The political landscape of Africa looks quite different from that of the 1980s in the waning days of the Cold War. Military and single-party regimes no longer dominate the continent. There has been a remarkable increase in the number of African states that have formally democratic systems. In 1990, there were only three such states: Senegal, Botswana, and Mauritius. By the year 2000 multi-party electoral contests had been held in all but 5 of the 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

However, in 2001-2002, the Freedom House Index rated only 9 of these 48 countries as free, 24 partially free and 15 not free. This shows that democracy in most African countries is shallow, based solely on small changes to the electoral system. Except for South Africa, the continent's success stories were limited to small countries: the percentage of the African population living in countries deemed free is only about 13%. Five of the largest, most populous countries, which together account for over 40% of the total population of Sub-Saharan Africa, are all deeply troubled, shaken by internal conflicts, or teetering on the verge of disintegration. Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Angola and the Sudan are unstable and divided countries, whose domestic problems could affect entire regions.

Many explanations have been provided for the unhappy political conditions prevailing in African states, including the colonial legacy, the arbitrary nature of African boundaries, poor leadership or, as an all-purpose explanation, the rise of 'neopatrimonialism' - an ill-defined code word for the political ills that afflict the continent. Less discussed is the fundamental truth that without a functioning government capable of making major decisions, democracy does not have much meaning.

Granted independence by a fiat of international decision-making, rather than because they developed the administrative, financial, and military capacity to govern and defend themselves, African states from the beginning had trouble either commanding the loyalty of their citizens or forcing them to submit to their power. Large segments of the African population remained uncaptured by their respective states. For many Africans, the state was less important than immediate patrons, religious leaders or ethnic leaders. And, in a growing number of cases from the 1980s on, it was less important than the international institutions and bilateral donors whose

imposed policies deeply affected the lives of Africans. When a country's macro-economic policy is prescribed by the International Monetary Fund, its education and health policies are negotiated with the World Bank in the preparation of a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (as is the case almost everywhere in Africa), and domestic and foreign NGOs have more influence on revenue spending than the government (as it is the case for oil revenue in Chad), the election of a president and a parliament have little impact on policies.

Three sets of problems contribute to the present African predicament: the weakness of the states, their lack of integration in the new international economy and their lack of democracy. Ideally, donors seeking to help African countries should address all three sets of problems at the same time. In reality, this is not possible because of funding and human resource constraints. Donors are thus forced to establish priorities. Democracy should be the ultimate goal for African countries but it is not a good starting point in trying to help them to extricate themselves from their present predicament. While democratically elected and accountable governments might be eager to address the weakness of their states, the changes that would strengthen the state are not those that would deepen democracy. Democracy requires the strengthening of parliaments and judiciaries and the curbing of the power of the executive. Strengthening the state requires building up executive agencies and the administrative apparatus. Indeed, without an increase in their capacity to control and administer the country, states would continue to disintegrate whether or not the government was elected or the judiciary was independent.

Nor would democratic governments be able to promote their countries' integration in the global economy without a clear improvement in their administrative and, in extreme cases, even military and police capacities. The major beneficiaries of preferential terms of trade measures , such as the US African Growth and Opportunity Act, are those countries whose governments are able to guide entrepreneurs through its maze of implementation rules. Strong states like South Africa and Mauritius are already benefiting, while the changes make no difference to the Democratic Republic of the Congo or to Burundi

Addressing the governance deficit by building up the capacity of administrative agencies is the most promising focus for helping African countries move forward. Africa needs stable states capable of controlling their territories to become democratic. It also needs strong states in order to become better integrated in the global economy. The reason is simple: Africa needs to become part of the global economy, but the global economy hardly needs Africa, except for the raw materials to which it already has access. There is no shortage of low-income countries offering cheap labour to transnational corporations. In fact, African labour is neither particularly cheap nor very productive. There is no new "scramble for Africa". Rather, it is African countries that must scramble to integrate economically and politically, and that requires stable states and capable governments.

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