

ABSTRACT

HYBRIDITY AND HYPOCRISY: DONOR DISCOURSE ON DEFECTIVE DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN AFRICA

Stephen Brown, Associate Professor

School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa

This paper analyzes donor responses to “hybrid regimes” (the “defective democracies” and “electoral authoritarianism” mentioned in the call for papers), focusing on Kenya (1992-2008), Malawi (1994-2003) and Rwanda (2000-2007), as well as to a lesser extent in contemporary Angola and Mozambique. It draws heavily on some 70 interviews I have conducted with donor officials in these countries over the past 12 years. The paper traces important patterns that cross time, countries and donors, all of which tend to undermine donors’ self-professed goals of promoting democracy and good governance:

1. Donors tend to care little about the standard of elections, focusing primarily on election day order at the expense of the fairness of campaign conditions. They repeatedly fall back on arguments that even if not free and fair, “the elections were better than last time” and that “democratization takes time; it took democracy 500 years to take root in Europe”.
2. Donors have very short memories, mainly due the relatively short postings of their officials. Defective democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes are repeatedly given the benefit of the doubt, even if the poor record can be clearly established (“It is too early to tell if the problem is a lack of capacity or of will” and “you have to give the government a chance”).
3. Donors repeatedly downplay concerns regarding human rights, fundamental freedoms and the ability of NGOs to function independently. Instead, they emphasize the achievement of stability, security and order (“At least they are not killing each other anymore”) and the (often overplayed) spectre of chaos and civil war.
4. Donors deplore corruption, but fail to recognize it as a symptom of the neopatrimonial basis of power of hybrid regimes.
5. Donors are more interested in economic than political liberalization. When aid is suspended for explicitly political and economic reasons, economic reform (or the promise thereof) is usually sufficient for aid to be resumed.
6. Local representatives of donor agencies often act as stronger apologists for hybrid regimes than do their political/embassy counterparts, mainly because they fear aid allocations will be cut.