



Beyond Linz: Institutional Safeguards and the Viability of Presidentialism in Africa

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Abstract

The debate on presidentialism and its impact on democratic stability has been a central concern in political science, particularly following Juan José Linz's seminal work on the perils of presidentialism. Linz contends that the separation of powers in presidential systems engenders democratic instability, primarily due to political rigidity, dual legitimacy, and zero-sum electoral politics. While many scholars support Linz's argument, others critique it as overly simplistic, emphasizing institutional weaknesses rather than inherent flaws in presidential systems. This study engages with these scholarly debates by highlighting divergent perspectives on the relationship between presidentialism and democratic consolidation. This study moves beyond the abstract argument of whether presidentialism is inherently stable or fragile to discussing its viability in postcolonial Africa and whether external factors, such as weak institutions, play a more decisive role. And it concludes that presidentialism is not inherently detrimental to democracy, but requires robust institutional safeguards.

Keywords

Africa, executive, legislature, Juan José Linz, parliamentary, presidentialism

1 Introduction

The study of presidentialism gained popularity in the 1980s, following the seminal work of Juan José Linz, who highlighted how the separation of powers in presidential systems can lead to instability. His contributions set the stage for comparative studies in presidentialism and evoked scholarly debates (Cheibub & Limongi, 2010). Linz argued in one of his early projects that “most of the countries with presidential constitutions have been unstable democracies” (Linz, 1985, 1). This raises a fundamental question: to what extent is Linz's description of the relationship

between presidentialism and democratic (in)stability true? As a result, scholars have attempted to address these questions by presenting debates that support this notion, as exemplified in Linz's works and echoed by other scholars, including Giovanni Sartori, Scott Mainwaring, Matthew Soberg Shugart, José Antonio Cheibub, David J. Samuels, Alfred Stepan, Cindy Skach, Anthony Mughan, Aurel Croissant, and Wolfgang Merkel. Meanwhile, other scholars, such as Nic Cheeseman, Steven Ellis, and Steffen Ganghof, hold the view that the relationship between the executive and legislative arms under presidentialism, as represented by Linz, is too simplistic and does not necessarily promote democratic instability. As Ellis and Samuels (2011, 7) argue, "In many cases, a key difficulty is a pattern of weak institutionalization, rather than problems with the formal distribution of power between legislatures and presidents". In response to these debates, this study takes a stance on the matter and situates it within the African context.

A form of presidentialism, where the president is directly elected and assumes both the roles of head of state and head of government, is still deeply rooted in the politics of Africa. African countries that have presidential systems, including Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, and Zambia, do not have a dual executive; they operate the president as head of state and head of government (Cheeseman, 2024). But Africa has many hybrid systems as well, with a *de facto* similarity to complete presidential systems, as the power balance of the executive leans heavily in favor of the presidency. According to the Comparative Semi-Presidential Database (CSPD) (Åberg & Denk, 2024), of all semi-presidential regimes in the world, the presidential-parliamentary subtype, in which the president can appoint and dismiss the prime ministers, is much more common than the premier-presidential one, and this is rather typical within the African context. As such, and for the sake of comprehension, this study includes semi-presidentialism as part of presidentialism to capture the actual distribution of executive power on the African continent. However, the subtype differentiation of CSPD up to 2021 still enables the recognition of which semi-presidential constitutions operate in practice as presidential regimes. And so, the data gathered on the subject helps to avoid inflating the differences that, in most instances, are formal but not substantive (Åberg & Denk, 2024).

In terms of the original criticism, Linz argued that a parliamentary system is more conducive to stable democracy than a presidential one (Linz, 1990). "It might or might not be an accident that so many countries with presidential regimes have encountered great difficulties in establishing stable democracies" (Linz, 1990, 4). For Linz, it is these flaws of the presidential system that influenced the popularity of parliamentary democracies. That is why he maintains that a parliamentary system is superior to a presidential system, which is well exemplified by the title of his work: *The Perils of Presidentialism*. There, he argues that the flaws of presidentialism include "political rigidity, dual democratic legitimacies, zero-sum politics, an undemocratic 'style' of presidential governance and a tendency for political outsiders to gain office independently of political parties" (Samuels & Shuggart, 2003, 34). For Linz, these structural issues not only pose threats to democratic stability and threaten breakdown, but also increase the chances of political paralysis and military takeover (Mughan, 1995).

Linz's critique of presidentialism has sparked scholarly discussions since its publication, with some scholars focusing on the primarily destabilizing nature of the concept and others concentrating on the possible benefits. On the one hand, Sartori (1994, 86) cautions that the assumption of the political systems of the president as necessarily strong and efficient is nothing but a thin-sliced assumption. Similarly, Cheibub et al. (2004, 580) illustrate that presidential democracies are significantly weaker than those of parliamentary democracies and that presidential democracies are more prone to dissolution in any circumstance. Stepan and Skach

(1993, 17) furthered this criticism that the mutual independence of branches, which defines presidentialism, results in predictable incentives of minority governments, coalition failures, stalemates in legislative processes, and executive excess as well as military intervention. Samuels (2004, 427), however, suggests that the separation of powers may, actually, make democratic accountability better as more information is available to the public. Ellis and Samuels (2011, 27) also argue that, under certain circumstances, strong presidents can stabilize divided legislatures, promote deliberation, and increase the range of political bargaining, but the risk of being divisive remains.

This study aims to contribute to the literature beyond the speculation on the theoretical aspects of the inherent stability or instability of presidentialism by paying attention to the institutional and contextual dynamics that contribute to the results of presidentialism in Africa. It does not focus on respective binary, Linz-inspired criticisms and counter-criticisms, but on finding the mechanisms that allow presidential systems to function effectively within instability. In particular, it examines the interaction of constitutional design, electoral credibility, term limits, and executive-legislative relations with the political practice to find out whether presidentialism can cause instability or provide democratic strength. Based on this, the research endeavors to add to the existing body of knowledge on the developmental path of presidentialism in Africa by placing the discussion in the context of regionally based evidence and highlighting the institutional checkpoints that are necessary to ensure its sustainability.

2 What is presidentialism?

The presidential system is a globally recognized form of government that has its roots in the American system, as provided for in the United States Constitution of 1787, which recognizes the office of the president as the head of state. The system has its roots in a monarchical government, where one person occupies the offices of both the head of state and the head of government. According to Mainwaring and Shugart (1997, 449), presidentialism refers to “a regime in which, first, the president is always the chief executive and is elected by popular vote or, as in the U.S., by an electoral college with essentially no autonomy concerning popular preferences and, second, the terms of office for the president and the assembly are fixed”. It is a system characterized by the concentration of executive power in a single individual (Ganghof, 2021). According to Sartori’s (1994, 84) criteria, a political system is presidential “if, and only if, the head of state (president) i) results from popular election, ii) during their pre-established tenure cannot be discharged by a parliamentary vote, and iii) heads or otherwise directs the governments that they appoint. When these three conditions are met, then we doubtlessly have a pure presidential system”.

Additional insights may be gained from Fix-Fierro and Salazar-Ugarte (2012), who described presidentialism as an alternative system to parliamentarism; hence, Sartori’s (1994, 83) insistence that “a presidential system is non-parliamentary”. Further clarifying the distinction, Cheibub et al. (2004, 565) note that “parliamentarism and presidentialism are different: the former is a system of ‘mutual dependence’ and the latter of ‘mutual independence’ between the executive and the legislature”. For Cheibub et al. (2014), it is the mode of electing presidents that distinguishes them in terms of ‘origin’ and ‘survival’ from parliamentary leaders.

Sartori (1994) characterized presidentialism by two key features: the direct election of the head of state and the executive appointment. Croissant and Merkel (2004) buttressed this, noting that in presidentialism, the president is elected directly and serves a fixed term. The

president exercises constitutional powers and is empowered to appoint the members of his cabinet. The system allows for the separation of powers among the various arms of government, ensuring independence among them. Croissant and Merkel (2004), in their categorization of presidentialism, observe that it encourages a loosely organized political party structure that focuses on elections and possesses limited leverage on the president's success after the election. As a result, parties restructure for election purposes to gain political advantage, thereby weakening their ideological bond and increasing the chances of volatility. The system is noted for creating a personalistic and clientelist structure whereby candidates rely on personal networks and where competition centers on individual leaders rather than the party's program. This necessitates a zero-sum game and a winner-takes-all contest, thus exacerbating social division and confrontation.

The debate on presidentialism has undergone three distinct phases (Cheeseman, 2024). The first phase, perhaps the most significant one, features the works of Linz, who argued that the friction between the president and the legislature, the prevalence of winner-takes-all elections, and the rigidity of the system compared to parliamentarism render presidentialism problematic (Cheeseman, 2024). However, scholars reject this premise on the grounds of abundant evidence of stable presidential systems. As Cheeseman (2024, 570) puts it, "there were several cases in which presidential systems proved to be comparatively durable and to lead to executive dominance rather than presidential paralysis".

The second phase featured the contributions of scholars such as Mainwaring, who argued that the weakness of presidentialism is attributable to the absence of an executive majority and the inability to control a complex legislature. According to Cheeseman (2024, 570), this is due to a "difficult combination of presidentialism and legislative multiparty fragmentation". Thus, the ability of presidents to manage such multiparty coalitions as in a parliamentary system influenced the third phase. There, scholars such as Blondel argue against the common misconception that presidentialism is inherently problematic. In his view, "presidentialism also has distinct advantages when it comes to states in the throes of nation and state-building" (Blondel, 2019, 570). This suggests, to an extent, and contrary to the previously conceived notion, that parliamentarism may pose a more serious threat to democracy. According to Cheeseman (2024, 570), "this argument effectively turns the perils of presidentialism thesis on its head". As a result, we turn to appraise the arguments of Linz, also known as the Linzian framework.

3 The terms of the Linzian framework

Linz discusses the perils of presidentialism, comparing the system to parliamentarism. He notes that "the best way to summarize the basic differences between presidential and parliamentary systems is to say that while parliamentarism imparts flexibility to the political process, presidentialism makes it rather rigid" (Linz, 1990, 55). To substantiate his argument of the flaws of presidentialism, he identified factors such as zero-sum elections, the style of presidential politics, dual legitimacy, the issue of stability, the time factor, and the election of an outsider as reflecting these perils. Presidentialism is rigid due to the fixed term that presidents are to serve. This places power in the hands of the president and makes its removal from office difficult, except through impeachment. Although a direct popular election confers democratic legitimacy upon the president, the extent of the executive powers will ultimately be determined by specific provisions established in the constitution and prevailing political norms. The system

is characterized by conflict between the executive and legislature, with both arms laying claim to democratic legitimacy (Linz, 1985). And this often results in conflict, especially when their political agendas clash or when they belong to opposing political factions. As such, it increases the likelihood of democratic instability and, in some cases, results in a military takeover, signaling the utter erosion of democratic structures (Linz, 1985; Linz, 1990). Since the president and the legislature are both elected and enjoy democratic legitimacy, they cannot be removed arbitrarily, thus making the system excessively rigid (Linz, 1994).

Presidentialism promotes a zero-sum game or a winner-takes-all system, where the winner gains exclusive control of executive power during their term, while excluding losers from the system and restricting their access to resources. Because it does not support coalitions and alliances, the stakes of winning become high, thus intensifying the competition and increasing the chances of polarization. The resulting friction and conflict are undoubtedly detrimental to democratic stability (Linz, 1985). Linz (1985, 6) notes that “perhaps the most important implication of presidentialism is that it introduces a strong element of zero-sum game into democratic politics with rules that tend towards a ‘winner takes all’ outcome”. And therefore it is “ineluctably problematic [...] with all the potential for conflict such games portend” (Linz, 1990, 56).

Moreover, the losing party may have to wait for years before it gains political power. To this end, when a majority has its way of selecting a leader, it may inadvertently polarise the minority and create tension (Linz, 1990). Meanwhile, it is challenging to remove a leader in a presidential system without triggering a political or constitutional crisis (Linz, 1994). As Samuels (2004, 16) surmises, “the time limit associated with presidential systems combined with the zero-sum character of presidential elections, the winner-take-all position that excludes those defeated from any chance to share in executive power and the control of the administration, including patronage, is likely to make choices in a presidential election more dramatic and polarizing than most parliamentary elections”. This view was held by Croissant and Merkel (2004) as well, who opine that “the highest prize to be won in the political game. The concentration of political power in this office impels the parties to focus almost all their efforts on its attainment. As a consequence, presidential elections take on the character of final judgments over the winners and losers of the political game.” Here, Croissant and Merkel (2004) note that “the loose party structures in combination with the focus of political conflict on the presidency further amplify the personalistic character of political competition in presidential systems.”

Since the executive powers in presidentialism are vested in one person, this person’s political style and personality set the tone for leadership. A president may decide to reconcile various opposing groups after an election or advance the partisan interests of their party. While a conciliatory move may help douse the tension in the polity, it may weaken their position, especially when the opposition rejects their overtures. This may further intensify the polarization in the system. Since the president is independent of the legislature and there is no neutral figure to resolve conflicts, the president may promote a populist agenda to the detriment of democratic stability (Linz, 1990). Moreover, presidentialism often carries with it a paradoxical mechanism aimed at limiting the abuse of power, in the form of oversight, judicial control, and term limits (Linz, 1985). According to Linz (1990, 61), “some of presidentialism’s most notable effects on the style of politics result from the characteristics of the presidential office itself. Among these characteristics are not only the great powers associated with the presidency but also the limits imposed on it”. Meanwhile, Linz (1985, 4) concedes that “presidentialism leads to a personalisation of power”.

It is believed that the frequent changes in leadership permissible in a parliamentary system may threaten stability. However, because parliamentarism allows for flexibility in changing a leader, especially during a crisis situation, it has an edge over presidentialism, where the rigidity and cumbersome process of impeachment make it challenging to change a president even during such circumstances. This may further inflame the situation and increase volatility (Linz, 1990). Moreover, if a president loses support and refuses to resign, its opponents may resort to unconstitutional means, which can lead to violence and increase the likelihood of military intervention (Linz, 1994). Presidents may not rely on collaboration with their cabinet to make decisions and may also dismiss a minister easily, thus limiting the independent opinions of cabinet members (Linz, 1985). Because the cabinets in a presidential system play an advisory role rather than acting as equal partners, the president may fill the cabinet with party members, ensuring that their views are dominant (Lijphart, 1999).

Presidentialism is a system that operates within a fixed term stipulated in the constitution. This makes it difficult for presidents to implement their lofty ideas, leading to frustration. This inflexibility can exacerbate crisis processes, particularly when fixed-term limits prevent a president from serving an additional term or prompt rapid decision-making in the final year of their presidency. Moreover, as presidents' successors seek to occupy the presidential seat, this may create tension between them, as the former president may intend to assert influence. In contrast, the new president aims to operate independently. These contests and disagreements increase tension and conflict.

4 Subsequent supports for and criticisms of the Linzian framework

Linz's work on the perils of presidentialism has gained wide traction and generated some support in the literature. He notes that "the odds that presidentialism will help preserve democracy are far less favourable" (Linz, 1990, 68). Supporting this view and suggesting that the presidential system is susceptible to instability and breakdown, Mughan (1995) argues that, since World War II, presidential democracies have experienced breakdowns more frequently than parliamentary systems. It is believed that presidential systems are more prone to being overtaken by military coups, unlike parliamentary systems, which have internal mechanisms to resolve political impasses. The possibility of a deadlock due to the separation of powers between the president and the legislature remains a cause for concern. When such a deadlock arises, presidents may choose to circumvent the legislature, thus increasing tension. Moreover, when political or economic crises persist in a presidential system, there is a tendency for the system to break down, providing impetus for military intervention (Stepan & Skach, 1993).

Linz argued that presidential systems do not support coalition formation as effectively as parliamentary systems. As a result, they tend to engender disagreements between the executive and legislature, making them prone to instability and collapse. This Linzian presupposition suggests that presidentialism weakens democratic consolidation (Cheibub & Limongi, 2010). In support of this argument, Stepan and Skach (1993, 18) note that "presidents and legislatures are directly elected and have their own fixed mandates. This mutual independence creates the possibility of a political impasse between the chief executive and the legislative body for which there is no constitutionally available impasse-breaking device". This, then, as Samuels and Shugart (2003) argue, can lead to a 'divided government'. On the other hand, Samuels (2004, 427) claims that "presidentialism obscures government responsibility generally and that coalition and divided governments under presidentialism are particularly bad for accountability". And

generally, scholars on this side of the debate tend to characterize presidentialism as a system prone to vulnerabilities, which gives impetus to a divided government. For Sartori (1994, 89), “ironically, then, the belief that presidential systems are strong systems draws on the worst possible structural arrangement - a divided power defenceless against divided government - and fails to realise that the American system works, or has worked, despite its constitution - hardly thanks to its constitution”.

Samuels and Shugart (2003) note that there is a heavy dependence of the executive and legislative arms on each other for political survival in a presidential system, increasing the chances of tension between them, even when they belong to the same party. However, since there is no form of mandated representation, each arm can still function independently. Accordingly, “presidentialism typically allows for the possibility that voters can hold presidents and legislators accountable for different things” (Samuels & Shugart, 2003, 41). In support, Mainwaring and Shugart (1997, 449) posit that “presidentialism tends to function better where presidencies have weak legislative powers, parties are at least moderately disciplined, and party systems are not highly fragmented”. For Cheibub et al. (2004, 566), “stable multiparty presidential democracy [...] is difficult, ‘presidential systems which consistently fail to provide the president with sufficient legislative support are unlikely to prosper’”. However, despite the strong argument put forward by these scholars, their submission is weakened by the susceptibility of parliamentarism to democratic instability and the growing relevance of presidentialism. One would expect that, given their characterization of presidentialism, the system would have experienced a decline or been rejected globally.

However, such a pessimistic evaluation made by Linz is challenged by several scholars who believe that the alleged threats of presidentialism are exaggerated. As Mughan (1995) notes, the main issues raised by Linz are not new but have been developed based on previous criticisms, thus questioning the novelty and the depth of the arguments made by Linz. In more recent times, Ganghof (2021) argues that Linz overblows the threat of legislative paralysis and highlights stabilising characteristics of presidentialism. In his view, presidential systems lead to a better democratic choice, as the identifiability of competing cabinet options prevailing before the election is ensured, and the executive is stabilized, as an assembly majority can no longer dismiss the president and the cabinet through regular parliamentary means (Ganghof, 2021, 157–158).

It is argued that the president may become too powerful and unaccountable to others, thus making it challenging to balance a strong presidency (Howell & Moe, 2023). These powers, which may be derived from decrees, vetoes, exclusive powers to introduce legislation on specific items, and urgency powers, often create strong presidencies, increasing the chances of conflict with the legislature and, by implication, instability within the system (Cheibub & Limongi, 2010; Cheibub et al., 2014). However, Ellis and Samuels (2011, 17) contend that “strong presidential power can be constructive when the president expands the bargaining circle in the core political center and thus encourages deliberation. A strong president can be a unifying and integrating figure symbolizing the state, who can step in to unify when the legislature is divided. However, a strong president can also be divisive where they are not truly representative of the whole society”.

Tsebelis (1995, 292) opines that “the logic of decision making in presidential systems is quite similar to the logic of decision making in multiparty parliamentary systems”. This suggests that both presidential and parliamentary systems have similar decision-making processes and face similar challenges in achieving consensus or compromise. For instance, in a presidential system, the president may engage in negotiations with the legislature to implement policies, just as collaborations between different parties are needed in a parliamentary system to form a

coalition. This negotiation, consensus, cooperation, and compromise are required to maintain stability irrespective of the system in operation.

A salient aspect in the normative discussions on presidentialism that has not received sufficient academic attention is the historical experience of colonialism, particularly how European imperialism has shaped institutional paths and political party development in postcolonial Africa. Unlike the European experience, where parties emerged gradually through societal bargaining, ideological struggle, and mass mobilization, African parties often arose as offshoots of anti-colonial liberation movements or were hastily formed by elites to seize control of the colonial state upon independence (Dias, 2017). Both the models of transplanted European parties and those in Africa lost their pluralism and representation with time, becoming an instrument of state control and a tool of clientelism. The fact that parties were weakened as independent brokers further put executive dominance, and hence limited the limitations on presidentialism in Africa by competitive party politics (OECD, 2025). In Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya, and Tanzania, parties had been centralized, leader-dominated, and integrated into the administrative machines left behind by colonialism (Mamdani, 1996). Therefore, they are heirs to the repressive logics of the colonial state and deprived of institutionalized democratic norms to check executive power.

For example, in Senegal, the Socialist Party, led by the Socialist leader Léopold Sédar Senghor, was not a mass party but a device to accommodate the elite. Although the nation has often been commended for its democratic persistence, it was not a one-party state in strict terms after gaining independence. Instead, Senegal maintained a controlled multiparty system since the 1970s, with only a few legalized parties representing various ideological streams, and subsequently, opening up to full multiparty competitions in 1981 (Diop, 1993). This course, which was partly informed by the policies of French colonial assimilationism (Gellar, 2005), however, fixed the executive hegemony and limited the development of parties as independent vehicles of plural representation (Boone, 1992). Similarly, in Kenya, the development of a centralized hierarchical nation, maintained by the colonialists, compromised the establishment of independent political organizations. Parties like KANU were used as hegemonic tools of presidential consolidation under Jomo Kenyatta and subsequently Daniel Arap Moi, and ethnic patronage networks superseded institutionalized parties.

This constitutional legacy imposed a significant restriction on presidential engagement. The product was not the model of presidential democracy envisioned by Linz, which described horizontal accountability, but rather a neo-patrimonial adaptation, whereby the presidency became the supreme authority, conduit of powers and resources. The executive, therefore, filled an institutional vacuum created by strong legislatures and divided parties, but failed to moderate power; instead, it concentrated it. The merging of the logic of authoritarianism inherent in colonialism with postcolonial presidential regimes explains why even democratic systems that were once designed would evolve to one-party systems, military dictatorships, or illiberal constitutionalism.

This constitutional legacy placed a significant limitation on the rise of presidentialism in Africa. Instead of giving rise to the model of presidential democracy as conceived by Linz, which is based on horizontal accountability and checks and balances, postcolonial systems gave rise to neo-patrimonial adaptations where the presidency was the ultimate power and the primary source of power and resources (Kieh, 2018). In an actual sense, the vacuum created by divided legislatures and feeble parties was consolidated by the executives, but instead of tempering power, they centralized it. It was not just a matter of constitutional design that this resulted in that way, but a meeting of colonial authoritarian logics with postcolonial presidential

institutions. As a result, democratic constitutions often became one-party or, in other words, military-interventionist or illiberal presidentialism (Kwasi Prempeh, 2007).

The authoritarian predispositions of presidentialism in Africa should not be reduced to the working of the mechanism; they should be placed in the colonial context. The colonial rule left disunited societies, inefficient and foreign institutions, and top-down and centralized governmental forms (National Research Council, 1992). All these structural factors implied that the legislatures had no actual ability to check the executive, and parties were so weak that they could not be used as an instrument of representation. In this way, the issue of democratization in the form of presidential systems is not merely a constitutional engineering problem in the legislature; it entails the necessity to deal with the path-dependent consequences of colonialism that still influence political culture, baffle the party system, and strengthen the elite.

5 Presidentialism in postcolonial Africa

Blondel (2019) advanced the study on presidentialism by integrating African political systems into the discourse, challenging the notion that democratic progress in Africa is fragile (Cheeseman, 2024). According to Cheeseman (2024), this is significant, considering the region has a higher number of presidential systems compared to the other areas. Blondel (2019) argues that African presidentialism has contributed to enhanced political stability and economic development, although, according to Cheeseman (2024), presidentialism thrives in politically polarized, economically challenged, and ethnically diverse societies as found in Africa. This implication is that if presidentialism can survive in such a volatile environment, the system is likely to be stable in even more peaceful and democratically consolidated environments. Drawing on the work of Blondel, Cheeseman (2024) argues that there have been positive presidencies in Africa, whereby presidents have either positively impacted the system through democratic reform or corrected a period of political crisis, tilting towards stable democracy in a ‘corrective’ manner through continuity. Examples of such positive turnarounds include Armando Emilio Guebuza of Mozambique, Hifikepunye Pohamba of Namibia, and Quett Masire of Botswana. A relatively smooth transfer of power was witnessed throughout the presidency of Jakaya Kikwete, with more or less intra-party openness. Still, later down the line, under his successors, the vulnerability of the Tanzanian democratic experiment is highlighted (Osei et al., 2020).

Executive power under President John Magufuli became even stronger, as evidenced by the silencing of the opposition, heavy control of the media, and weakening of the civil space. President Samia Suluhu has continued to operate under this centralized system (Minde, 2024), and, as a result, Freedom House declared Tanzania to be Not Free, the first time in decades (Freedom House, n. d.). This demotion suggests that the authoritarian tendencies are not simply a factor of the personal approach of the leadership process. However, Suluhu is described as being less violent than Magufuli, but rather a sign of institutional frailty. The lack of strong checks by the legislature and the judiciary has enabled an incessant executive perversion in Tanzania’s presidential system, regardless of the temperament of the leaders (Mureithi, 2024). The case also shows how endemic weaknesses that are both instantiated by the institutional design and the political culture allow ostensibly moderate presidents to slip into authoritarian trends when power is concentrated to an unreasonable degree.

The specified dynamics are not limited to Tanzania but characterize a broader African trend in which the structural concentration of power, which the presidential systems imply, enhances executive control, contributing to the lack of democratic resilience within the regimes of different leadership styles.

Meanwhile, the case of Abdoulaye Wade in Senegal shows that the semi-presidential constitutional system can serve to support but not limit presidential control (Heyl, 2019). The controversial bid for a third term of office by Wade in 2012 was eased by his growing monopolization of state institutions, a tendency that conforms to the characterization of Elgie (2011) of the president-parliamentary subtype of semi-presidentialism. In this system, the president will have exclusive powers to hire and fire the prime minister and the cabinet. Thus, the ability of the legislature to give a credible check is undermined. Therefore, the institutional asymmetry helped Wade to abuse constitutional provisions and form networks of the elite, thus hastening the undermining of democratic norms. Instead of restraining presidential authority, this subtype actually contributed to its concentration and, therefore, confirms Linz (1990) by arguing that systems that are predisposed to presidential supremacy are structurally susceptible to aggrandizement of the executive.

These complex cases remind us that the dangers of presidentialism in Africa are real, particularly in areas marked by weak institutions and where executive authority is established. However, these instances do not exhaust this phenomenon. Cheeseman (2024) notes that African presidentialism cannot be simplified to the straightforward story of authoritarian drift. Although the examples of Tanzania and Senegal demonstrate the dangers of institutional imbalance, other developmental paths suggest that presidential rule can also become a substantial contribution to the stability of democracy. As part of a discussion on the warnings of Linz, Blondel (2019) argues that, in certain circumstances, presidential republics can contribute to accountability and developmental governance instead of their destruction, based on the example of African cases (cf. Cheeseman, 2024, 575). It is this healthier outlook that brings to the fore the dual aspect of presidentialism: it can either lead to autocratic entrenchment of power through the institutionalization of power, or it can, in a context where there are credible elections, term limits, and strong checks, offer a sense of clarity and stability, which augurs well with democratic consolidation.

The discussion of presidentialism's viability gains a special thrust in North Africa. Tunisia and Egypt, as two nations created as a result of European colonialism, provide contrasting empirical lenses through which we may evaluate Linz's cautionary tale of the dangers of presidentialism and how governments can provide mechanisms that stabilize executive power without falling into autocracy. Tunisia and Egypt were both products of French and British colonial activities, with their centralized systems of administration. In Tunisia (1881–1956) and Egypt (formal protectorate, 1882–1952), colonial governments promoted hyper-balkanized bureaucracies that ran low on substantial local self-government (Herb, 1999). After independence, leaders such as Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia and Nasser in Egypt maintained highly centralized systems, replacing the colonial governorates with highly powerful presidents. This absence of pre-existing local institutions implied that even when democracies shifted to multiparty politics, executive offices continued to be centers of state resources and patronage (Yerkes & Muasher, 2018).

The republican institutions in Egypt date back to the overthrow of the monarchy during Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule in 1953. Egypt, under successive military-led presidencies, was a *de facto* one-party state until briefly holding competitive elections after 2012–2013. A military coup ended the one-year reign of President Mohamed Morsi, and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi further cemented authority by instituting constitutional amendments in 2019, which increased presidential tenures to six years and allowed a third term (Brownlee et al., 2015). At the same time, the nominally independent National Election Authority remains subordinate to executive decree, and the judiciary has readily accommodated the executive's will (Blaydes, 2011).

Egyptian authoritarianism scholars note that such relations demonstrate the routine of informal norms and patronage networks prevailing over the official stipulations of the constitution (Choudhry et al., 2014). The 2019 amendments were endorsed following a referendum that was marred by the influence of military and security personnel at the polling centers and excluded independent observers (Brownlee et al., 2015). In the meantime, legislative-executive collaboration is facilitated by a pro-Sisi Nationwide List with a supermajority in parliament, which renders the legislature a rubber stamp rather than a check on the presidency. Egypt confirms Linz's fear that, in the absence of a genuine separation of powers and with no absolute independent electoral authority, presidential systems can become a form of hegemonic presidentialism, characterized by formal rules and practices that circumvent them.

After the 2011 revolution, Tunisia implemented a semi-presidential constitution with the express purpose of preventing the personalization of power, as criticized by Linz. The 2014 Constitution introduced a two-executive structure, where the president had significantly reduced, mostly ceremonial, authorities, and there was a prime minister who was accountable to the parliament (Zhang & Zoubir, 2021). Control over voter registration and election administration was transferred to a newly empowered Independent High Authority for Elections, and the Superior Council of the Judiciary was placed beyond executive influence. A nine-member selection committee, comprising judges and representatives from civil society, was established (Bulmer, 2019). Such institutional checks have thus far avoided concentration of power in the hands of an individual office holder. The Court overturned a proposed extension to the mandate of President Beji Caid Essebsi in 2019, when the Constitutional Court, established just five years previously, invalidated the amendment. This ruling highlighted the act of a genuinely independent judiciary to oppose executive aggrandizement (Zhang & Zoubir, 2021).

Nevertheless, Tunisia's experience also has its weaknesses. Prolonged party fissures have led to unstable coalitions that are unable to enact policies in the government. This move created a breakthrough for President Kais Saied in 2021, who used Article 80 of the constitution to fire the government and suspend parliament (Anderson, 2021). Technically, Saied was right to do so, but his actions exploited the grey areas in the emergency powers provisions. Critics argue that these loopholes stem from the rapid drafting of the legislation in 2013–2014, a period marked by coalitions of Islamist and secular parties, all of which prioritized swift action over clarity. Tunisia, then, is a good example of the power and potential danger of institutional design: the robust courts and electoral institutions can restrain presidents, but half-baked or ambiguous constitutional drafting can leave backdoor operators to do so in the future.

The effect of this path dependence is that any meaningful separation of powers cannot be institutionalized other than by a constitutional amendment, and it also contributes to the development of sub-national governance and civil society, which will curb the executive's excess. The 2018 municipal elections in Tunisia were initially celebrated as a move towards decentralization, where local councils were going to provide some political power outside the capital (Bulmer, 2019). Nonetheless, the recent events have defused this optimism. Since 2021, the government of President Kais Saied has been systematically undermining independent institutions, which have subordinated the judiciary and electoral commission, and used legal persecution against political opponents (Freedom House, n. d.). This trend highlights the fact that decentralization measures in themselves are ineffective unless they are incorporated with long-term mechanisms of checking executive control. In comparison, Egypt illustrates an even stronger trend of presidential monopolization, where Sinai and Upper Egypt are still under the military governors who are appointed and strengthen the executive to control politics and even security (Blaydes, 2011).

The significance of constitutional design is eminent in North Africa; however, the effects of politics are also dependent, to a great extent, on informal norms, historical backgrounds, and the strength of civil society (Swart, 2016). For instance, the classical analysis of presidentialism by Linz (1990) in divided societies finds an echo in Egypt, where election cancellation and exclusion of the legislature have strengthened authoritarian retrogression. Nonetheless, executive aggrandizing is not unavoidable. Comparative experience suggests that it is reproducible by strong institutional restraints, especially the insularity of the courts, election commissions, and other types of supervision, which limit presidential authority (Laebens, 2023).

Tunisia was the first country to be seen as moving in this direction, especially after changing the governance structure, which strengthened subnational governance and local councils in 2011 (Bulmer, 2019). However, the last steps of President Saied discredited the independence of the judiciary and undermined the electoral commission, which emphasizes the fragility of such mechanisms unless they are institutionalized (OECD, 2025). Meanwhile, the divergent paths of Egypt and Tunisia emphasize the point that presidentialism alone is not a determinant of authoritarianism; in fact, its democratic basis rests on other supportive institutions and political culture that support constitutional limits (Hassan et al., 2019).

West Africa presents an irresistible opportunity to test and refine Linz's ongoing argument about the dangers of presidentialism. Whilst Linz cautioned about the structural rigidity, dual legitimacy crisis, and winner-takes-all logic of presidential politics, the reality on the ground in West Africa makes it clear that the outcomes are highly varied depending on the kind of constitutional design, political culture, elite behavior, and institutional environment. Thus, the subsequent analysis develops the critique that both proponents and opponents of Linz's thesis have offered, focusing on particular cases in West Africa, namely, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, to shed light on the relationship between formal presidential systems and informal politics.

The presidential system of Nigeria, which is closely related to the USA, has demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of the constitutional design of the largest democracy on the continent. The office of the president has enjoyed vast powers as head of state and head of government, including the powers to appoint senior judicial and legislative personnel and to exert control over federal finances, since the government shifted to civilian hands in 1999 (Hoffmann & Wallace, 2022). Even though the 1999 Constitution officially binds the separation of powers, the other branches have often been compromised by patronage groups and executive encroachment (Adejumobi, 2010). However, the examples of efficient horizontal accountability are also evident in Nigeria: most prominently, in 2006, the legislature rejected the effort of President Olusegun Obasanjo to change the constitution to enable him to stay in office, which represented a unique, although noteworthy, instance of an institution exercising vertical restraining powers (NBC News, 2006). This oscillation between executive dominance and seminal resistance underscores the hybrid nature of Nigerian presidentialism. This institutional structure enables the concentration of power while allowing for the scope of democratic self-correction by legislative and judicial actors to assert their constitutional authority.

Invasive personalization of power has taken shape through several patterns of interference with electoral bodies, police, and anti-corruption agencies. A rejected third-term bid under President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) highlighted just how readily presidential regimes may slip into authoritarian solidification as alliances break down, strong constitutional protections are neglected, and an elite compromise on term limits fails to emerge. Even though civil society and the National Assembly opposed the move, the episode revealed the weakness of horizontal accountability mechanisms (Akinyetun, 2021; Akinyetun & Ebonine, 2022; Isike & Idoniboye-Obu, 2011).

Over the past few years, the centralization of power in Nigeria under President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) has been intensifying, and the process has been accompanied by accusations of biased anti-corruption investigations, executive infiltration of the judiciary, and the suppression of the independent press (Human Rights Watch, n. d.). The systemic weaknesses listed by Linz (1990) remain of very current interest, particularly the zero-sum game that underlies presidential campaigns in a multi-ethnic federation. Though the informal zoning arrangements are meant to bring about ethnic balance, they have not been effective in reducing the winner-takes-all dynamics that have enhanced political division and created succession crises. Thus, the official division of powers has not been very effective in curbing presidential excesses. Instead of dispelling the skepticism of Linz, the Nigerian experience helps to put into perspective his fundamental argument, which is that the institutional protections of presidentialism, checks and balances on paper, are often too thin in reality to guard against executive aggrandizement.

Conversely, the situation in Ghana presents a somewhat hopeful example of how presidentialism can function within a system of democratic consolidation. As with many other nations, Ghana has a presidential system as established in the 1992 Constitution, where an elected executive, who performs as the head of state and government simultaneously, serves as the head of state (Commonwealth Governance, n. d.). The uniqueness of the system can be attributed more to the gradual accumulation of democratic norms, rather than the institutional architecture of the system, and the relative independence of critical institutions. The Electoral Commission, which is considered to be a reputable organization, has played a significant role in maintaining such a developmental path, as it presided over peaceful power transfers at the 2000, 2008, and 2016 elections (Graham et al., 2017). Another striking fact was the election petition of 2012, when the opposition challenged the results of the elections in the Supreme Court and later accepted the decision as it is, an indicator of how well the constitutionally prescribed mechanisms of dispute resolution are established in Ghana (Agbevide, 2024).

More importantly, the term limits have been reasonably complied with in Ghana by the presidents. There has been no move to meddle with the tenure stipulations in the constitution, some of the most vigorously contested matters among the rival political parties. In addition, the Ghana legislature, which is less potent than the executive, has sought to exercise its control role, such as budget oversight and ministerial vetting. Although civil society's weaknesses in countering the power of executive presidents remain, the case of Ghana moderates this pessimism by showing how norms of political behavior, consensual action by elites, and institutional change in presidential systems can help reduce the structural hazards of presidentialism.

Senegal stands at the center of presidentialism discourse. It has been widely praised for having one of the most consistent democracies in the West African region, and its constitutional development has been influenced by a series of vague questions related to executive design. Since gaining independence, the nation has officially existed under a semi-presidential system; however, political and economic instability have triggered incidents of heightened presidential supremacy. Overall, interim governments have enabled leaders to dominate executive and legislative branches of power even when there are constitutional limits, like the successive reigns of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Abdou Diouf, and Abdoulaye Wade (Basedau, 2023).

The leadership of Abdoulaye Wade (2000–2012) was a vivid example of the dangers of democratic destruction in the person of the leader. Despite its original status as a liberalization of the political scene, Wade has slowly concentrated power and weakened judicial independence over time, and eventually attempted to secure an unconstitutional third term of office in 2012. Despite Constitutional Council approval of his candidacy, his effort to seek a third term of office

was blocked by massive protests and electoral mobilization, which highlights the weakness of the judicial branches and the dangers of constitutional flexibility in executive control (Heyl, 2019).

The leadership under Macky Sall exacerbated the conflict between constitutional limitations and the executive's desire. A rhetoric of democratic reform notwithstanding, charges of press censorship, judicial interference, and centralization of power marked his tenure (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). The election of Bassirou Diomaye Faye to office in 2024, after months of political unrest and the controversial management of the term limits by Sall, is both a testament to Senegalese pluralism and a weakness of its institutions (Yabi & Holman, 2024). The result is a testament to the fact that civil society and opposition forces can counter the authoritarian drift. Still, it also confirms that democracies founded primarily on procedural premises, with no strong institutional controls, are easily susceptible to a process of executive dominance.

West African experience suggests that institutional barriers surrounding executive power, in the form of institutional safeguards, determine the course of presidentialism not simply by its nominal content. Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal demonstrate three different ways that provide insight into the weaknesses as well as the opportunities of presidential systems. In Nigeria, politics have become highly centralized, with a strong presidential system coupled with poor institutions, which have resulted in frequent episodes of democratic backsliding (Akinyetun, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Despite the National Assembly's efforts to thwart President Obasanjo's attempts to amend the constitution and secure a third term, thereby exemplifying good horizontal accountability, the absence of fully independent electoral and judicial institutions has allowed executive men to dominate successive regimes. Weaknesses in viable mechanisms of dispute-resolution, along with the politicization of anti-corruption efforts, are examples of how weak protections make presidentialism prone to personalization.

In comparison, Ghana is an illustration of how presidentialism may be anchored by strong institutional checks. Since 1992, the Electoral Commission has received extensive legitimacy by undertaking transparent elections, and constitutional term limits have been observed during consecutive changes of power. Most importantly, cases like the 2012 presidential election petition were determined in Court with the losing side accepting the result, thereby strengthening the belief in judicial independence (Agbevade, 2024). Such protections as free and fair elections, binding term limits, and an independent judiciary have been the reason behind the relative political stability in Ghana despite the strong executive authority.

Senegal occupies a middle ground. In 2012, when Abdoulaye Wade sought a third term, it revealed how the constitutional manipulation took place through judicial malleability and executive-legislative vagueness. The additional mobilization of masses of civil societies and electoral turnover thwarted further entrenchment of authoritarianism (Heyl, 2019). The subsequent tenure of Macky Sall had, however, revived the worry of executive aggrandizement, with the point being that unless legislatures are strong and the courts are independent, popular accountability will not be sufficient to check presidential excess all the time (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). The fact that Bassirou Diomaye Faye was elected in 2024 is not only an indication of the vitality of pluralism but also the frailty of the Senegalese institutions.

Taken together, these cases suggest that presidentialism in Africa can succeed not by appealing to an abstract notion of positive political culture but through material protection, namely: (1) independent electoral commission to ensure fair competition, (2) constitutional court with the power to enforce term limits, (3) legislature with actual independence and capacity to check, (4) civil society with sufficient strength to mobilize in the event of failure in

institutions. In places where they are lacking, such as in Nigeria, where the highly centralized system has been adopted, presidentialism is strongly drawn towards the executive; where partially present, such as in Senegal, either pluralism or authoritarian drift ensues; and where they are well established, such as in Ghana, presidentialism can be the source of both stability and democratic consolidation.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

The debate regarding presidentialism and its impact on democratic stability remains unclear. Juan José Linz's argument that presidentialism inherently predisposes democracies to instability has shaped scholarly discourse, emphasizing issues such as executive-legislative deadlock, zero-sum politics, and political rigidity. However, counterarguments challenge Linz's framework, asserting that the survival of democratic systems is influenced more by institutional strength, political culture, and governance practices than by the mere structure of the government. Evidence from stable presidential democracies, including cases from Africa, suggests that presidentialism can function effectively when institutional mechanisms are strong and political actors adhere to democratic norms. While presidential systems may be susceptible to executive dominance and political polarization, they also offer advantages, such as direct electoral legitimacy and apparent executive authority. The resilience of a democracy depends not only on its structural framework but also on the adaptability of its institutions and the willingness of political elites to engage in consensus-building. The experiences of different countries indicate that democratic breakdowns under presidentialism are not inevitable but rather the result of weak institutionalization, lack of political accommodation, and governance failures. Therefore, rather than advocating for the total rejection of presidentialism, the focus should be on institutional reforms that mitigate its potential weaknesses. Strengthening legislative-executive cooperation, fostering political party discipline, and ensuring mechanisms for conflict resolution are all critical for democratic consolidation.

In light of the ongoing debate on presidentialism and its implications for democratic stability, this study offers several recommendations. The above discussion has once again revealed that presidentialism *per se* is not the cause of democratic failure. Guaranteeing the effective functioning of presidentialism depends on a combination of institutional safeguards, particularly judicial independence, electoral autonomy, legislative strength, and decentralization. The establishment of constitutional courts with clear jurisdiction, tenure security, and insulation from executive interference serves as a vital bulwark against extra-constitutional amendments and executive overreach. These courts act as the final line of defense in constitutional interpretation and can serve to check presidential excesses where political institutions fail.

Similarly, the credibility of electoral processes depends on the autonomy of election management bodies. When electoral commissions are shielded from executive appointments and partisan interference, they foster transparency, reduce post-election crises, and reinforce public trust in democratic transitions. Non-partisan, procedurally sound election administration is essential in curbing state-orchestrated referenda and ensuring the authenticity of presidential mandates. Equally important is the strict observance of term limits and the institutionalization of succession norms. Explicit constitutional provisions, backed by strong civic coalitions, serve to constrain the ambitions of incumbents and prevent manipulation of tenure. Where elite consensus and societal vigilance align, executive abuse of succession rules can be effectively curtailed.

Strengthening legislatures also remains a critical component. Empowered parliaments with budgetary independence, robust oversight committees, and reduced presidential appointment powers provide substantive checks on the executive. They ensure that the legislature does not become a mere rubber stamp, allowing it to perform its role in maintaining a balance of power. Decentralizing authority and empowering local governments reduces the concentration of power at the center and broadens democratic participation. By granting local councils greater budgetary control and administrative autonomy, political power is dispersed, reinforcing democratic culture at multiple levels and limiting the scope of presidential dominance. Together, these measures create a more resilient institutional environment that is capable of upholding the constitutional order within presidential systems.

In addition, the enhancement of party discipline should not be just a matter of rhetoric. Internal party rules and sustainable standards regarding candidate screening and leadership turnover are being adopted, supporting programmatic parties over personality-based vehicles, in systems such as Ghana. Mechanisms such as the legal enforceability of intra-party democracy and the punishment of floor-crossing, as witnessed in the early parliament of post-apartheid South Africa, are also stabilizing. Furthermore, executive and legislative cooperation arrangements are essential in the constitution. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya brought greater clarity to the roles of cabinet ministers (appointed outside parliament), and formalized parliamentary committee vetting of appointments, enhancing transparency and alleviating tension. Also not African, but interesting is the Chilean presidential system, in that it has granted the legislature budgetary initiative, meaning parliament has a genuine interest in policy construction, hence compromise.

Additionally, the prevention of deadlock through a conflict resolution mechanism is possible in a constitution. Finally, institutionalization of democratic norms necessitates collaboration between formal regulations and socialization. These would entail long-term civic education, a free press, and a strong civil society that monitors government administration to ensure transparency and opposes an unconstitutional accumulation of power. The peaceful alternation of power in Ghana, the annulment of invalid elections led by the judiciary in Kenya (2017), and the zoning principle in Nigeria, even if informal, are part of the context-specific mechanisms and processes that incorporate norms over time.

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