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Thomas Bierschenk

**Democratization without Development:**

**Benin 1989 – 2009**

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Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität,  
Forum 6, D-55099 Mainz, Germany.  
Tel. +49-6131-3923720; Email: [ifeas@uni-mainz.de](mailto:ifeas@uni-mainz.de); <http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de>  
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Geschäftsführende Herausgeberin/ Managing Editor:  
Eva Spies ([espies@uni-mainz.de](mailto:espies@uni-mainz.de))

### **Abstract:**

In contrast to a widely held view that sees Benin's democratic transition in 1989 primarily as the fall-out of global tendencies, this paper focuses specifically on the internal causes of this historical event, which it locates in the context of the history of Dahomey/Benin since 1960 and the country's political economy. It argues that, while the *Renouveau Démocratique* doubtlessly represented a significant step towards of democracy, it did little to change the country's deep-rooted political-economic structures. Since Dahomey gained independence in 1960, it has been a structurally deficient rent-based economy. None of the regime changes of the past 50 years – independence in 1960, the adoption of Marxist-Leninism in 1974 or the *Renouveau Démocratique* of 1989/90 – have succeeded in changing anything in relation to this fundamental fact. Thus, the crisis of 1989 was primarily a crisis of a particular pattern of political-economic regulation. None of the regime changes of the last 50 years, however, succeeded in resolving the country's basic development problem, i.e. how to transform a structurally deficient rent-based into a productive economy. Likewise, throughout the entire period from 1960 to 2009, basic elements of the political culture of the country remained unchanged. Neopatrimonialism, personalization, authoritarianism, regionalism and generationalism became, at best, more subtly differentiated as a result of the democratic renewal. To this extent, the Beninese democratic renewal of 1989/90 highlights the problematic connection between democracy and economic development.

### **Der Autor:**

Thomas Bierschenk ist Professor für Kulturen und Gesellschaften Afrikas am Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz. Er forscht seit 1985 zu Benin.

Email: [biersche@uni-mainz.de](mailto:biersche@uni-mainz.de)

## Democratization without Development:

### Benin 1989 – 2009

Thomas Bierschenk<sup>1</sup>

On 10 December 1989, around one month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Marxist-Leninism, which had formed the ideological basis of political and social relations in Benin since 1974, was abolished at a meeting of the politburo of the *Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin (PRPB)*. Three months later, from 19 to 27 February 1990, a *Conférence Nationale des Forces Vives de la Nation* took place which heralded the country's transition to a multi-party western-style political system. This peaceful transition to democracy had a signal effect for Africa. The Beninese National Conference became the model for similar conferences in seven other African states within the ensuing three-year period (Gabon 1990, the Republic of the Congo, Mali, Niger and Togo 1991, Zaire 1992, Chad 1993) (Godjo 1994). In 1991, President Kérékou, who had been in office since 1972, was voted out of office in the country's first democratic election since 1970. He was re-elected, however, in 1996 when he defeated the incumbent (Nicéphore Soglo), and also defended his presidency in the election of 2001, winning a second and final mandate allowed under the Constitution. Yayi Boni was elected President in 2006. In other words, since 1990 there have been three democratic changes of president. A total of twelve elections have been held since the National Conference (six parliamentary elections and two local elections in addition to the four presidential elections) which were all evaluated as overall "fair and free". The country enjoys free and lively media (over 60 private and government newspapers, some private and two government radio stations, two national television channels, apart from the foreign ones accessible via satellite). The Constitutional Court has admirably played its role as guardian of the Constitution and there are no political prisoners in the country. Benin has also been spared major outbursts of ethnic and social violence since 1991. In other words, along with Mali, Ghana, Botswana, and South Africa, Benin is seen as one of the few democratic model countries on the continent of Africa ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org))

That Benin should be considered a shining example of democracy in Africa is surprising in view of its basic political-economic data. With a per-capita GDP estimated at USD 508 in 2005, Benin is one of the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the world, ranking 163<sup>st</sup> out of a total of 177 countries evaluated in 2005 (these and the following figures are taken from PNUD 2000; UNDP 2007). The country's Human Development Index (HDI) was 0.437 that year, below the average in Sub-Saharan Africa. Based on the USD 1 per day per head threshold, over 30 percent

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (Germany); [biersche@uni-mainz.de](mailto:biersche@uni-mainz.de). – I would like to thank Christine Fricke, Dirk Kohnert, Eva Spies and Sai Sotima Tchantipo for critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

of Benin's population can be considered poor and roughly the same percentage lives below the national poverty line. At least a further 20 percent are considered vulnerable. Access to clean drinking water is estimated at 67 percent overall (71 percent in the cities and 46 percent in rural areas). Literacy rates are low: 52 percent of men and 77 percent of women are illiterate. The Beninese economy is almost entirely "informal". There are almost no manufacturing industries in the country. Agriculture accounts for approximately 40 percent of GDP and provides 70 percent of domestic exports (almost exclusively cotton) and 75 percent of all employment. Benin has the largest informal sector of 27 African and Latin American countries for which comparable data exist (Joekes, Houedete & Serra 2000). Cross-border trade and micro enterprises are at the heart of the informal economy and account for approximately 50 percent of total GDP (World Bank 1994). Political relations are characterized by neopatrimonialism, and widespread corruption, ethnicity and regionalism are constitutive factors of the political dynamic. Depending on the definition used, around 30 different languages are spoken in this small country with approximately seven million inhabitants where the course of the colonial conquest left behind a deep North-South divide. Benin also successfully rejected a regional authoritarian trend: the democratic credentials of neighboring countries Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Togo are definitely less obvious than those of Benin. Nonetheless Benin was able to isolate itself relatively from these regional anti-democratic tendencies and thus disproved a simplistic democratic domino theory.

This paper begins by presenting in brief the *Renouveau Démocratique* which took place in Benin between 1980 and 1991. In contrast to a widely held view that sees Benin's regime change primarily as the mere fall-out of global tendencies, this account will focus specifically on the internal causes of this historical event. President Kérékou's historical contribution will need to be acknowledged here too as the peaceful nature of the transition is without doubt also due to his political vision; this is rarely acknowledged, in the English-language literature in particular. The second part of the article will locate this event in the context of the history of Dahomey/Benin since 1960 and the country's political economy. I will argue that, while the *Renouveau Démocratique* doubtlessly represented a significant step towards of democracy, it did little to change the country's deep-rooted political-economic structures: to start with, the fundamental political dynamics – which I shall temporarily refer to as regionalism, generationalism, neopatrimonialism and authoritarianism – became at best more subtly differentiated as a result of the democratic renewal. In the main, however, since Dahomey gained independence in 1960, it has been a structurally deficient rent-based economy and an extroverted rentier state and remains so today. None of the regime changes of the past 50 years – independence in 1960, the adoption of Marxist-Leninism in 1974 or the *Renouveau Démocratique* of 1989/90 – have succeeded in changing anything in relation to this fundamental fact. None of them succeeded in resolving the country's basic development problem, i.e. how to transform a structurally deficient rent-based into a productive economy. To this extent, the Beninese democratic renewal of 1989/90

presents highlights the problematic connection between democracy and economic development: the example of Benin at least casts doubt on a dominant paradigm of the -- usually donor-produced -- development literature that political democracy almost automatically results in socio-economic development.

### **Democratic renewal (Renouveau Démocratique) in Benin 1989/90**

This section begins with a presentation of the process of political mobilization in Benin in the year 1989 and presents the main actor groups involved. Even the chronology of the events will demonstrate that, for the main part, it was these processes of internal political mobilization that forced the regime to open up. We will return to this point later in the section entitled "Long-term causes".

#### ***Course of events***

The party press monopoly was lifted in 1988 and the rapidly established private press quickly became the mouthpiece for a virulent critique of the government and rampant corruption (Heilbrunn 1993: 285). The entire year of 1989 in Benin was characterized by strikes, demonstrations, and unrest in the major cities which rendered the country increasingly ungovernable. It began with a strike by the teachers at the high schools of Cotonou and Porto Novo (9 January). One week later, the students at the Abomey-Calavi campus of the National University went on an indefinite strike. Demonstrations on the campus and in the city were violently terminated by the police. Towards the end of the month there was unrest on the streets of Porto Novo and shortly afterwards civil servants demonstrated against a proposal put forward by the single trade union that they should forego three months' salaries so as to provide some relief for the public finances. In April, the teachers started an indefinite strike with the result that the school year of 1988/89 could not be completed and had to be cancelled. By July, finally, the employees of 13 of the 16 ministries were on strike. In the same month, parliamentary elections were held in which three reformist oppositionists (in particular Robert Dossou, who would play an important role during the transition phase) were elected to the *Assemblée Nationale Revolutionnaire*, a corporatist -style parliament modeled on that of the German Democratic Republic. Negotiations to find a solution to the crisis took place behind the scenes with a large number of participants coming from all directions. In early August, Kérékou reformed the government, which now included Robert Dossou. Shortly afterwards, an amnesty law was passed and around 100 members of the banned Communist Party of Dahomey (*Parti Communiste du Dahomey/PCD*) were released from prison.

However, these measures did not have the desired success and the strikes by the public service and students continued in September. On 30 November, Kérékou gave his usual annual keynote address which contained some vague promises of reform. It did nothing to calm the tumultuous situation: on the contrary, it provoked major demonstrations in many of the country's cities on 2 December and with the participation of the students on 4 December in Cotonou. Three days later, on 7 December, the party's politburo met and decided to abandon Marxist-Leninism and single-party monopoly. A *Conférence Nationale des Forces Vives de la Nation* was announced for early 1990 which would define the outline of a new political order based on a new constitution. This new order was to be characterized by the separation of state and party, the limitation of the power of the President through the creation of the post of Prime Minister, political decentralization, and the guarantee of fundamental rights and rights of freedom. It was also to be accompanied by economic liberalization.

Based on this decision, a National Conference with 493 participants took place from 19 to 28 February 1990 in Hotel PLM/Aledjo in Cotonou (Banégas 1997: 97ff.). It was later acclaimed throughout Africa as a new model for peaceful political regime change and the path to political pluralism. Foreign observers frequently saw in it the importation of European models, i.e. either that of the Estates General of the French Revolution or the round tables of Eastern Europe. Although it shared some common features with the latter, the genuinely internal roots of this Beninese model must be stressed. In 1979 when the Marxist-Leninist regime had been facing its first crisis, it had reacted by calling a national *Conférence des cadres* which led to a degree of liberalization of the regime (see below). From summer 1989, Kérékou's speeches made increasing references to this *Conférence des cadres* and it played an important role in the debates of the National Conference. Kérékou and, moreover, the foreign donors, in particular France, obviously viewed the National Conference of 1990 as – similar to its predecessor of 1979 – a proven means of alleviating the crisis by providing a platform for the expression of criticism. It would enable the establishment of a new social contract for the price of certain reforms and the sacrifice of the left-wing of the single party. Regime change was not initially planned, not even, in all likelihood, by the majority of the participants. However, the debates took on a momentum of their own and the question of the sovereignty declared by the National Conference on 25 February quickly arose. President Kérékou initially showed resistance towards this and threatened indirectly with military reaction. In fact, tanks actually drove in front of Hotel Aledjo, prompting the free trade unions, which had formed in the previous months, to threaten a general strike. Against this background of a threat of social revolution and bloody civil war *à la Togo*, Archbishop de Souza succeeded in moving the President of the National Conference, i.e. Kérékou, who probably could not have relied on the support of large sections of the army anyway, to relent.

Hence, rather than a teleological view of the unavoidability of regime change and its retrospective idealization as a consensual process of transition, the entirely open outcome of the process and its conflictual nature should be stressed. *Rien n'était joué d'avance* – as was the case,

moreover, throughout the entire transition phase, there were numerous instances, not only during the National Conference, when the democratization process threatened to collapse and fail.

### **Actors**

The mobilizations in 1989 and 1990 were sustained by a heterogeneous social basis. This consisted primarily of students from the country's only university (in Abomey-Calavi, at the gates of Cotonou), who were joined in the course of 1989 by a wide variety of teachers, i.e. from primary school to university level, and, finally, a large sector of the entire public service. In other words, the democratic movement was primarily supported by a state-based urban middle class. Due to their close connection with their rural areas of origin, a generally distinctive feature of African urban elites (Geschiere & Gugler 1998), the rural areas were also touched by the social movements. As opposed to this, the demonstrations in the big cities were more socially heterogeneous with the greater involvement of the *petit peuple*.

The mobilizations in 1989 and 1990 were mainly coordinated by the student organizations, the autonomous trade unions, which had formed as part of this mobilization process (in particular university lecturers, teachers and then other public service employees), and, to a certain extent, the Catholic church and organizations of Catholic intellectuals (Banégas 1997: 40ff). The Communist Party of Dahomey (*Parti Communiste du Dahomey/PCD*) also played an important if generally rather over-estimated role. Albanian in its tendencies, it had been founded as the successor of various communist organizations and for years had been the only open opposition movement to the post-1974 regime which it termed "military-Marxist deviationists" and struggled against from underground. Between 1977 and 1990 the PCD's strategy was primarily one of passive resistance from the rural milieu with calls for the refusal to pay taxes and, from the 1980s also, one of large-scale and, in part, violent attempts at influencing the mayoral elections. It would appear that the PCD played an important role in the organization of demonstrations, for example the big demonstration on Lenin Square on 11 December 1989 during the crisis of 1989/1990. However, the fact that stones were hurled at the statue of Lenin by the crowd at this demonstration must be taken as an indication that the PCD's ideological influence was probably minimal. The PCD refused to participate in the National Conference in 1990 and it disappeared into insignificance in the ensuing elections. Thus, overall, it is difficult to estimate the actual influence of the PCD during Marxist-Leninist period regime and the 1989/90 mobilization phase; quite possibly, the myth of the PCD was also deliberately fostered by the regime as it provided a useful screen on which to project all kinds of protests.

As opposed to this, there can be no doubt as to the key role played by the student organizations in the mobilization. The Beninese student body had already been a center of political mobiliza-

tion against the various governments in power from the 1960s. The *Union Générale des Étudiants et Élèves du Dahomey (UGEED)*, which was founded in 1965, was banned in 1971, then temporarily reinstated by the Military government in 1972 for a short honeymoon period, and banned again after renewed strikes in 1974. Strikes and demonstrations had also arisen on the campus in 1979 prior to the first *Conférence nationale des cadres*; and a major student strike took place on 6 May 1985. This tradition of student strikes and demonstrations undoubtedly shaped the country's collective political memory and represented something of a political learning process for the students themselves. The student movement of 1989 was organized jointly by the PCD and the *Bureau Exécutif National (BEN)* of the *Coopérative universitaire* while the public service employees were mobilized by the independent trade unions which were in the process of forming. The students' approach was, however, more radically aimed at confrontation while that of the university lecturers focused instead on a "procedural strategy of protest" (Banégas 1997: 67).

The trade unions – which under Dahomeyan/Beninese conditions were, and are, primarily public service trade unions – had also played an important role in the 1960s and proven to be entirely capable of overturning governments (for example in 1963). In 1974 they were amalgamated to form a single trade union (*Union Nationale des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Bénin/UNSTB*). The first attempts to establish autonomous trade unions, starting with the *Syndicat Nationale de l'Enseignement Supérieur (SNES)*, arose in late 1988. The demands for trade union autonomy and political freedom of speech, which were formulated as part of this process, constituted an important catalyst of the crisis and, ultimately, the fall of the regime; and the trade union milieu and its publications (in particular the so-called *Bulletins de Liaison*) provided central sites of political reflection.

The Catholic Church, symbolized by the person of Monsignor de Souza, also played an important role in the transition process even though it has probably been over-estimated by foreign observers. Isidor de Souza, the archbishop of Cotonou, chaired the National Conference as President and later also chaired the *Haut Conseil de la République (HCR)*, the legislative body established during the transition process which then became the Constitutional Court – until he was called on by the Pope to resign from his political positions. Catholic missionary schools had been a key institution for producing an intellectual, administrative and political elite in colonial and post-colonial Dahomey (Bierschenk 2007). In the 1970s, the Catholic church had been put under strong pressure by the regime and divested of a considerable part of its influence through the nationalization of the Catholic private schools (Claffey 2007; Wetzig 2007). The church responded to this pressure with passive resistance and presented itself as the silent alternative to the totalistic demands of the regime. However, relations improved markedly with the Pope's visit in 1980: the pressure from the regime, which anyhow had begun to deradicalize at about the same time, diminished and the church began to become more involved in the field of politics. It actively intervened in politics for the first time on the occasion of the student strike of May 1985:



the Beninese Bishops' Conference sent a delegation to an audience with Kérékou and appealed for understanding of the students. Finally, in March 1989, a pastoral letter was read out in the country's churches which represented a direct political contribution to the ongoing crisis. In this letter the bishops stressed that the crisis was primarily internal in its causes, denounced the self-enrichment, corruption, and nepotism practiced by those in government and called for peaceful democratic change. This pastoral letter clearly sent out a signal for further mobilization.

However, in general, the church's attitude during the entire mobilization and transition process remained very cautious. It was certainly not the driving force behind the movements, but instead accompanied the process, during which it was, of course, mainly concerned with the safeguarding of its own institutional interests. Various Catholic reflection groups, including in particular the Syrius Group (later renamed as Club Perspectives 21) which also worked as Mgr De Souza's think tank, undoubtedly made an important contribution to the political debate. The leading actors of these groups were simultaneously involved in other organizations and reflection groups, e.g. the trade unions. This multi-locality of actors was a typical phenomenon of the mobilization dynamic.

The influence of the Beninese diaspora on the transition process is often significantly overestimated. This is probably due to the fact that the representatives were far better represented in the subsequent transition process, starting with the *Conférence Nationale*, than could be expected on the basis of their generally low level of involvement in the mobilization phase. A *Front de Libération et de Rehabilitation du Dahomey* had existed in France under the leadership of ex-President Zinsou since 1975; however its influence remained negligible. In late 1988, the *Club Perspectives 99* was established in Paris; it organized a round table in Versailles on 2 and 3 December of the same year. Although the French media naturally paid quite a lot of attention to this event, its overall insignificance is demonstrated by the fact that all of the ex-Presidents of Dahomey/Benin invited to attend (i.e. Zinsou, Maga, Ahomadegbe, and Apithy) stayed away. Thus, on the whole the diaspora was not a major factor in the political mobilization. However, it became an important actor during the *Conférence Nationale*, at which participants with pre-prepared proposals had a considerable advantage. This diaspora, whose representatives often worked for international organizations prior to 1990 – President Soglo, who had previously worked for the World Bank being the most prominent example – was also strongly represented in the new regime.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This tradition was continued with President Yay Boni, who was elected in 2006 and had previously held the position of President of the West African Development Bank (BOAD). As was the case with his predecessor Soglo, great – and unrealistic – hopes have been pinned on him by the “international community”.

Thus, without doubt, the mobilizations of the years 1988 to 1990 primarily expressed conflicts within Benin's political class. The protests were sustained by both the new (or potential) elites, i.e. the students, who insisted, so to speak, on adherence to the "post-colonial compromise" (see below) and sought access to power, and the old ones, who were already integrated into the political clientelist networks and were protesting against the effects of the economic crisis on their standard of living. Thus, the demands voiced by the latter were relatively concrete and limited, while those expressed by the former were rather more far-reaching if somewhat diffuse (Banégas 1997: 59ff.).

The success of the mobilization – for example, in comparison with events in neighboring Togo – has been attributed by some authors to the existence of a strong Beninese civil society (Heilbrunn 1993). This interpretation appears to represent a rather simplistic transfer of Eastern European experiences to Africa and does not stand up to closer scrutiny. On the contrary, the organizations that played an important role in the success of this mobilization were often only established in the course of this process which was marked by a high degree of plasticity of the organizational locations of the actors. Thus these emerging organizations were the product of the disintegration of the regime rather than the expression of a pre-existing strong organized civil society. The economic crisis and the dependence on external financial support had made limited political opening necessary; thus the formulation of protest had to be allowed, at least to a limited extent. While these protests were initially material and corporatist, they soon developed into a radical critique of the regime. The criticism of corruption, which was triggered by a series of scandals that increasingly eroded the moral legitimacy of the regime, was an important discursive mechanism in this radicalization of protest, which then developed its own momentum and transformed itself into demands for comprehensive democratization. However, regime change only moved into the realm of the conceivable and demandable after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Information about what was happening in other places was clearly of enormous significance in that it radically extended the space of possibility and opportunity for future developments. To this extent, the Beninese transformation process in fact cannot be explained on the basis of purely internal developments.

The comparison with Togo is illuminating. Careful examination of the empirical data shows that, despite many similarities, the situations in Togo and Benin were quite different in many respects. First, the Togolese President received significantly more support from abroad, in particular from France, throughout the entire period of crisis than his Beninese counterpart. Second, the scale of the economic crisis in Benin was far more significant than in Togo, a factor that limited Kérékou's capacity for action considerably. Unlike Benin, Togo was less dependent on rents from development aid as it had an alternative source of income i.e. phosphate (Heilbrunn 1993: 282). A third differentiating factor consisted in Eyadema's control of the army and security forces (including the militia), who were mainly recruited from his own Northern ethnic group, the Kabiye, and intervened extremely brutally in the capital of Lome, the center of the opposi-

tion against Eyadema and situated in the South. By opposition, in Benin soldiers (as other public employees) from the North had in fact been given particular support under the Marxist-Leninist regime in Benin but this had only led to a better regional balance in the army (and the public service in general). This regional balance – for which again President Kérékou needs to be credited -- would prove an important condition for the peacefulness of the Beninese transition: unlike in Togo, the Beninese army could not be mobilized through appeals to regionalist loyalties. Furthermore, our own research on the political dynamics in rural Benin (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 2003, 1998) points to a fourth important difference between the two countries: unlike in Togo, the socialist period in Benin had led to the considerable mobilization of the political and social conditions, not least in the country-side. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship, which relates – at most – to the national level, it was under this regime that electoral democracy had been introduced at local level. Mass revolutionary organizations also played an important role in the social mobilization: when the biographies of the activists from the post-1990 associative sector are traced, it emerges that they frequently gained their initial organizational experience in these mass revolutionary organizations (Le Meur, Bierschenk & Floquet 1999). Thus, to this extent, the Marxist-Leninist regime actually did produce “fragments of democracy” – if not those identified by Heilbrunn (1993: 277) – which formed a fertile breeding ground for the “civil society” which rapidly emerged after 1990 – even if, as will emerge below, this concept of “civil society” is extremely problematic in the Beninese context.

### ***Long-term causes***

Many observers saw the democratic transition as Benin’s (and Africa’s) participation in a universal movement towards democracy, as an expression of a world-wide “third wave of democratization” (Huntington 1991). Three variants of this argument can be found in the literature: first, some authors assume a direct democratic diffusion process (Starr 1991). This assumption of the local imitation of Eastern European models, in particular, is based primarily on a superficial perception of the chronology of the events: i.e. the fact that the abolition of Marxist-Leninism in Benin occurred almost exactly one month after the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, it overlooks the fact that a process of intensive internal political mobilization had been under way in Benin long before November 1989. Moreover, empirical studies have shown that during the core of the transition phase, i.e. between November 1989 and February 1999, references to the events in Eastern and Central Europe were rather rare in the public debate and the increasingly virulent criticism of the ruling regime was related almost exclusively to internal Beninese conditions.

A second variant of the “externalist” argument assumes that the democratic renewal was a response to pressure from the aid donors. Benin was practically bankrupt in 1989 and urgently dependent on external support. The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) which had been dis-

cussed with the Washington International Finance Institutions (IFI) from 1987 and agreed on in spring 1989 in response to this situation forced the regime to accept tight conditionalities. However, these conditions related primarily to economic good governance: i.e. the main objectives were the stemming of inflation and the budgetary deficit, the reduction of the size of the public service, the privatization of the banking system and the 40 public companies, the withdrawal of the state from the commercial sector, and the lifting of the import licenses (Kohnert & Preuss 1993: 58). Democracy did not feature on the agenda of the multinational donors. Nonetheless, as demonstrated above, the dependence on the donors played an indirect role in the democratization process as it reduced the regime's capacity for action considerably.

Finally, the role of France is highlighted in the third variant of this argument in support of the external causes of the regime change in Benin. Here too, closer examination shows, however, that this role was, in fact, ambivalent. Mitterand formulated his demand for democracy for Africa in summer 1990 in La Baule, in other words five months after the staging of the Beninese National Conference. Up to then, the French government appears to have favored an Ivoirian or Togolese solution of controlled liberalization for Benin. It certainly did not wish for the deposing of Kérékou who, for his part – in a process of mutual instrumentalization – saw the French intervention as an opportunity to rid himself of the radical wing of the PRPB.

Thus the available (Banégas 1997, 2003; Kohnert & Preuß 1992; Vittin 1991) rather points to the internal causes of the democratic transition in Benin. The crisis of 1989 was primarily a crisis of a particular pattern of political-economic regulation which had existed at least since independence in 1960 and which was only intensified under the Marxist-Leninist regime. This pattern was based on a "post-colonial compromise" (Banegas 1997: 34 in reference to Bayart 1993): the systematic policy of the cooptation of new elites and oppositional groups into the state apparatus. As a result, from 1960 onwards the public service expanded in breathtaking speed: from approximately 2,000 employees in 1960 to 12,000 in 1980 and 49,000 in 1990 (Banégas 1997: 33). And this latter figure does not even include the 8,000 employees in public companies and 12,000 in the military (only 2,000 in 1972) (Kohnert & Preuß 1992: 54). In its initial phase, in particular, the Marxist-Leninist regime enjoyed particularly good conditions for the implementation of this strategy. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a slight upturn in palm oil exports which were replaced in the 1970s by the export of cotton and, to a lesser extent, peanuts and coffee. Benin also became Africa's biggest exporter of cocoa for a time despite the fact that the country did not produce any cocoa: it was smuggled out of Nigeria. This is indicative of a fundamental fact of Benin's economic situation: it is primarily influenced by conditions in its vast neighboring country of Nigeria. The good economic conditions of the 1970s were largely an indirect consequence of the Nigerian oil boom. Benin benefited from cheap petrol, the remittances of its many guest workers in Nigeria, and, moreover, increasing cross-border smuggling. This made it possible to reduce the foreign trade deficit temporarily, albeit at the price of an increasing informalization of the economy (Igué & Soulé 1992). The country also benefited from

the economic possibilities created by see-saw diplomacy of the Cold War period. Furthermore, the nationalization of industry put the regime temporarily in a particularly strong position to allocate jobs.

However, the economy's enormous dependence on Nigeria became clear when the latter closed its borders in 1984 and expelled the Beninese guest workers. Due to the devaluation of the Naira, Nigeria also became less attractive as an export destination for agricultural products. At the same time, the regime's policy of industry-based catch-up development increasingly emerged as a dead end. The reasons were not least the competition from Nigeria and mismanagement, but on a more fundamental level the structural dictates of the regime's cooptation policy. Towards the late 1980s, the only state enterprises that remained profitable were the monopoly electricity and water concerns (Kohnert & Preuß: 53f.).

The crisis that took hold around 1980 gave a boost to a reform-oriented group within the political class and encouraged it to stand up to the hitherto dominating party hardliners (who were organized in the *Ligue nationale de la jeunesse patriotique* and thus known as *ligeurs*) with an increasingly audible discourse on profitability, efficiency, productivity, and the need for the rationalization of the economy and politics. Thus, the year 1980 represented an important turning point in the history of Beninese Marxism-Leninism which is sometimes referred to as "thermidorianization" (Martin 1985).

With time, the cooptation strategy adopted by the Benin rentier state (for a discussion of this term, see below) reached its natural – financial – limits. In 1988, the "gray" budget, which was financed by development aid, represented 75 percent of central government's internally generated revenue; 90 percent of this public revenue (from taxes and customs duties) was used for personnel expenses (Bierschenk 1993a). In 1987, the automatic employment of university graduates in the public service came to an end. As a result, a social category entirely new to Benin was created, i.e. that of the *jeunes diplômés sans emplois* who would become important supporters of the critique of the regime. In 1988 and 1989, the increasing external and external indebtedness of Benin's government culminated in the bankruptcy of the state: the salaries of state officials were not paid for eight months and the financial institutions collapsed due to mismanagement and fraud. This process was accompanied by a series of political and financial corruption scandals that increasingly undermined the regime's legitimacy.

The reforms introduced in the course of 1989 must therefore be seen as an attempt to react to this dual, i.e. economic and legitimation, crisis. However, it took on a momentum of its own with critics of the regime being further energized by the reports from Eastern Europe. Thus, the collapse of the regime was primarily based on an internal momentum. The fact that it resulted in regime change to a liberal multi-party system was due, first, to the dynamic of internal events and, second, the psychological effects of images of political events in Eastern Europe which made certain political models more plausible. The effect was all the greater for a political class

which had deeply internalized the country's external orientation (extraversion) and had developed a particular sensibility for new global opportunities, in particular in the context of development cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

### **The context: rentier economy and rentier state**

A main argument of this paper is that the Beninese crisis of 1989 must primarily be understood as a crisis of the regulative dynamic of a certain political-economic model, i.e. that of a centrally-administered rentier state which had reached its financial limits. I use the notion of rent here in the Ricardian-Marxian sense of surplus revenues, which are not derived from the investment of factors of production (e.g., capital or labor). In this sense, rents are "unearned" revenues; they arise in situations where competition is limited by either natural or socio-political factors. In neo-classical economic theory, rent is a receipt in excess of the opportunity cost of a resource (which would arise in situations of competition). The access to rents needs to be politically organized ("lobbying"). In this perspective, rent seeking describes the activity of economic actors who compete for monopoly positions and preferential access to rents via political and social means.

A rentier state therefore is a state that receives considerable revenues from sources other than taxes on (internal) productive processes, e.g. profits and salaries. The possibility of having access to rent renders the state indifferent to the problems of internal mobilization of factors of production; thus, a rentier state is the opposite of a tax state. As a consequence, the basic political contract of modern democracies, i.e. no taxation without representation, is suspended in rentier states (Guyer 1991). The concept of the rentier state was originally used to analyze the political economy of Near Eastern (and other) oil-producing countries.<sup>4</sup> It is my contention that it can also usefully be employed to highlight certain features of poor African (and other) countries. These countries are structurally aid-dependent with aid fulfilling a similar economic and political function (rent equivalent) to the oil-derived rents in the Near East. However, the different nature of the rent has important political implications: development rent needs to be mobilized by lobbying external actors. Therefore, aid-dependent rentier states have much less control over their rent than oil-producing ones; they are, in the words of the French political scien-

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<sup>3</sup>As a participant at a conference on the "Social Dimension of Structural Adaptation" sponsored by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), I witnessed the big demonstration on 10 December 1989 on Cotonou's Lenin Square directly. It was very noticeable how quickly the linguistic usage of our Beninese partners at the conference changed over the course of this three-day conference: while they consistently addressed each other on 9 December as "comrade", by the 11<sup>th</sup> this term had been replaced by "monsieur".

<sup>4</sup>For an introduction into the vast literature on the subject, see Buchanan et al. (1980) and Hazem & Luciani (1987). For an initial application to Benin, see Bierschenk (1993a). Elwert (1990) referred to the centrally-administered rentier state as a "commando state" ("Kommandostaat").

tist Bayart (1993), “extroverted” to a much higher degree. Development rent is also much more volatile than oil rent, and, of course, it amounts to much less money, thereby increasing the dependence of governments on foreign donors. In the case of Dahomey/Benin, a second type of rent also plays a role which results from the geographical location of the country as a transit corridor to the Sahel states and neighboring Nigeria. Because of this transit rent, Benin has also been referred to as an “entrepot state” (Igué & Soulé 1992).<sup>5</sup>

Its rentier character represents a basic constant of the Dahomeyan/Beninese political economy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> In reality, not only the regime change of 1989/1990, but also that of 1972/74 and the internal reforms of the Marxist-Leninist regime around 1980 should be understood as – ultimately unsuccessful – attempts to resolve these regulative crises.

Likewise, throughout the entire period from 1960 to 2009, basic elements of the political culture of the country remained unchanged. These basic elements are indicated by the terms neopatrimonialism, personalization, authoritarianism, regionalism and generationalism. This point was already developed above for the period of the revolutionary military government (1972 – 1974) and the Marxist-Leninist regime (1972/74 – 1989). To conclude, the continuity in this regard with the preceding (1960 – 1972) and succeeding (from 1990) periods will now be demonstrated.

### ***Benin 1960 – 1972: L’Enfant malade de l’Afrique***

In the 1960s Dahomey was known for its political instability which earned it the sobriquet *enfant malade de l’Afrique*. Between 1960 and 1972, the country experienced eleven Presidents (five civilian, six military men), six different constitutions and twelve coups d’états, of which five were successful. The background to this instability was an enduring rivalry between three political leaders, each of whom represented a major political region of the country (Apithy the southwest around Porto Novo, Ahomadegbe the central region around Abomey, and Maga the north). They entered into shifting alliances which were interrupted at regular intervals through the temporary seizure of power by the military (Staniland 1973). These leaders were at the top of political parties that enjoyed virtual monopolies at regional level – a model of “regional single parties” which would re-emerge after 1991. The meager political elite, which flocked around

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<sup>5</sup> The revenue from the transit economy cannot, however, be fully considered as rent as its realization necessitates business service, i. e. a productive investment (which in the case of Benin is largely carried out in the -- in part illegal -- informal economy). Arguing for considering development aid a type of rent is not to deny, as Collier (2005) has argued, that it can, under certain conditions, be relatively more beneficial – or less harmful – for development than oil.

<sup>6</sup> This observation is applicable to all poor African states. The aid regime which gave rise to the rentier state had its origin in the immediate aftermath of the war (Cooper 1997) and therefore pre-dates independence.

these three leaders – and also in rapidly changing alliances – was extremely homogenous in sociological terms: Firstly, membership of the elite was based exclusively on educational capital -- in most cases acquired at the country's Catholic mission schools and, for the top echelon, in French West Africa (AOF) and metropolitan France -- and less so on social origins. Secondly, this new class of *évolués*, as they were called, originated almost exclusively from the south of the country, a state of affairs that would not change markedly until 1972.<sup>7</sup> In addition, from the late 1950s a group of indigenous traders gradually formed: the emergence of this group was, however, politically mediated insofar as they profited from business opportunities almost exclusively provided by the state. Thus, with independence, a political symbiosis emerged of *évolués*, who held political and administrative power, and local entrepreneurs, mainly involved in trade, who had no political pretensions and lived from political protection and in return financed the politicians. This symbiosis survived the period of Marxist-Leninism largely intact, so that the resulting political embedding of the economy would remain a constant of Dahomeyan and Beninese politics to the present day.<sup>8</sup> Another potential elite group, the so-called traditional chiefs (who had colonial rule to thank for their function) who have remained a central force in national politics in the neighboring countries of Nigeria, Niger and Togo until the present day, play a rather subordinate role in Benin since the *chefferie* de canton was suppressed in 1959 (Bako-Arifari 1998). The politics of regionalist rivalry within a relatively small and sociologically homogenous political class were shot through by a logic of political clientelism: each of the three leaders received his support for the price of a vast system of political patronage which constantly strained the country's financial limits. Throughout the entire period of 1960 – 1972, Dahomey had a permanent deficit in its balance of trade: only 50 percent of imports were covered by exports (Ronen 1975). This was accompanied by rapid impoverishment: per capita GNP fell by 50 percent between 1959 and 1968. As far back as the 1960s, between two thirds and 80 percent of state income was used to pay the salaries of public sectors employees, the numbers of whom – in accordance with the logic of political clientelism – increased significantly after 1960.<sup>9</sup> In 1965 President Ahomadegbe declared that the country was on the brink of bankruptcy and ordered 25 percent salary cuts for the public service. This type of economic and financial crisis would become a constant feature of Dahomeyan/Beninese politics and the salary cuts of 1965 were only the first ones of a long series to come. The Beninese rentier state has its historical roots in this period.

Political clientelism not only collided continuously with the financial limits of the Beninese rentier state, it also produced its own internal contradictions. The extension of school education

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<sup>7</sup> For a case study on one of the members of this elite from the north of the country and on the gradual traditionalization of this elite, see Bierschenk (1993b)

<sup>8</sup> This mechanism was examined in detail for the city of Parakou in Bierschenk (2000; 2006).

<sup>9</sup> The figures provided by Ronen (1975: 152) for public sector employees are, however, inconsistent: there are supposed to have been 7,888 employees in 1961 and over 18,000 in 1962.



from the 1950s increased the number of (potential) *évolués*, the younger representatives of whom faced increasing difficulties in transforming their educational capital into the same social positions as those achieved by their predecessors. The seizure of power by the military under Kérékou in 1972 was sustained by the frustration of this young generation; this aspect of Dahomeyan/Beninese political culture, which could be described as generationalism, would remain a line of continuity to the present day.

### ***Les primes de la démocratie: the Beninese rentier state from 1990 to today***

#### *The democratic rentier state*

After the Democratic Renewal, Benin's level of internal resource mobilization remained one of the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (Joekes & Houedete 2000: 5). As a result, the Beninese economy remained very dependent on external aid. Aid financed 30 percent of total public expenditure and over 80 percent of public investment over the period 1992-97 (ibid: 17). Undoubtedly, the country's good democracy and human rights track record since the 1990s have positively impacted on development aid levels. This phenomenon is referred to in Benin as the "democracy bonus" (*primes de la démocratie*). Thus France withdrew a large part of its demands for debt repayment as early as 1990 and other donors followed its example. In 1991, Benin featured for the first time on the list of recipients of USAID and in the same year, a second installment of the SAP was granted although the objectives of the first phase had not actually been reached (Kohnert & Preuß 1992). In fact, following the Democratic Renewal, the country became increasingly "over-assisted": in 1999, Benin consumed barely one third of all external aid committed (52 percent of loans and 28 percent of grants) (République du Bénin 1999).

Institutionalized aid dependence is not a purely "economic" phenomenon. It is directly articulated with the political system. Poorly coordinated aid – with each donor pursuing its own agenda, creating its own local clientele within and outside the government administration, working according to different funding cycles, timeframes and procedures – has been a major factor in limiting the coherence of government action. It has reduced the government's weak arbitration and regulation capacity even further. Actions are undertaken not because they are seen as priorities for the development of the country, but because they bring external financing.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, clientelist politics, which we have identified as a major feature of Benin's political system, are encouraged and stabilized by institutionalized aid dependency. Consequently, political rhetoric is marked by a tendency for window dressing. In Benin, the political discourse is easily adapted to the latest fashion emanating from the West. Often this is simply done by add-

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<sup>10</sup> This theme is particularly well documented for West Africa. See for example Naudet (1999), Lecomte & Naudet (2000).

ing up words. The latest fashion is to add “poverty” to longer-established development buzzwords: “women and poverty”, “employment and poverty”, “informal sector and poverty”, “health, poverty and development”, “decentralization and poverty”, “corruption and poverty”, “governance and poverty”, and the like. With the recent swing in development philosophy towards decentralized aid that tries to directly reach beneficiaries, the search for “development rent” has been decentralized and generalized. This is one major factor behind the recent flourishing of Benin’s associational sector discussed below (for case studies in Benin and beyond, see Bierschenk, Chauveau & Olivier de Sardan 2000).

As a corollary, the formal economy remains highly politically embedded: the larger private sector operators all continue to depend to a very large degree on contracts with the administration. Indeed, main actors typically straddle the sectors of politics, economy and civil society and have, as a rule, multiple identities and functions.

### *Political immobility*

On a more strictly political level, the institutionalization of a pluralist democracy and the rule of law triggered by the “democratic renewal” have remained in important respects incomplete. The price for the political stability which has marked the country since the democratic renewal has had a cost in terms of democratic governance. To begin with, Benin’s political system suffers from a high degree of political immobility. Since the successful completion of the “democratic renewal”, all major reform projects have advanced only very slowly or have stalled. In each case, the initiative for these reforms came from outside; the formulation of reform projects relied to a large extent on foreign, and foreign-financed, expertise; and the degree of implementation was directly correlated with the degree of pressure from Benin’s foreign donors. Where pressure was high and non-compliance risked being sanctioned by the closure of access to external aid, reforms have been implemented, sometimes reluctantly (e.g. privatization of public enterprises, reduction in the number of civil servants, devaluation). Where the “friendly pressure” from donors has been more diffuse, reform projects have moved exceedingly slowly (e.g. decentralization: on the agenda from 1990 to 2001, civil service reform: still on the agenda, fight against corruption: a series of ad hoc measures largely ineffective so far; the decade-long blockage of the reform of family law). Where pressure from the outside has not been backed by financial support or financial sanctions, reforms have been blocked (e.g. the reform of the judicial system which only got under way once there was outside financing).

Governing through clientelist networks also leads to a high degree of politicization of the administration. Politicization, in combination with a low level of material resources, inflexible bureaucratic norms, a sub-optimal distribution of personnel (across regions and sectors) and weak intra-administrative control and sanctioning mechanisms has largely contributed to the low effec-

tiveness of the administration in implementing government decisions. Large sections of the administration at least partially escape central control. This has been shown, for example, for the judicial system (Bierschenk 2008).

#### *The preponderance of the executive and the weakness of parliament and political opposition*

On a more formal level, the national political system is highly based in favor of the executive, and in particular the President. The latter enjoys large powers to legislate by decree and, via his Finance and Economics Minister, largely controls the budget. Under certain conditions, the budget does not even have to be voted by Parliament. The President also has very extensive powers to appoint senior staff in the administration and State enterprises. In a political system tainted by clientelism, this is a formidable base of power.

Another disadvantage of Benin's "inclusive" political regime is that it systematically weakens public debate. Opposition is either bought off, or isolated. Parliament and its 83 members can easily be bypassed in the legislative and budgetary process. Furthermore, it does not possess the technical capacity to challenge the administration given the shortage of professional staff and the generally low technical skills of the MPs. As a result, Parliament has taken relatively few legislative initiatives. Most laws are based on government initiatives (around 90 percent between 1991 and 2000) and draft laws can pile up without any action taken for long periods of time (PNUD 2000: 57). These constraints are compounded by the inability of political parties to organize policy debates.

#### *Political parties and the continuity of Benin's electoral geography*

The transition to a multi-party system has produced the re-emergence of the specific electoral and political geography which we had encountered in the Dahomey of the 1960s. Paradoxically, the recent wave of democratization in Africa has created de facto one-party systems (or, to be more precise, a single dominant party and a fractured opposition) in the most shining models of democracy like Mali (Bogaards 2000; Randall 2002). At first glance, Benin appears to be an exception to this rule of neopatrimonial democracy. Since 1991, the number of political parties in Benin has gone up from 38 to over 122. This seemingly high fragmentation of the party system, which observers often cite as its main weakness, is however misleading. There are in fact two types of political parties in Benin: Only a handful dominates national political life and accounts for 80 percent of the seats in Parliament. Through their participation in national elections, they try to get into a position to form a government and to advance the interests of their regional electorate (Bako-Arifari 1998; Gbessemehlan & Rijnierse 1995). The other 100 parties or so do not aspire to win elections and do not even seriously aim at being represented in Parliament.

The creation of a party and the participation in an election are, in the majority of cases, rather a means for individual local political leaders and their followers to measure their political weight in the hope of being granted positions in government after the elections. (The same strategy also explains the high number of candidates to presidential elections – 17 in 2001 – most of whom have no serious chance of winning at all.) This strategy is being favored by the electoral system that guarantees representation for a maximum of diverse local interests once they are able to muster a minimum of votes in at least one given electoral district, thus creating a “parliament of minorities” (Hounkpe & Lalaye 2000/01).

However, a closer look reveals that this apparent competitiveness of the Beninese party system actually rests – like in the past – on parties that all have a very clear regional base and are often regionally dominant. As we have seen, in the 1960s, Benin was divided into three geopolitical regions; today, it is four, and, like in the past, each of the major four parties dominates one of them: the PSD in the south-west (the Mono region, which has emerged as an addition to the old tri-partite division) under the leadership of Bruno Amoussou; the PRD in the southeast (the Ouémé north of Porto Novo) under the leadership of Adrien Houngbedji; the RB in the center region around Abomey, and in the capital area around Cotonou, under the leadership of the Soglo couple; and (until recently) FARD-Alafia in the north.

On the other hand, recent elections also unleashed transformative forces in the Beninese polity, the long-term effects of which can at present only be estimated at best (Bierschenk 2006). In particular the local elections of 2001/2 and 2006/7 continued and reinforced a trend towards political microregionalisms. This trend first emerged with the transformation of the Dahomeyan three-region/three-party system to a four/four configuration after 1991 which we have already referred to, and continued with the complexification of regionalism, whereby, in a system of interlocking cleavages, the emergence of regional opposition parties is encouraged by parties that are dominant in other regions. As a result of these interlocking regionalist cleavages, parties now exist in the ‘South’ that are allied to the ‘northern camp’, while likewise parties in the ‘North’ are linked to the ‘southern camp’.

These parties, however, are very light structures built around the personal ambition of individual politicians (or coalitions of “big men” in the case of the larger parties) who are as a rule also their main sponsors. Internal conflicts are typically resolved by splitting up: in case of political defeat, the losing faction leaves the party and creates a new one. It is thus not surprising that most parties have no political program and no technical capacities in terms of policy analysis. In addition, parties and individual MPs that find themselves in opposition after an election tend to gravitate towards the government. As one notorious party-hopping MP recently declared, “opposition does not feed a man” (Le Cordon, 19.7.01). As a result, all major parties have been seriously weakened by secession and splits since 1996. On the other hand, it could be argued that, as MPs and parties are not elected on the basis of a program but function as a link be-

tween the electorate of a given area and the national centers of power, this “political transhumance” is not inconsistent with the interests of their electorate: Politicians are not elected to defend policy issues but to assure that government resources are channeled to their region of origin.

There is also reason to raise doubts about the internal democratic character of Benin’s political parties: their internal organization is not regulated by law (Engels, Stroh & Wantchékon 2008) The 1999 law on party finances that puts a ceiling on expenses linked to election campaigns and requires parties to make public their sources of finance has been systematically violated by all major parties. All parties need sponsorship from businesspersons who in turn are largely dependent on government contracts at the national and local levels. The feedback mechanism thus created is a major cause of the rising spiral of corruption that has plagued the country in recent years (Bako-Arifari 2001).

### *Civil society*

Strictly speaking, civil society is defined as an autonomous space composed of civil associations that pursue public goals. The sphere of civil society is distinct from both the State and the market. In this strict definition of the concept, Civil Society Organizations are not only non-government but also non-profit organizations. In the current debate concerning Africa, a more restricted definition is often used, one that identifies civil society simply with NGOs.

Benin has a flourishing associational sector. Some associations have a long history going back to colonial times (e.g., religious communities); some have existed since the revolutionary period but might have benefited from liberalization after 1990 (e.g., community organizations, trade unions, professional associations); others only appeared just before or after the democratic renewal in the early 1990s (e.g., NGOs, local development associations, cultural associations, agricultural producers associations). In 1999, it was estimated that there were more than 5000 NGOs in Benin, of which more than 3000 were officially registered (PNUD 2000: 66).

The majority of Benin’s NGOs, however, only exists on paper (Le Meur, Bierschenk & Floquet 1999). Indeed, a large number of them are small business ventures that have been established by university graduates as a response to the reduction in employment opportunities within the administration after 1986. A majority of graduates sets out to create an NGO, however small, after graduation. Having studied together, these NGO promoters are usually linked by ties of friendship, if not kinship. Their objective is to find contracts with development agencies, mostly in the decentralized aid-business (see the case studies on Benin and beyond in Bierschenk et al. 2000).

To run an NGO instead of running a consultancy firm has two main advantages: one is tax exemption under the Law of 1901 on non-profit associations; and secondly, in a context in which donors like to deal directly with civil society, owning an NGO helps to obtain funding for development projects.

Most Beninese NGOs work within a particular region while only a few of them are positioned at the national level. Regional and national NGOs alike are usually multi-purpose, as indicated by their names (usually a random combination of some of the current key words of the development discourse like “gender promotion”, “environment”, “community development” and the like). They implement any development project for which they can find financing. Indeed, their leaders often combine the functions of private consultants and “development brokers” (Bierschenk, Chauveau & Olivier de Sardan 2000). In other words, in view of their profit-making orientation and their main function of providing jobs for their promoters, it could be argued that most Beninese NGOs are in fact part of the private (business) sector.

Furthermore, Benin’s NGOs are hardly autonomous from the State. Many of them include at least one or more politician and/or civil servant. In fact, having good links with the administration seems to be a requirement for successfully finding contracts. The reverse is also true. Benin’s many local “development associations” were, throughout the 1990s, important trampolines for catapulting local politicians into national careers. Recently, it has become a fashion of politicians, in quest of legitimacy, to claim that they are “representatives of civil society” in order to dissociate themselves from the unfavorable reputation of political parties.

To conclude this point, leaders of many so-called CSOs have multiple identities and straddle with the world of politics and the private sector. Hence, in the Benin context, the distinction between civil society, the State and the market sector underlying much of the present development discourse needs to be seriously qualified; in Benin civil society is weakly developed and has hardly emancipated itself from either the State or the market.

Finally, it should also be noted that it is quite rare in Benin to find associations that either defend or promote broader interests vis-à-vis the government or the private sector, or that defend the interests of the users of a particular government service. Similarly, very few associations are able to generate a public debate on key development issues or influence public policy.

### *The media*

The liveliness of Benin’s media and the freedom of expression they enjoy are an essential component of the country’s image as an African (model) democracy. In fact, Benin can boast today a small number of very qualified journalists. However, some exceptions apart, the media’s poten-

tial in functioning as the carriers of an informed public debate on complex policy choices is rather limited.

To begin with, the reasons for this lie in the often low professional standards of many of the country's journalists. This could be overcome by training, in which some donors have been engaged in for some time. However, another feature of the country's media is their concentration, in terms of reporting and distribution, on the capital. While the reader has a wide choice of press journals in Cotonou, the choice gets much more limited and supply increasingly erratic the further the distance from the capital. Likewise, it is rare to find controversial regional or local issues (i.e., other than the opening of a school in such-and-such town or the touring of a minister of such-and-such region) reported in the press. In addition, the printed press publishes exclusively in French which is not mastered by a majority of the population. Television sets are also heavily concentrated in the capital and the other bigger cities of the country; there are, however, some programs in local languages. In terms of reach, the most effective public medium is the radio which covers the whole country and has programs in all major local languages.

On a more profound level, there are structural problems to Benin's press organs, and to a lesser extent television and radio, which are linked to its financial base. In the absence of subscription, all press journals have to compete daily in the streets for buyers which favors a preference for large headlines announcing yet another scandal. While this becomes relatively quickly obvious even to the foreign reader, there is another side to the functioning of the press which is less obvious: The majority of articles, in any given journal on any given day, are in fact paid for by the beneficiaries. This might be a politician who wants his opening of a new school in his native village reported; it might be an aid agency which wants to see an article on its activities printed or a foreign embassy which wants the aid it disburses in Benin detailed; it might be a politician who wants to undermine a rival by spreading rumors of the latter's scandalous private life or his mismanagement of public funds. (The budgets of most of the numerous aid-financed seminars in Benin include nowadays an item called "communication" or the like, which in fact is meant to cover the costs of attracting a television crew or a press or radio reporter to its opening and final sessions.)

"In Benin", notes Emmanuel Adjovi (2003: 158), one of Benin's top journalists, "we notice the venality of many information professionals who behave like vulgar mercenaries of the pen or of the microphone, in the service of whoever offers most". While this venality affects in the first place Benin's private press, it also exists in the government television and radio services (where, for example, the technical teams would regularly demand to be paid on a supplementary, private basis – under the label of per-diems – before they move their equipment to any given event).

The task of the media to inform the public on difficult policy choices is not made easier by the government's propensity to keep important information and policy orientations for itself, which

is part of the already mentioned primacy of the executive in the political system of Benin. In fact, it is often easier for a foreigner with good links to donors to have access to policy documents, than for the interested Beninese national.

## **Conclusions**

The appropriation of multiparty democracy in Benin can be deemed to have been successful on a number of counts. Starting with the technical and organizational level, it should be stressed what a tremendous organizational challenge the holding of elections poses for any government, and particularly an African one. Even if the considerable financial burden occasioned by an election is largely alleviated with the help of donors eager to promote democracy, it is no mean feat for the government of a poor country with a rudimentary communications network and an administration that functions at a far from optimum level to organize a chain of procedures to take place within the short span of 12 hours at several thousand locations scattered throughout a national territory almost as large as England, and all that this entails in terms of logistical preparation and administrative control. Add to this the challenges of the vote-counting procedures, the transmission of results first to a departmental and then national collection point, the procedures for checking and validating the figures, and the routines for dealing with irregularities and complaints, and we can gauge the extent to which the Beninese government and administration have become old hands at democracy. There are many indications that the population has also internalized democracy to a significant extent: the animated mood of the election campaigns, the high level of information about the issues and personalities at stake demonstrated by a large part of the electorate (my guess is that in the local elections, Beninese voters know the names of more top candidates in their localities than would be the case in a municipal election in Germany), the high voter turnout which would be the envy of many older democracies, the near absence of electoral violence and organized fraud, and, last but not least, the facts that more or less everybody accepts the results and that the democratically elected institutions are able to commence their work as planned. Thus, in the case of Benin it is possible to speak with confidence of a relatively successful appropriation of democracy.

Despite successful democratization, however, the country's structural problems – which formed the background for the instability of the 1960s (the military coups of 1965, 1967 and 1969, the seizure of power by the Revolutionary Military Government in 1972) and triggered the crisis of 1989 – have remained, and the new democratic regime continues to be characterized by the political practices that already characterized the Marxist-Leninist system and ultimately brought about its downfall. As in the past, the economy suffers from a structural budgetary and foreign trade deficit. In no way has democracy resolved the country's basic development problems, i.e. those of converting a rent-based economy into a productive economy. Benin can still be described as a neopatrimonial rentier state in which material benefits are closely related with



access to political power, with a correspondingly high and probably increasing level of corruption. In fact, the country's "extraversion" (Bayart 1993) has strengthened: the international donors have increased their control of developments in both the public and private sectors (Vittin 1991: 447). This extraversion even affects the democratic process in the strictly technical sense. The staging of an average of three elections every two years would not have been possible without the financial support of the donors: these elections each cost around EUR 10 million, which represents two percent of annual government revenues and 17 percent of all donor contributions (grants). In other words, electoral democracy has been turned into another opportunity for rent-seeking. Other deeply-rooted structures of the political culture, such as regionalism and generationalism, are at best nuanced by the democratic tradition but in no way replaced by alternative political logics. Thus, the case of Benin shows that a very profound change in political institutions is entirely compatible with relatively strong continuity of the political-economic deep structures and the political culture.

However, this should not obscure the fact that a major political transformation took place in Benin after 1989 with the advent of political liberalization, the introduction of at least the contours of a constitutional state, and establishment of a much higher level of political transparency. There are no political prisoners in Benin and no large-scale political violence has been experienced (at national level at least) since 1991. This was due in part at least to the political astuteness of President Kérékou who, unlike many of his presidential colleagues on the African continent, accepted the verdict of the National Conference in 1990 and spared his country a Togolese solution to the crisis (while his successor Soglo did not want to come to terms with his electoral defeat in 1996), withdrew fully from public life for five years after his electoral defeat in 1991 and refrained from sabotaging his successor, and, after his triumphant return to office in the polls of 1996 and 2001, adhered strictly to the Constitution and its restriction of two presidential mandates. In view of the frequently derogatory presentation of his political role, particularly in the English-language and mainly donor-produced gray literature (an example of which is the very incomplete and biased presentation on [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)), in my view it is important to stress this political contribution, against which that of his successor will have to be measured.

If, based on this and despite all of the reservations presented here, Benin can be justifiably considered as a successful case of democratic transition, its case demonstrates, however, that the expectations of multi-party democracy must remain realistic. In particular, democracy and the constitutional state should be viewed as positive achievements in themselves, and should not

be weighed down with excessive expectations: Benin's basic problem of development has not yet been resolved by its democratic transition.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A similar conclusion is also reached by Kohnert (2007), who, however, primarily bases his objections on methodological doubts as to whether the high level of significance of the information economy for economic development can actually be quantified.

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