risk just six years earlier. On this basis, the NDC faces a 2016 re-election bid from a considerably weakened position.

What about risks to the regime? Have recent governmental travails shaken Ghanaians' confidence in democracy? As [Figure 4B](#) indicates, Ghana's democratic order may also be experiencing risk, though the level of risk is moderate compared to the high risk facing the incumbent government. There has been a meaningful rise in levels of popular dissatisfaction with the workings of the country's democracy, from an average of less than 16% through 2008 to one-quarter of the adult population in 2012 and more than one-third (35%) in 2014. The proportion of the population perceiving a low extent of democracy in Ghana has steadily increased, from 12% in 2008 to 20% in 2012, then nearly doubling to 38% in 2014. Overall, the scale of risk to the regime also nearly doubled in 2012, to 23%, and rose further to 37% in 2014.

Other deteriorating trends in public opinion may well underpin rising risk to the regime. People perceive increasing corruption among elected officials (including the president, MPs, and councillors) and express declining trust in public institutions (including the presidency, legislature, and Electoral Commission). Only a minority of Ghanaians (46%) assessed the country's 2012 elections as "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems," a 34-percentage-point drop from 2002. Waning confidence in electoral institutions in Ghana may be an effect of the NPP presidential candidates' litigation against the results of the 2012 presidential poll. These eight-month Supreme Court proceedings, held in public and carried live on television and radio, dramatically highlighted numerous lapses and gaps in poll administration. Public concern about election quality should be taken as a warning signal in light of the importance that Ghanaians, like other Africans, attach to elections, and the premium they place on election quality in their evaluations of the supply of democracy in their country (Bratton & Houessou, 2014).

As seen in [Figure 4C](#), compared to risk to the government and regime, there is less concern about risk to the state in Ghana. Popular acceptance of the legitimacy of key state institutions – the police and tax authorities – remains solid, although one-fifth of all adults seemingly have doubts about the legitimacy of judicial services. On average, only small minorities – an average of 16% in four survey rounds since 2002 – declare an inclination to disobey these state agencies. Not only has the scale of risk been low in all survey rounds under different administrations, it has also generally stayed stable. Indeed, the Ghanaian state, so far, remains uninfected by the moderate risk to Ghana's democratic regime and high scale of risk to the incumbent Mahama government.



Figure 4A: Ghana: Risk to the government | 1999-2014

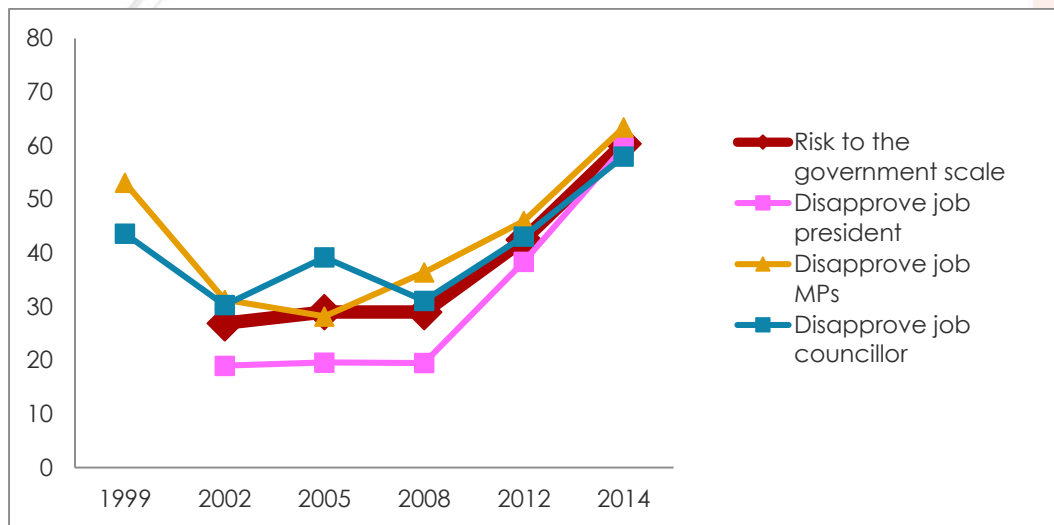


Figure 4B: Ghana: Risk to the regime | 1999-2014

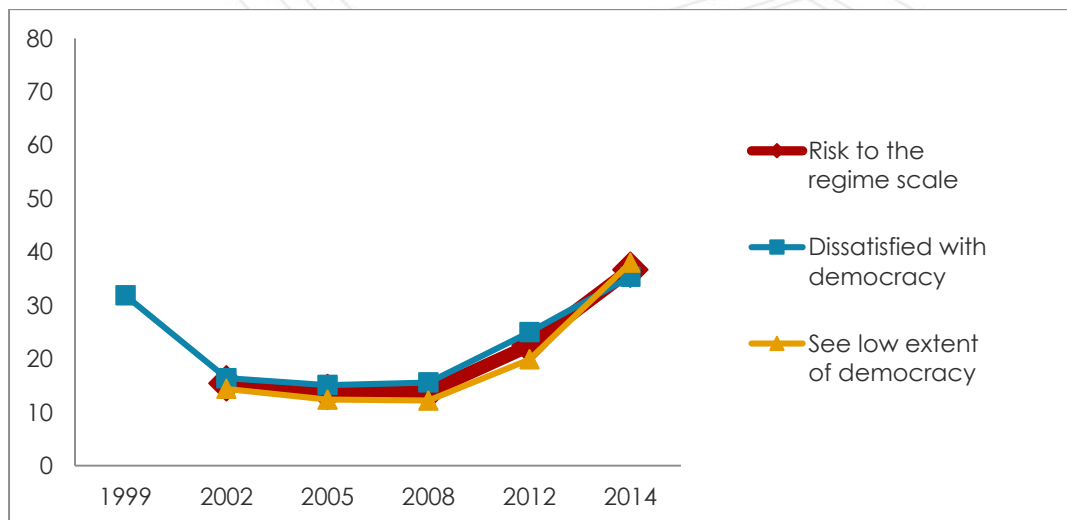
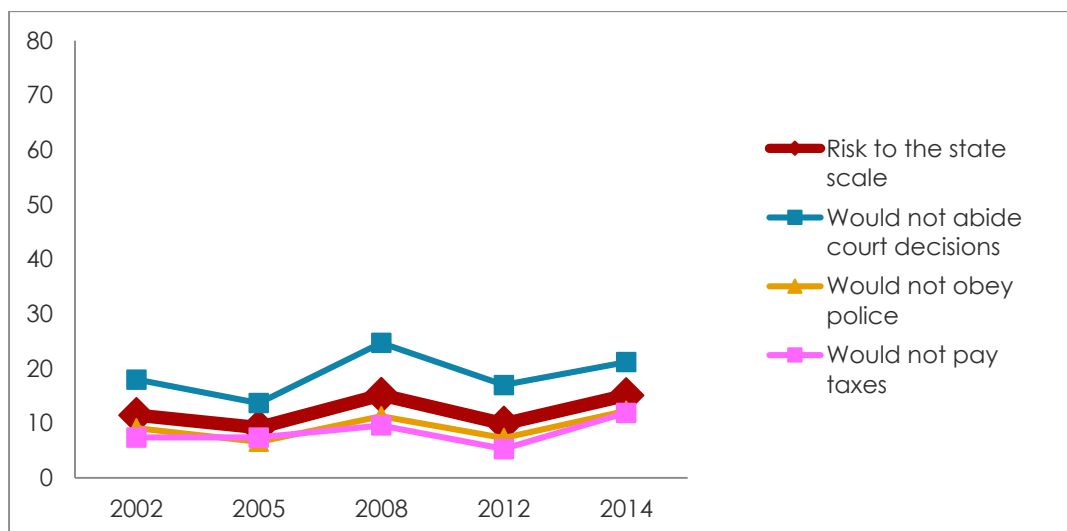


Figure 4C: Ghana: Risk to the state | 2002-2014



Other countries

Are other countries in Africa currently exposed to the types of political risks faced in Ghana? We cannot answer exhaustively, because at the time of writing, Round 6 Afrobarometer surveys were still underway, and certified data sets were available for just 16 of 35 countries. Nevertheless, we already detect up to four other countries that display early-warning signs of political instability.

For the purposes of this analysis, we limit our attention to risks to the political regime. The survival of new democracies is arguably the pinnacle issue of political development in an era when democracy is in retreat around the globe (Diamond, 2015; Fukuyama, 2015; Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). As in Ghana and elsewhere, the key question is less whether the structures of the state will survive intact, but rather whether sub-par incumbent performance will be manifest in a popular loss of confidence in democracy.

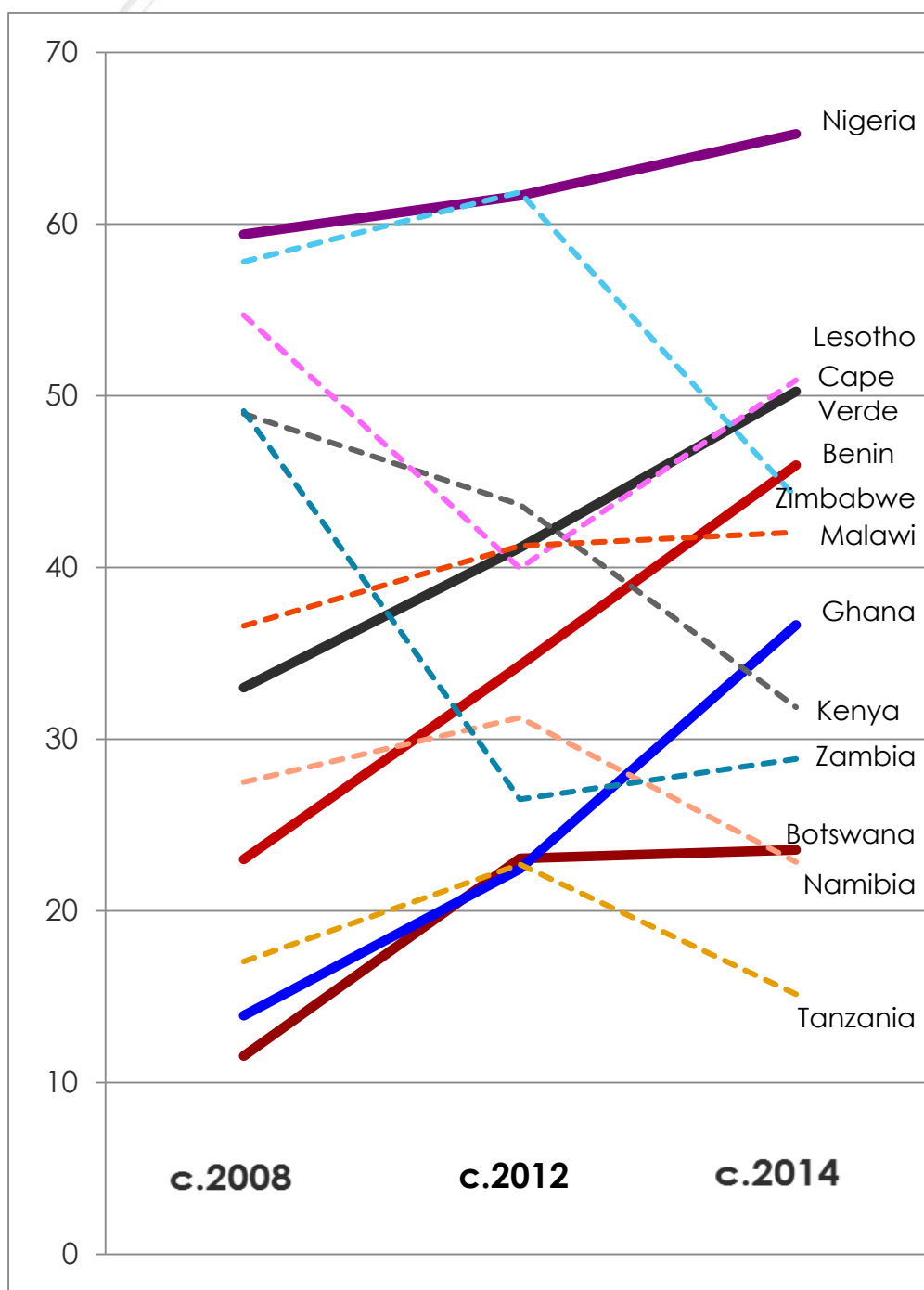
Figure 5 presents a cross-country comparison of trends in risk to the regime for 12 of the 16 African countries between 2008 and 2014.¹³ As a baseline, an early warning of risk to democracy is indicated by the sharp and consistent upward trajectory of the trend line for Ghana (from 14% to 37%). Reading down from the top of the figure, other countries with a similarly problematic regime trajectory are as follows:

- *Nigeria*. Over a seven-year period from 2008 to 2014, risk to the democratic regime in Nigeria rose only slightly, by just 6 percentage points. But the consistent upward trend began and ended at lofty majority levels (between 59% and 65%), which suggests substantial political risk. As a result, the stakes were extremely high in presidential, legislative, and governorship elections in early 2015. The positive outcome of these elections – the country's first peaceful electoral alternation of power – was not preordained. Ahead of the election, analysts and citizens alike were apprehensive that a different outcome could easily lead to destabilizing violence (Lewis & Logan, 2015).
- *Cape Verde*. In 2014, for the first time, more than half (50.3%) of the people in this island nation called democracy into question. Oddly, many more people say they are dissatisfied with the way democracy works (65%) than think they do not live in a democracy (35%). This contradictory result can perhaps be interpreted in light of the three-quarters of Cape Verdeans who have come to believe that their leaders serve their own ambitions rather than the public interest (Semedo, 2015).
- *Benin*. Between 2008 and 2014, risk to the political regime in Benin rose 23 percentage points (doubling from 23% to 46%). This upward leap is as sharp and substantial as the increase in the same index in Mali (2008-2012) and Ghana (2008-2014). It can be read against a background of growing public concern about official corruption; in 2014, three-quarters of adult Beninois said that the level of corruption had risen in their country (Houessou & Samson, 2015).
- *Botswana*. Long advertised as a poster child for democracy in Africa, Botswana's political regime is beginning to show signs of stress. According to the Afrobarometer data, risk to democracy doubled (from 12% to 24%) in a context where official crackdowns on opposition parties and the mass media have left citizens beginning to feel that they are losing the "freedom to say what you think" (Lekorwe & Moseki, 2015).

¹³ Four countries first surveyed by Afrobarometer in Round 5 (c. 2012) are excluded. Data is available for 2014 but not for 2008 in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritius, and Togo.



Figure 5: Risk to the regime: 12-country comparison | 2008-2014



Comparisons with other African countries provide perspective on the case of Ghana. First, along with Benin and Botswana, Ghana is not alone in experiencing a recent doubling of risk to democracy from levels previously prevailing in the country. This result suggests that citizens routinely re-evaluate regime performance as democracies mature, often raising their expectations. Second, even after rising rapidly, risk to the political regime in Ghana remains markedly lower than risk to the regime in several other countries, including Nigeria, Cape Verde, and Benin. If there is a threshold for the breakdown of democratic regimes, it probably requires majority disaffection, a juncture at which Ghana has yet to arrive. Finally, cross-national experience suggests that a high-quality election, especially one that

generates a turnover of political leaders, can restore flagging popular confidence in democracy (Bratton, 2004). This outcome is especially likely where citizens use instrumental criteria for evaluating the regime, that is, they evaluate on the basis of the performance of incumbent leaders. We predict that risk to democracy will drop sharply in Nigeria in the wake of the successful 2015 election, and we do not rule out the possibility that an electoral change of government in 2016 would have similar positive effects in Ghana.

Discussion

We have presented trends in public opinion for key African countries in order to illustrate the possibility of using survey research to identify political risk. Stepping back from the case detail and widening our analytic focus, we now suggest several general propositions.

First, the opinions of ordinary citizens provide a lens for observing threats to political stability. In our view, any strong and sustained upward trend in popular disaffection can be interpreted as an early-warning indicator of risk to some aspect of the political system. We have found such trends in all of the country cases studied in this paper, a generic result that reflects the climate of uncertainty that besets the process of political development. In search of further analytical precision, however, we have proposed a framework for unpacking the concept of political risk. The key to our approach is that the nature of risk – measured by the extent, duration, and target of popular disaffection (whether government, regime, or state) – varies across countries.

Second, types of political risk are arrayed on a scale of severity. Risk to the state is the most severe. Risk to the state constitutes the greatest threat because it undermines the institutional bone structure of the body politic. When the coercive, extractive, and developmental agencies of state do not function effectively, they risk being regarded as illegitimate by the general public. If citizens become widely disaffected with the performance of state institutions, they may be tempted to disregard the commands of its officials or even transfer their loyalties to political groups espousing a rival claim to authority. It is under these circumstances that the structure of the state may become fragile or the state may even fail outright.

Third, in practice, citizens tend to regard African states as effective and legitimate. In all four of the countries studied here, few people deem the courts, police, and national tax agencies unworthy of their obedience. In contrast to the extensive literature on the pervasive risk of state fragility in Africa, we find that weak states also attract voluntary citizen compliance, even if these attitudes are underpinned by wishful estimates of state capacity. Only rarely do we detect meaningful increases in risk to the state (e.g. Mali between 2002 and 2008). And even where risk inches up (e.g. in Zimbabwe in 2005 and Kenya in 2008), it often settles back again at low levels. Nevertheless, even small changes in levels of perceived state legitimacy can provide analysts with a measure of analytic leverage.

Fourth, Africa possesses a variety of political regimes that are moving in multiple directions. Even within a restricted sample of four countries, one can find a resilient authoritarian regime (Zimbabwe), a former democracy that faces significant political risk (Mali), and a new democracy beginning to take root (Kenya). The status of the political regime in Ghana remains uncertain because its once-consolidating democracy faces a major stress test in the form of popular disaffection. Moreover, citizen attitudes toward political regimes are more volatile than the steady sentiments they evince toward the state. In other words, all types of regimes in Africa remain in flux; none is fully consolidated. For this reason, the central question in understanding the context of political risk in Africa is the status of political regimes. Stated simply, will democracies survive, thrive, or backslide?

Fifth, political risk is magnified when citizens become simultaneously disgruntled with both the incumbent government and the prevailing regime. The “spillover” of disapproval with rulers into lost confidence in the regime is perhaps the biggest popular risk to democracy in Africa. In retrospect, the Afrobarometer data shows that a rising tide of this sort preceded major

political crises in Mali in 2012 and in both Kenya and Zimbabwe in 2008. To be sure, these political crises took different forms: an extremist insurgency in Mali, pre-election violence in Zimbabwe, and post-election violence in Kenya. But each crisis was sufficiently serious to challenge the viability of a democratic regime and to require urgent international intervention to constitute an inclusive government. In an important emerging lesson, we postulate that when popular disaffection with an incumbent group of leaders impugns the whole regime of government, political risk is especially high.

Sixth, *disaffection with an incumbent government alone is not an automatic signal of impending political instability. Much depends on the type of political regime.* For example, both Mali and Kenya were able to achieve peaceful electoral turnovers of government in 2002, thus releasing built-up political tensions. All participants – incumbent and challengers alike – adhered to democratic rules of the political game and accepted the outcomes of relatively open elections. In Mali, the handover of power helped to confirm a two-term limit on the presidency and install a leader who, at least at first, was widely popular. In Kenya, the rule-governed conduct of an election under a popular new constitution helped to avert a replay of a disputed and violence-marred contest just five years earlier. In this regard, democratic regimes are flexible; to the extent that they help to encourage peaceful government turnovers, they tend to offset the brittle vulnerability of autocracy.

Seventh, *the capacity of the state, even if less variable, also matters; a strong state is able to withstand the consequences of a sustained rise in governmental unpopularity.* In this regard, Kenya stands apart from Mali. Through 2008, Kenyans perceived a high level of state legitimacy that remained steady over time. By contrast, by 2005, Malians had begun to doubt whether corrupt and ineffective public institutions were any longer capable of serving basic state functions. Thus, popular confidence in a durable state can help to underpin satisfaction with democracy. But where state capacity perceptibly declines (culminating, *in extremis*, in a loss of state sovereignty), public dissatisfaction with all parts of the political system can lead to a multidimensional crisis.

Finally, but speculatively, we propose that *trends in public opinion can help to forecast outcomes in countries where political instability has not yet occurred.* For our purposes, the current critical test case is Ghana. Long regarded as a pace-setter in African democratization, Ghana enjoys several institutional advantages, including an electoral commission that enjoys a measure of residual respect, an established two-party system, and experience with regular electoral alternations. Yet of all the country cases considered in this paper, Ghana represents the most rapid recent rise in the Afrobarometer scale of risk to the government, which doubled from 29% to 60% between 2008 and 2014.

What does this steep and sustained loss of popular confidence in a sitting government signify? Since the same political party has held power in Ghana since 2009, there is reason to expect that a change of government at the next election in 2016 might offset the trend of rising citizen alienation. A positive projection of this sort would be consistent with the alleged flexibility of democratic regimes in removing underperforming leaders. But on a more worrying note, popular frustration with government performance in Ghana appears to have “spilled over” into disappointment with the country’s democracy, as indicated by a 23-point upsurge over the same period in the Afrobarometer scale of risk to the regime. It is therefore conceivable that, like Mali and Kenya before it, a once-promising democracy in Ghana could in the near future become embroiled in political instability.

We cannot predict whether this outcome would take the form of ethnic conflict as in Kenya or military intervention as in Mali. On one hand, the proportion of Ghanaians who think their ethnic group is ever treated unfairly by the government stayed roughly the same between 2008 (47%) and 2014 (44%). At a minimum, therefore, there seems to have been no recent increase in ethnic tensions. On the other hand, the proportion who approve of the possibility that “the army comes in to govern the country” rose over the same period (from 17% in 2008 to 23% in 2014). While still a minority sentiment, nostalgia for military rule is on the rise in Ghana, which cannot be healthy for the durability of democracy. Deeper, country-specific

analysis would be required, however, to discern other, perhaps distinctively Ghanaian forms of risk to democracy.

Finally, we note that, like Kenya and Zimbabwe but unlike Mali, Ghana enjoys a capable bureaucratic state and a record of policy stability that, over time, has produced substantive outcomes in the social development arena, especially health and education (Lenhart, Menocal, & Engel, 2015). Public recognition of these achievements suggests that Ghana is quite well placed to withstand impending threats of political instability. As such, a high-quality election and peaceful political alternation in Ghana in 2016 may prove sufficient to offset nascent signs of popular doubts about democracy.

Next steps

This working paper has been a pilot effort to mine the possible predictive potential of public opinion surveys. We have taken advantage of systematic trend data accumulated from repeated Afrobarometer surveys in many countries over a 15-year period. The analysis is both retrospective – connecting observed trends to known episodes of instability – and prospective – raising red flags for countries once considered stable but currently facing new political strains.

Although we see promising signs that social survey data can be used for practical forecasting purposes, we foresee a long road ahead in developing a reliable risk-analysis tool. Many conceptual, empirical, and interpretive issues remain, some of which are raised here by way of conclusion.

Although we distinguish conceptually among governments, regimes, and states, we readily concede that Africans do not always see the political world in this neatly ordered way. Instead, ordinary people regularly conflate *government* and *regime*; in short, they tend to interpret any popular dissatisfaction with government performance as a shortcoming of democracy. This relationship can be confirmed statistically: For 16 Afrobarometer countries for which 2014-15 data is available, the scale of risk to the government is highly correlated with the scale of risk to the regime ($r=0.425$, $p<0.0001$).¹⁴ Like other Africans, Ghanaians tend to conflate types of risk, but they do so to a much lesser degree ($r=0.169$, $p<0.0001$). There is therefore some reason to hope that, while citizens of Ghana express widespread dissatisfaction with the current occupants of government office, not all of them will automatically blame the entire regime of democracy.

Although we have noted the general resilience of African states, we wonder how long these structures can withstand downturns in economic conditions. Well-established state structures in Western Europe and North America remain stable even through extended periods in which the citizenry considers that the country is going in the “wrong direction.” We would hazard that the weaker the state, the shorter its resilience to this form of public disaffection. In the Afrobarometer data, whether citizens think the country is going in the right direction or wrong direction is a reflection of popular assessments of economic risk.¹⁵ In earlier work, we have established that Africans tend to favour statist strategies for economic development (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005, pp. 109-112). It therefore seems likely that sooner or later, poor economic performance would lead to withdrawal of popular legitimacy from the state itself.

Further work on risk analysis would preferably account for social as well as economic factors. Especially in ethnically divided or politically polarized settings, different segments of society

¹⁴ This result is confirmed by the factor analysis and by interpretations reported in footnotes 4 and 5.

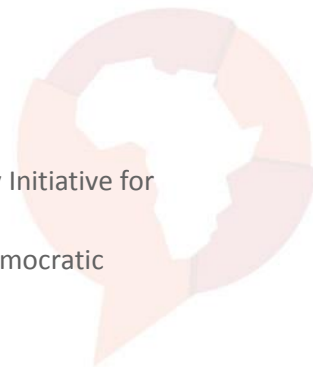
¹⁵ As evidence we note that, across 16 African countries in 2014-15, survey responses to a question about country direction are closely correlated with popular estimates of the present and future condition of the national economy ($r=0.521$ ($p<0.0001$) and $r=0.353$ ($p<0.0001$), respectively). These relationships are especially marked in Zimbabwe ($r=0.617$ ($p<0.0001$) and $r=0.531$ ($p<0.0001$), respectively), where the state sector is responsible for gross economic mismanagement.

are likely to express starkly divergent public attitudes. For example, we have shown that Kikuyu and Luo respondents in Kenya express different levels of political disaffection depending on whose ethnic leader is in power, and the same goes for supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party vs. loyalists of the opposition MDC in Zimbabwe. Because a country-level approach to risk analysis (such as the one employed in this paper) is likely to conceal such differences, analysts in the future would be well advised to disaggregate public opinion data to the subnational level. One could easily imagine a scenario, for example, where a social or political minority group felt so alienated from the prevailing political order that it opted to resort to violent resistance, but its grievances would not show up in “country” scores.

The future research agenda would also have to take account of the complicating factor of external shocks. In this paper, we have examined African countries as if they were self-contained entities isolated behind impermeable state borders. But as economic dependencies with weak states, African countries are exposed to an array of international pressures and impacts that are well beyond their control. The declining price of oil on world markets, for example, may have played a role in the rapid loss of popular confidence in government capability in Ghana. And an understanding of the complexities of the 2012 political crisis in Mali requires reference to an external insurgency mounted from abroad by violent extremists. In this regard, risk analysts in Kenya will surely have to grapple with the threats to political stability represented by the ambitions of Islamic fundamentalists based in neighbouring Somalia.

Other fundamental challenges remain in the quest to construct reliable methods of political risk analysis. There is no shortage of questions to pursue. Is public opinion really an independent “leading indicator” of future political developments? Or is it simply a reflexive popular response to the public-relations messages of skilled political elites? Is a public opinion today a reliable indicator of political directions tomorrow? Or, instead of mechanical extrapolation from past quantitative trends, should risk analysis rely on a more theoretically grounded approach using a richer assortment of qualitative indicators? Finally, what is the next practical step? Especially when it comes to the promotion and protection of democracy, how can practitioners move from risk identification to risk management? The research agenda is certainly full.

In pursuing this agenda, analysts would be well advised to heed Spiegelhalter and Reich's plea for humility: “We view any risk models as human constructions based on our limited knowledge and judgment, which are best treated as ‘guide books’ that can be very useful but should be clearly distinguished from reality, cannot be judged purely on the basis of internal consistency, and need to be used with caution” (2011, p. 4737).

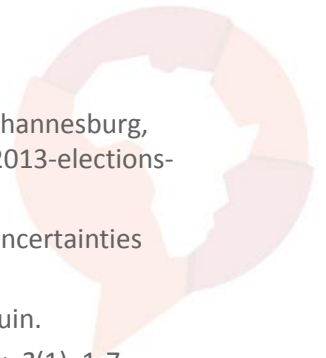


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