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Political Transition and the Challenges of Opposition Politics in Africa: A Comparative Analysis of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya.

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Abstract

Democracy in Africa is increasingly confronted by a paradox in which regular elections coexist with executive dominance, shrinking of opposition space, and the weakening of institutional autonomy. It is in this light, that this article interrogates the notion of democracy beyond electoral rituals by examining the contemporary political transition in Senegal and comparatively situating it within the broader dynamics of opposition politics in Nigeria and Kenya. The study argues that the true measure of democratic consolidation lies not merely in the conduct of elections, but in the capacity of political institutions to tolerate dissent, accommodate opposition participation, and maintain institutional independence from executive overreach. Using a comparative qualitative approach anchored on democratic consolidation and institutional theories, the article analyzes the rise of Ousmane Sonko from opposition figure to institutional political actor within Senegal's democratic framework. The paper contrasts Senegal's relative institutional resilience with the growing perceptions of executive centralization and opposition weakening in Nigeria, as well as the politics of elite co-optation and "broad-based" governance under the *Kenya Kwanza* administration in Kenya. The article contends that while Senegal demonstrates a model of democratic accommodation through institutional competition, Nigeria and Kenya reveal varying patterns of democratic erosion, opposition fragmentation, and elite incorporation. The study concludes that the future of democratic consolidation in Africa depends largely on the protection of institutional autonomy, political pluralism, and the survival of credible opposition politics beyond electoral symbolism.

Keywords: Democracy; Opposition Politics; Democratic Consolidation; Executive Dominance; Institutional Autonomy.

Introduction

African democracy has experienced significant transformations since the wave of democratization that swept across the continent in the late twentieth century. The transition from authoritarian and military regimes to multiparty political systems

generated optimism regarding the prospects of democratic governance, constitutionalism, and political participation in Africa. Across several African states, elections became institutionalized as the principal mechanism for leadership selection and political legitimacy. However, despite the regular conduct of elections in many African countries, concerns continue to emerge regarding democratic quality, institutional autonomy, executive dominance, and the shrinking space for opposition politics (Diamond, 2008; Cheeseman, 2015). Increasingly, scholars argue that the existence of elections alone is insufficient for measuring democratic consolidation, particularly where institutions remain vulnerable to executive interference and opposition politics is weakened through repression, co-optation, or elite bargaining (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Within this context, the contemporary political developments in Senegal have generated important debates concerning democratic resilience and institutional maturity in Africa (Ngom & Ricart-Huguet, 2025). Senegal has historically been regarded as one of Africa's relatively stable democracies due to its tradition of constitutional continuity, peaceful political transitions, and comparatively vibrant opposition politics (Villalón, 2015). The recent rise of Ousmane Sonko from opposition figure to a major institutional actor within the Senegalese political system has further intensified discussions regarding the capacity of African democracies to accommodate dissent within formal political structures. Sonko's political trajectory, particularly within the broader transition that brought Bassirou Diomaye Faye to power, reflects a significant moment in African democratic politics where opposition mobilization translated into institutional participation rather than systemic collapse or unconstitutional disruption.

The Senegalese experience is particularly noteworthy because it highlights the importance of institutional accommodation and democratic negotiation within competitive political systems. In many African democracies, opposition politics is frequently perceived as a threat to state stability rather than a legitimate component of democratic governance. Consequently, ruling elites often deploy state institutions, legal mechanisms, and patronage structures to weaken opposition actors and consolidate executive dominance (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). This pattern has contributed to the emergence of hybrid democratic systems in which electoral processes coexist with democratic erosion and institutional manipulation (Schedler, 2002). The contradiction between electoral continuity and democratic substance therefore remains central to contemporary debates on governance in Africa.

The current political climate in Nigeria and Kenya further illustrates the complexity of democratic politics beyond elections. In Nigeria, concerns have increasingly emerged regarding executive influence, opposition fragmentation, party defections, and the perceived weakening of institutional independence. Although Nigeria continues to conduct competitive elections, critics argue that the democratic space for opposition politics has become increasingly constrained through political absorption, selective

institutional assertiveness, and the concentration of power around the executive arm of government (Omotola, 2010). Similarly, in Kenya, the emergence of the "broad-based government" arrangement under the Kenya Kwanza administration has raised important questions concerning the relationship between political inclusion and elite co-optation. While proponents view broad-based governance as a mechanism for national unity and political stability, critics contend that it risks weakening democratic accountability by blurring the distinction between governing parties and opposition forces (Ihembe, Ashindorbe, Onwuzuruigbo & Alumona, 2026).

These developments reveal a broader democratic dilemma within Africa given the fact that elections have become normalized across much of the continent, the institutional conditions necessary for democratic consolidation remain uneven. In several cases, democratic systems continue to struggle with executive overreach, weak separation of powers, fragile legislatures, compromised judicial autonomy, and the erosion of opposition credibility (Arriola, Rakner & Van de Walle, 2023). Consequently, there is a growing need to rethink democracy in Africa beyond electoral formalities toward a broader emphasis on institutional resilience, political pluralism, and the protection of dissenting political voices.

It is against this background that this study interrogates the notion of democracy beyond elections through a comparative analysis of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya. The study is guided by the argument that the strength of democracy lies not merely in the conduct of periodic elections, but in the ability of political institutions to tolerate opposition politics, accommodate dissent, and maintain relative autonomy from executive domination. The article specifically examines how Senegal's recent political transition reflects a relatively resilient democratic culture compared to the patterns of executive centralization and opposition management observable in Nigeria and Kenya.

The central aim of this study is to examine the relationship between opposition politics, institutional autonomy, and democratic consolidation in Africa through the comparative experiences of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya. In pursuit of this objective, the article addresses several research questions. First, what does Senegal's recent political transition reveal about democratic maturity and institutional resilience in Africa? Second, how does the accommodation or suppression of opposition politics affect democratic consolidation within African states? Third, in what ways do Nigeria and Kenya demonstrate alternative patterns of executive dominance, elite co-optation, and democratic negotiation? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates concerning the quality and future of democracy in Africa.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to move beyond conventional electoral interpretations of democracy by emphasizing the broader institutional dimensions of democratic governance. Existing scholarship on African democracy has often focused

heavily on elections, electoral violence, and regime transitions, while paying comparatively less attention to the politics of opposition survival, institutional accommodation, and executive-opposition relations within formally democratic systems. This article contributes to the literature by comparatively examining how different African democracies manage political dissent and opposition participation within contemporary democratic frameworks. Furthermore, by integrating the cases of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya, the study provides a broader comparative understanding of democratic consolidation, executive dominance, and elite bargaining within the African political landscape.

Ultimately, the article argues that the future of democratic governance in Africa depends not only on the regularity of elections but also on the capacity of institutions to preserve political pluralism, resist excessive executive interference, and guarantee meaningful opposition participation. In this regard, Senegal's recent political transition offers important insights into the possibilities and limitations of democratic resilience in contemporary Africa

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Democracy Beyond Elections

The concept of democracy has remained one of the most contested and evolving subjects within political science and comparative politics (Kurki, 2010). Traditionally, democracy has often been associated with the conduct of periodic elections, majority rule, political participation, and representative governance (Schäfer, Syam & Gogali, 2025). However, contemporary democratic scholarship increasingly argues that democracy extends beyond the mere organization of elections to include broader institutional, constitutional, and participatory dimensions that sustain political accountability and legitimacy (Dahl, 1971). While elections remain a critical component of democratic governance, they do not automatically guarantee democratic consolidation, institutional independence, or political freedom. Consequently, the growing emphasis on "democracy beyond elections" reflects scholarly concerns regarding the emergence of political systems that maintain electoral processes while simultaneously weakening democratic institutions and opposition politics.

Classical liberal democratic theory conceives democracy as a political system characterized by constitutionalism, separation of powers, civil liberties, rule of law, and institutional accountability (Held, 2006). Within this framework, elections are important because they provide citizens with the opportunity to choose political leaders and hold governments accountable. Nevertheless, democratic governance also requires the existence of autonomous institutions capable of limiting executive excesses and protecting political pluralism. According to Robert Dahl (1971), democracy, or what he conceptualizes as "polyarchy," depends on multiple conditions including inclusive

participation, public contestation, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, and the legitimacy of opposition politics. Dahl's argument is particularly significant in the African context where elections are frequently conducted in environments characterized by institutional fragility and uneven political competition.

The distinction between electoral democracy and liberal democracy is therefore central to understanding the limitations of democratic governance in many African states. Electoral democracy primarily emphasizes the procedural aspects of democracy such as elections, voting rights, and political participation, while liberal democracy extends further to include institutional checks and balances, judicial independence, protection of minority rights, and respect for civil liberties (Zakaria, 1997). In several African democracies, elections have become institutionalized without a corresponding consolidation of liberal democratic norms. As a result, political systems may outwardly appear democratic while internally exhibiting authoritarian tendencies through executive centralization, opposition repression, and manipulation of state institutions.

This contradiction has contributed to the emergence of what scholars describe as hybrid regimes or competitive authoritarian systems. Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that competitive authoritarian regimes maintain formal democratic institutions such as elections and legislatures, yet incumbents routinely violate democratic norms in ways that undermine genuine political competition. Within such systems, opposition parties may exist legally but operate within highly unequal political environments shaped by state intimidation, patronage politics, media control, and executive influence over state institutions. Schedler (2002) similarly conceptualizes these systems as "electoral authoritarian regimes" where elections are conducted primarily to preserve legitimacy rather than ensure meaningful democratic accountability.

The African democratic experience increasingly reflects these contradictions. Since the reintroduction of multiparty politics across much of Africa during the 1990s, elections have become relatively regular and constitutionally entrenched. However, democratic consolidation remains uneven due to persistent challenges associated with executive dominance, weak institutional autonomy, and the personalization of political power (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). In many African states, political institutions remain subordinate to executive authority, thereby limiting the effectiveness of legislatures, judiciaries, and oversight institutions in constraining state power. Consequently, democratic governance often becomes dependent on the preferences and strategies of political elites rather than the resilience of institutions.

The notion of democracy beyond elections therefore emphasizes the importance of institutional resilience and democratic culture in sustaining political accountability. Democratic consolidation requires more than electoral continuity; it also requires institutionalized respect for opposition politics, political tolerance, and the capacity of

state institutions to function independently of executive manipulation (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Opposition politics plays a particularly significant role in this regard because democracy fundamentally depends on the legitimacy of dissent and political competition. Where opposition voices are systematically weakened through coercion, co-optation, or exclusion, democratic systems risk degenerating into dominant-party or quasi-authoritarian structures despite maintaining electoral processes.

The contemporary political experiences of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya illustrate the varying dynamics of democracy beyond elections within Africa. Senegal has historically demonstrated relatively stronger institutional continuity and opposition accommodation compared to many African states. The transition involving Ousmane Sonko and Bassirou Diomaye Faye reflects a political environment where opposition mobilization was ultimately incorporated into institutional democratic processes rather than violently suppressed or constitutionally obstructed. Although Senegal is not without democratic challenges, its political trajectory nonetheless reveals the significance of institutional negotiation and political pluralism within democratic governance.

By contrast, the Nigerian political experience increasingly demonstrates the tension between electoral continuity and executive centralization. While elections remain competitive and politically significant, concerns persist regarding party defections, institutional vulnerability, selective law enforcement, and the shrinking vitality of opposition politics. Similarly, Kenya's "broad-based government" arrangement under the Kenya Kwanza administration raises important questions regarding democratic inclusion and elite co-optation. Although broad-based governance may contribute to political stability, it may also weaken democratic accountability by reducing the effectiveness of adversarial opposition politics. These contrasting experiences demonstrate that democratic quality cannot be measured solely through elections but must also consider the broader institutional and political environment within which democratic competition occurs.

Opposition Politics and Democratic Survival

Opposition politics constitutes one of the foundational pillars of democratic governance because it provides alternative political choices, enhances accountability, and limits the concentration of state power. In democratic systems, opposition parties perform several critical functions including policy criticism, legislative oversight, political mobilization, and the articulation of alternative visions of governance. The existence of a credible and functional opposition is therefore essential for maintaining democratic legitimacy and preventing authoritarian tendencies within political systems (Dahl, 1971).

The role of opposition politics becomes even more significant within transitional and consolidating democracies where institutions remain relatively fragile. Huntington (1991)

argues that democratic consolidation depends largely on the institutionalization of political competition and the acceptance of opposition legitimacy by ruling elites. Democracy becomes sustainable when political actors accept elections as the legitimate mechanism for political succession and recognize the opposition as a lawful participant within the political process rather than an existential threat to state authority. In many African democracies, however, ruling elites frequently perceive opposition politics through the lens of political insecurity, thereby encouraging the use of state institutions to weaken or absorb opposition actors.

This pattern contributes to the personalization of political power and the erosion of institutional autonomy. Where executive institutions dominate legislatures, judiciaries, and security structures, opposition parties often face unequal political conditions that undermine democratic competitiveness. Such conditions may include harassment, legal restrictions, media exclusion, financial disadvantages, and selective institutional enforcement. Consequently, opposition parties may struggle to effectively perform their democratic functions despite the formal existence of electoral competition.

Beyond outright repression, contemporary African democracies increasingly exhibit patterns of political co-optation in which opposition elites are incorporated into governing coalitions through patronage arrangements, elite bargaining, or broad-based governance agreements. While political accommodation may contribute to short-term stability, it may simultaneously weaken democratic accountability by blurring the distinction between governing and opposition forces. The Kenyan broad-based political arrangement represents an important example of this dilemma. Although elite accommodation may reduce political tensions, it may also diminish adversarial politics and weaken the capacity of opposition parties to effectively challenge executive authority.

Conversely, the Senegalese political experience demonstrates a relatively different trajectory in which opposition politics retains greater institutional legitimacy despite intense political contestation. The ability of opposition actors to transition into formal political leadership through constitutional and electoral processes reflects a comparatively stronger democratic culture rooted in political negotiation and institutional continuity. This does not imply that Senegal is immune from democratic tensions, but rather that its political system has demonstrated greater capacity for accommodating opposition participation without entirely undermining institutional legitimacy.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored primarily on Democratic Consolidation Theory and Institutional Theory. Democratic Consolidation Theory explains the processes through which democratic systems become stable, institutionalized, and resistant to authoritarian reversal. According to Linz and Stepan (1996), democracy becomes consolidated when

political actors accept democratic rules as the only legitimate framework for political competition. Democratic consolidation therefore requires not only elections but also institutional legitimacy, political tolerance, and the routinization of democratic procedures.

Institutional Theory complements this perspective by emphasizing the role of political institutions in shaping political behavior and governance outcomes. Institutions such as legislatures, courts, electoral commissions, and political parties influence the distribution of political power and determine the extent to which democratic accountability can be sustained (North, 1990). Strong institutions constrain executive excesses, protect political competition, and preserve constitutional order, whereas weak institutions facilitate executive dominance and democratic erosion.

These theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant to the comparative analysis of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya because they provide analytical tools for understanding how institutional resilience, executive behavior, and opposition politics interact to shape democratic outcomes. While Senegal reflects relatively stronger institutional accommodation of opposition politics, Nigeria and Kenya reveal varying patterns of executive centralization, elite bargaining, and opposition management. Collectively, these cases demonstrate that democratic consolidation in Africa depends not merely on elections but on the broader institutional capacity to sustain political pluralism and democratic accountability.

Historical Evolution of Democracy in Senegal

Senegal's Democratic Trajectory

The democratic trajectory of Senegal represents one of the most extensively studied cases of relative democratic stability in Sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike many postcolonial African states that experienced cycles of military coups, prolonged authoritarian rule, or violent regime breakdowns, Senegal has maintained a comparatively uninterrupted trajectory of civilian governance since independence in 1960. This exceptionalism has led scholars to describe Senegal as a "pacted democracy" or a "procedural democracy with deep historical roots" (Resnick, 2013; Villalón, 2015). While the quality of its democracy has been debated, its resilience and institutional continuity remain widely acknowledged in comparative African politics (Gellar, 2005).

The foundation of Senegalese democratic development is closely tied to its colonial administrative inheritance and early post-independence political leadership. Under the leadership of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal adopted a centralized political system that initially exhibited strong executive dominance. However, unlike many African leaders of the post-independence era, Senghor gradually institutionalized political pluralism through controlled liberalization in the 1970s (Resnick, 2013). This gradual opening allowed

opposition parties to exist legally, albeit within a constrained political environment. Scholars argue that this early institutional accommodation laid the groundwork for Senegal's later democratic stability by normalizing opposition participation within constitutional politics rather than treating it as a threat to regime survival (Gellar, 2005).

Senghor's voluntary resignation in 1980 marked a critical milestone in African democratic history, reinforcing norms of constitutional succession. His successor, Abdou Diouf, further expanded political liberalization through incremental reforms that strengthened multiparty competition. Diouf's era is widely regarded as a period of democratic consolidation in procedural terms, particularly due to the institutionalization of competitive elections and the avoidance of military interference in politics (Villalón, 2015). Importantly, Diouf's concession of defeat in the 2000 presidential election to opposition leader Abdoulaye Wade remains one of the most cited examples of peaceful democratic transition in Africa (Diallo, 2016). This event significantly reinforced Senegal's reputation as a stable democracy and demonstrated the increasing institutionalization of electoral legitimacy.

The rise of Abdoulaye Wade introduced a new phase of competitive politics characterized by increased electoral participation and heightened political pluralism. Wade's initial election in 2000 was widely interpreted as a democratic breakthrough, symbolizing the consolidation of opposition politics within the formal political system. However, his later tenure revealed the persistence of executive centralization and patrimonial governance tendencies, which scholars such as Beck 2008 describe as "clientelist democracy," where democratic institutions coexist with patronage-based political practices (Beck, 2008). Despite these challenges, Senegal maintained its constitutional order and avoided systemic democratic breakdown.

The transition to Macky Sall in 2012 further reinforced Senegal's pattern of peaceful electoral alternation of power. Sall's victory over Wade was interpreted as another milestone in democratic consolidation, demonstrating the electorate's ability to sanction incumbents through institutional mechanisms (Gellar, 2005). However, analysts have also noted that Senegal's democratic stability coexists with structural weaknesses, including executive dominance and the personalization of political authority (Resnick, 2013; Villalón, 2015). While elections remain competitive, political power is often concentrated within the executive branch, raising questions about the depth of institutional checks and balances.

More recent developments, including the rise of Ousmane Sonko and the political transition that brought Bassirou Diomaye Faye into office, represent a new phase in Senegalese democratic evolution. Sonko's emergence as a populist opposition figure reflected broader societal frustrations with corruption, inequality, and elite dominance. His movement, particularly among younger demographics, challenged the established

political order and reshaped the dynamics of electoral competition. According to recent analyses, the PASTEF movement represented a significant reconfiguration of political alignment in Senegal, demonstrating the capacity of opposition politics to mobilize mass support outside traditional party structures (Villalón, 2015; Ndiaye, 2025).

The electoral success of Faye, alongside Sonko's continued political influence, illustrates both the resilience and complexity of Senegalese democracy (Fall & Kelly, 2025). On one hand, it demonstrates the ability of opposition movements to transition into formal governance through electoral processes. On the other hand, it raises important questions about the evolving relationship between institutional authority and populist political movements. As recent developments suggest, tensions within ruling coalitions indicate that institutional stability remains contingent on ongoing political negotiation rather than fully consolidated democratic norms (Le Monde, 2026).

Overall, Senegal's democratic trajectory reflects a hybrid pattern of institutional resilience and structural vulnerability. While the country has avoided military coups and sustained regular elections, it continues to grapple with issues of executive dominance, political centralization, and elite bargaining. Nevertheless, compared to many African states, Senegal remains a relatively stable democratic system with strong norms of electoral legitimacy and peaceful political transitions (Villalón, 2015; Gellar, 2005).

Institutional Development and Political Culture

The durability of Senegalese democracy cannot be fully understood without examining the evolution of its political institutions and political culture. Institutional development in Senegal has been shaped by a combination of colonial administrative legacies, post-independence constitutional engineering, and sociopolitical structures that have historically mediated state-society relations. According to Gellar (2005), Senegal's democratic resilience is partly rooted in its "Tocquevillian" social structure, characterized by relative social equality, religious tolerance, and strong associative life, all of which contribute to political moderation and institutional stability.

A defining feature of Senegalese institutional development is the relative continuity of constitutional governance (Fall, 2020). Unlike many African states where constitutions were frequently suspended or rewritten to consolidate executive power, Senegal has maintained a relatively stable constitutional framework since independence (Mbaye, 2026). Although constitutional amendments have occurred, they have largely taken place within institutional procedures rather than through abrupt regime ruptures. This continuity has strengthened the legitimacy of political institutions and reinforced the normative expectation that political disputes should be resolved within constitutional boundaries (Resnick, 2013; Mbaye, 2026).

Electoral institutions in Senegal have also played a crucial role in sustaining democratic governance. Elections are generally regarded as credible, competitive, and relatively transparent, even though concerns about incumbency advantage and administrative influence persist. The repeated acceptance of electoral outcomes by both winners and losers has contributed to the institutionalization of democratic norms. As Villalón (2015) argues, Senegalese democracy is sustained not only by formal institutions but also by a "culture of political acceptance," which discourages extra-constitutional challenges to electoral outcomes.

Civil society and religious institutions constitute another critical dimension of Senegal's political culture. The influence of Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Mouride and Tijani orders, has historically contributed to political stability by promoting social cohesion and mediating political conflicts. Rather than directly contesting political power, these religious institutions often function as intermediaries between the state and society, thereby reducing political polarization (Beck, 2008). This mediation role has been widely cited as a key factor explaining Senegal's relative absence of large-scale political violence.

The judiciary and legislature, while not entirely independent, have also contributed to institutional stability. The judiciary has occasionally played a role in adjudicating electoral disputes and constitutional matters, reinforcing the rule of law. However, scholars caution that institutional independence remains uneven, particularly in relation to executive influence over key appointments and administrative decisions (Gellar, 2005). Similarly, the National Assembly has functioned both as a site of political debate and as an arena often dominated by executive-backed majorities, limiting its effectiveness as a strong oversight institution.

Political culture in Senegal is generally characterized by a preference for negotiated political settlement over violent confrontation. This cultural orientation is reinforced by historical patterns of elite bargaining and the role of religious authorities in conflict mediation. However, this does not imply the absence of political contestation. On the contrary, Senegal has witnessed significant episodes of political tension, protest movements, and electoral disputes, particularly in recent years. The difference lies in the tendency for such conflicts to be resolved within institutional frameworks rather than escalating into systemic breakdown.

Despite these strengths, Senegal's institutional development faces growing pressures. Increasing political polarization, youth mobilization, and dissatisfaction with traditional elites have introduced new forms of political contestation. The rise of Sonko and the PASTEF movement reflects a generational shift in political expectations, particularly regarding transparency, accountability, and economic inclusion. These dynamics suggest

that Senegalese democracy is undergoing transformation, moving from elite-managed pluralism toward more populist and mass-driven forms of political engagement.

Furthermore, concerns have been raised regarding executive dominance and the concentration of political authority. Scholars such as Beck (2008) argue that Senegal's democracy retains strong clientelist elements, where political loyalty and resource distribution remain central to governance. This has implications for institutional autonomy, as political institutions may be influenced by patronage networks and executive preferences.

In conclusion, Senegal's institutional development reflects a complex interplay between stability and fragility. While the country has successfully maintained constitutional governance and avoided democratic breakdown, its political system continues to evolve under the pressures of social change, opposition mobilization, and institutional constraints. The endurance of Senegalese democracy thus depends not only on historical institutional strength but also on its capacity to adapt to emerging political realities.

Ousmane Sonko and Senegal's Democratic Transition

Sonko and the Rise of Opposition Politics

The political emergence of Ousmane Sonko represents a defining moment in the evolving architecture of democratic contestation in Senegal. His rise is best understood not as an isolated political event, but as the outcome of long-term structural tensions within Senegal's democratic system particularly, the gap between formal electoral stability and substantive political inclusion. While Senegal has long been celebrated as one of Africa's more stable democracies, comparative scholarship increasingly cautions against equating electoral continuity with deep democratic consolidation (Beck, 2008; Villalón, 2015). Within this context, Sonko's political trajectory reflects both the durability and the stress points of Senegalese democracy.

Sonko's rise was anchored in a discourse of anti-corruption, economic justice, and political renewal (Oxford Analytica, 2021). His messaging resonated strongly with younger citizens and urban populations who felt increasingly alienated from established political elites and party structures. This aligns with broader patterns identified in African political scholarship, where youth-driven mobilization has become a central force reshaping opposition politics and electoral competition (Resnick, 2014; Sanneh, 2026). In this sense, Sonko's appeal was not merely partisan; it was generational and systemic, reflecting a broader critique of entrenched elite governance.

Unlike earlier opposition figures in Senegal, who largely operated within negotiated boundaries of elite competition, Sonko introduced a more confrontational and populist style of political engagement. His rhetoric framed politics as a struggle between

entrenched elites and excluded citizens, thereby intensifying ideological polarization within the democratic space. Such dynamics are consistent with Levitsky and Way's (2010) characterization of opposition politics in hybrid regimes, where formal democratic institutions coexist with intense political asymmetries and contested legitimacy.

The state's response to Sonko's rise further illustrates the complexity of opposition politics in African democracies. His political career was marked by legal disputes, institutional confrontations, and periods of heightened political tension. While state authorities framed certain actions as matters of legal accountability, critics interpreted them as evidence of selective institutional enforcement and political targeting. This ambiguity reflects a broader continental pattern in which legal institutions are frequently drawn into political contestation, blurring the boundaries between judicial processes and political competition (Cheeseman, 2015; Sanneh, 2026).

Nevertheless, Sonko's sustained political relevance underscores the resilience of opposition politics in Senegal. Despite institutional pressures, his movement succeeded in mobilizing significant electoral support and reshaping the national political agenda. This outcome is consistent with Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) argument that opposition movements in Africa can serve as critical drivers of political liberalization, particularly when they are able to sustain mass mobilization and challenge ruling coalitions over time.

Importantly, Sonko's rise also exposed underlying structural contradictions within Senegal's democracy. While institutions remained operational and elections competitive, the political environment revealed tensions between state authority and opposition legitimacy. These tensions highlight the dual nature of Senegalese democracy: procedurally stable on the one hand, but politically contested on the other.

From Opposition to Institutional Leadership

The transition of Sonko from opposition figure to a central actor within Senegal's governing architecture marks a significant shift in the country's democratic trajectory. This development reflects the capacity of Senegalese political institutions to absorb opposition forces into formal governance structures, thereby reinforcing a broader pattern of institutional adaptability. In comparative African politics, such transitions are neither automatic nor common, particularly in systems where opposition figures are often excluded from state power or permanently positioned outside governing coalitions (Diamond, 2008).

The broader political transition that brought Bassirou Diomaye Faye into office further illustrates this institutional flexibility. Rather than resulting in systemic rupture or extra-constitutional change, the transition occurred through electoral mechanisms that preserved constitutional continuity. This aligns with Huntington's (1991) argument that

democratic consolidation is strengthened when political competition becomes routinized and when opposition victories are normalized within institutional frameworks.

Sonko's movement from opposition leadership into a formal institutional role also reflects a broader pattern of elite negotiation and political accommodation. According to Higley and Burton (2006), democratic stability in transitional contexts often depends on elite settlements that allow former opposition actors to be incorporated into governing structures. Such settlements reduce the likelihood of political exclusion but simultaneously introduce new tensions regarding ideological coherence and policy direction.

However, this institutional incorporation is not without contradiction. While it enhances political inclusion and reduces the risk of political marginalization, it also raises questions about the transformation of opposition identity within governing structures. Once incorporated into institutional power, opposition actors may face constraints imposed by bureaucratic structures, constitutional limits, and coalition politics. This creates a tension between transformative political agendas and institutional pragmatism.

In the Senegalese case, Sonko's institutional positioning reflects this duality. On one hand, it signifies democratic inclusion and recognition of opposition legitimacy (Kohnert, 2024). On the other hand, it introduces structural constraints that may moderate radical reform agendas. Linz and Stepan (1996) emphasize that consolidated democracies require both inclusion and institutional constraint; however, balancing these two imperatives is often politically complex, particularly in societies undergoing rapid political transformation.

This transition also highlights the importance of institutional flexibility in sustaining democratic governance. Systems that are capable of integrating opposition actors into formal structures tend to experience lower levels of political instability and reduced risks of systemic breakdown. However, excessive incorporation of opposition forces may also blur the boundaries between government and opposition, potentially weakening the adversarial nature of democracy.

Democratic Implications

The political trajectory of Sonko and the broader Senegalese transition carries significant implications for democratic theory and comparative African politics (Kohnert, 2024). First, it reinforces the argument that democracy must be understood beyond elections. As Dahl (1971) argues, democracy requires not only contestation but also participation, inclusion, and institutional guarantees of political competition. Senegal's experience demonstrates that electoral success alone is insufficient unless it is accompanied by meaningful institutional integration of diverse political actors.

Secondly, the Senegalese case highlights the centrality of opposition politics in sustaining democratic legitimacy. In contrast to systems where opposition actors are systematically marginalized, Senegal demonstrates that opposition movements can evolve into governing actors through institutional mechanisms. This supports Huntington's (1991) contention that democratic consolidation depends on the normalization of political alternation and acceptance of opposition legitimacy as part of the political order.

Thirdly, the case reveals the persistent tension between institutional stability and political transformation. While Senegal's institutions have demonstrated considerable resilience, the rise of populist and reform-oriented movements such as Sonko's reflects deeper societal demands for accountability, redistribution, and political renewal. Merkel's (2004) concept of "embedded democracy" is useful here, as it captures the coexistence of stable formal institutions with ongoing political contestation and societal pressure.

Finally, the Senegalese experience provides an important comparative lens for understanding democratic variation across Africa. When contrasted with the experiences of Nigeria and Kenya, Senegal illustrates a model of relatively successful opposition incorporation through institutional competition rather than elite co-optation alone. However, it also demonstrates that such incorporation is inherently dynamic, requiring continuous negotiation between political actors and institutions (Omondi, Adesanya, Otieno, Kioko & Ogieomo, 2024).

In conclusion, Sonko's political trajectory underscores both the possibilities and limitations of opposition politics in African democracies. It demonstrates that opposition movements can be integrated into governance structures through constitutional means, thereby strengthening democratic legitimacy. At the same time, it reveals the inherent tensions involved in balancing inclusion, institutional constraint, and political transformation within evolving democratic systems.

Executive Dominance and the Politics of Opposition in Africa

Africa's Democratic Contradiction

A central paradox in contemporary African politics is the coexistence of formal democratic institutions, particularly regular elections with persistent concerns about weak institutional autonomy, executive dominance, and constrained opposition politics. Since the onset of multiparty reforms in the 1990s, elections have become routine across much of the continent; however, their presence has not necessarily translated into deep democratic consolidation (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Cheeseman, 2015). This has led scholars to emphasize that African democracies often operate as hybrid regimes where democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian practices (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Diamond, 2008).

At the center of this contradiction is the structural dominance of the executive branch. In many African states, presidential power extends beyond the classical separation of powers and encompasses significant influence over legislatures, judiciaries, and electoral institutions. This concentration of authority produces asymmetrical political competition, where opposition actors operate under conditions of institutional disadvantage (Médard, 1991). Even when opposition parties are legally permitted, they often face uneven access to state resources, media visibility, and judicial protection.

Recent scholarship also highlights how executive dominance is sustained through neopatrimonial governance structures, where political loyalty is exchanged for material and institutional rewards (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). In such systems, opposition politics is frequently undermined not only through repression but also through co-optation, fragmentation, and elite bargaining.

The contemporary experiences of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya illustrate different configurations of this broader African democratic contradiction. Senegal reflects a relatively resilient but increasingly strained model of institutional accommodation; Nigeria demonstrates persistent executive dominance with fragmented opposition; while Kenya illustrates elite co-optation through negotiated governance arrangements (Omondi et al, 2024).).

Importantly, recent developments in Senegal underscore that even relatively stable democracies are not immune to political volatility. The 2026 dismissal of Ousmane Sonko as Prime Minister and his rapid re-emergence as Speaker of Parliament reflects both institutional flexibility and elite conflict within governing coalitions (Reuters, 2026a; Reuters, 2026b). These developments complicate earlier narratives of Senegal as a straightforward model of democratic stability and highlight the fluidity of executive–legislative relations even within consolidated electoral systems.

Senegal: Institutional Accommodation and Democratic Resilience

Senegal is widely regarded as one of Africa's most durable electoral democracies, characterized by relatively peaceful transfers of power, competitive elections, and historically strong norms of constitutional continuity (Gellar, 2005; Villalón, 2015). Unlike many African states that experienced military coups or prolonged authoritarian breakdowns, Senegal has maintained uninterrupted civilian rule since independence in 1960.

A key explanation for this stability lies in Senegal's gradualist and negotiated democratization process. Rather than abrupt liberalization, Senegal's political system evolved through incremental reforms that allowed opposition participation while preserving state continuity (Creevey, Ngomo, & Vengroff, 2005). This institutional

design enabled ruling elites to maintain stability while gradually expanding political competition.

However, recent scholarship suggests that Senegal's democracy is better understood as "managed pluralism" rather than fully consolidated liberal democracy (Beck, 2008; Ngom & Ricart-Huguet, 2025). While opposition parties are institutionally recognized and electoral competition is meaningful, executive influence over political institutions remains significant, particularly in shaping administrative processes and judicial outcomes. The rise of Ousmane Sonko represents a critical stress test for this system. Sonko's movement, rooted in anti-corruption and anti-elite discourse, mobilized significant youth support and disrupted traditional party alignments (Lacatus, 2026). His political trajectory reflects broader patterns in African democracies where populist opposition figures emerge in response to perceived elite entrenchment and governance failures (Resnick, 2014).

Importantly, Sonko's transition from opposition leader to a central institutional actor, recently culminating in his position as Speaker of the National Assembly following his removal from the executive branch, demonstrates both the adaptability and volatility of Senegalese institutions (Reuters, 2026b). On one hand, this reflects institutional flexibility and elite negotiation; on the other hand, it raises questions about separation of powers and the stability of governing coalitions. Recent developments also suggest growing tensions within the ruling elite itself. The breakdown of the Sonko–Faye alliance indicates that even opposition-led governments may reproduce internal executive conflicts once in power, highlighting the personalization of authority within Senegalese politics (Reuters, 2026a). This supports Beck's (2008) argument that Senegalese democracy, while stable, is deeply embedded in clientelist and factional networks.

Thus, Senegal represents a case of resilient but tension-filled democracy, where institutional accommodation coexists with elite fragmentation and rising political contestation.

Nigeria: Executive Dominance and Democratic Strain

The democratic experience of Nigeria reflects a more structurally constrained form of electoral democracy characterized by persistent executive dominance, institutional weakness, and fragmented opposition politics. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has maintained regular elections and competitive party politics; however, scholars widely argue that democratic consolidation remains incomplete (Suberu, 2007; Lewis, 2011). A central feature of Nigeria's political system is the overwhelming influence of the executive branch over other institutions of governance. Despite constitutional separation of powers, the presidency exercises significant control over legislative and judicial institutions through patronage networks, fiscal dominance, and

appointment powers (Omotola, 2010). This has resulted in what Diamond (2008) describes as "illiberal democracy," where electoral procedures exist but are weakened by institutional imbalance.

Opposition politics in Nigeria is also characterized by volatility and fragmentation. Political parties frequently suffer from elite defections, often driven by access to state resources rather than ideological differences. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) argue that this reflects broader neopatrimonial dynamics, where political competition is structured around access to patronage rather than programmatic contestation. Furthermore, concerns have been raised about shrinking civic and opposition space, particularly regarding the selective use of legal and administrative mechanisms against opposition actors. While Nigeria remains electorally competitive, the uneven application of institutional rules undermines confidence in democratic fairness (Cheeseman, 2015).

Nevertheless, Nigeria also retains important democratic features, including active civil society engagement, a vibrant media environment, and periodic electoral turnover at subnational levels. However, these strengths are often overshadowed by the structural dominance of the executive and the personalization of political authority.

Kenya: Broad-Based Government and Elite Co-optation

The political experience of Kenya introduces a distinct model of executive–opposition relations characterized by elite negotiation and coalition-based governance. Under the Kenya Kwanza administration, the emergence of a "broad-based government" arrangement has reshaped traditional boundaries between ruling and opposition politics (Cheeseman, Kanyinga, Lynch & Willis, 2024). Unlike systems defined primarily by repression or fragmentation, Kenya's model reflects elite co-optation, where opposition actors are incorporated into governing structures through negotiated settlements (Nyagaka, 2025). While this arrangement is often justified in terms of national unity and political stability, it raises important concerns about the erosion of adversarial democracy.

Higley and Burton (2006) conceptualize such arrangements as elite settlements, where political elites reach consensus to stabilize governance and prevent conflict. However, these settlements may reduce democratic accountability by weakening the institutional independence of opposition actors. In Kenya's case, the incorporation of opposition-aligned figures into governing coalitions has blurred the distinction between government and opposition, raising questions about the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight and political competition (Paget, 2024). While such arrangements may enhance short-term stability, they risk undermining long-term democratic accountability by weakening structured opposition.

Across Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya, three distinct patterns of executive–opposition relations emerge, institutional accommodation as the case with Senegal, executive

dominance with fragmentation in Nigeria, and elite co-optation Kenya (Muhammad & Fanny-Kinge, 2024). These variations demonstrate that African democracies are not uniform but are shaped by different historical trajectories, institutional designs, and elite strategies.

Recent developments in Senegal, particularly the rapid restructuring of executive and legislative leadership involving Ousmane Sonko, further illustrate that even relatively stable democracies remain politically fluid and subject to elite negotiation and institutional tension (Reuters, 2026a; Reuters, 2026b). Ultimately, the comparative evidence suggests that democratic consolidation in Africa depends not only on elections but on the continuous balancing of executive authority, institutional autonomy, and meaningful opposition participation.

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Policy Implications

This study set out to examine the nature of democratic governance in Africa through a comparative analysis of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya, with specific attention to executive dominance, opposition politics, and institutional autonomy. The central argument advanced is that democracy in Africa cannot be adequately assessed through elections alone, but must be evaluated through the strength of institutions, the survival and legitimacy of opposition politics, and the degree to which executive power is constrained by constitutional and political checks.

The comparative findings reveal three distinct but interconnected democratic trajectories. In Senegal, democracy is best understood as a system of institutional accommodation, where opposition forces are generally integrated into formal political competition, even amid moments of tension and elite conflict. The political emergence and institutional repositioning of Ousmane Sonko illustrates this dynamic, showing how opposition actors can move from protest politics into formal governance structures through constitutional processes. While this reflects institutional flexibility, it also exposes underlying tensions within elite political settlements.

In Nigeria, the evidence points to a pattern of executive dominance accompanied by fragmented opposition politics. Despite regular elections and active party competition, the concentration of power within the executive branch continues to shape political outcomes, weaken institutional checks and balances, and contribute to frequent party defections and elite realignments. The result is a democracy that is procedurally active but substantively constrained, where opposition politics struggles to maintain coherence and institutional leverage.

Kenya, on the other hand, reflects a model of elite co-optation through broad-based governance arrangements, particularly under the *Kenya Kwanza* political configuration. While such arrangements are often justified as mechanisms for national unity and

political stability, they raise concerns about the weakening of adversarial democracy. The incorporation of opposition actors into governing structures risks blurring the boundary between government and opposition, thereby reducing the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that African democracies are increasingly characterized by hybrid political arrangements that combine electoral competition with varying degrees of executive influence, elite bargaining, and institutional adaptation. The key implication is that democratic consolidation in Africa remains uneven, contested, and highly dependent on domestic political configurations rather than uniform continental trends.

Recommendations

First, there is a need to strengthen institutional independence, particularly in the judiciary, legislatures, and electoral management bodies. Without autonomous institutions capable of resisting executive interference, democratic governance becomes overly dependent on individual leaders rather than stable rules. Institutional reforms should prioritize transparent appointments, budgetary autonomy, and constitutional safeguards that limit executive overreach.

Secondly, African democracies must actively protect and institutionalize credible opposition politics. Opposition parties should not be treated as destabilizing forces but as essential pillars of democratic accountability. Legal and political frameworks should guarantee equal access to political participation, fair media space, and protection from selective enforcement of laws. This is particularly important in contexts where opposition fragmentation is exacerbated by patronage politics.

Thirdly, governments should carefully manage coalition-building and elite integration strategies. While inclusive governance arrangements can promote stability, they must not eliminate meaningful opposition or weaken accountability structures. Political inclusion should complement rather than replace structured political opposition.

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that democratic support in Africa should move beyond a narrow focus on elections toward broader institutional development. International partners, regional organizations, and domestic reform actors should prioritize strengthening rule of law institutions, enhance legislative oversight, and support civic engagement.

Additionally, democratic assessment frameworks should place greater emphasis on substantive democratic indicators, including institutional autonomy, opposition viability, and executive restraint, rather than focusing primarily on electoral cycles. This would provide a more accurate understanding of democratic performance across African states.

In conclusion, the study underscores that democracy in Africa is not defined solely by elections, but by the quality of institutions and the ability of political systems to accommodate dissent. The experiences of Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya demonstrate that the future of democratic consolidation on the continent will depend on whether states can transform opposition politics from a source of political tension into a stabilizing component of governance.

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