

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

How African Autocracies Instrumentalize Women Leaders

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Although democratic countries historically have had stronger outcomes in advancing gender equality than other regime types, many authoritarian regimes in Africa have proved rather adept at adopting women's rights provisions, making extensive constitutional and legislative reforms, and promoting women as leaders. These outcomes are particularly evident when it comes to women's political representation, where one finds little difference between authoritarian and democratic regimes in Africa. This essay explores how authoritarian regimes in Africa came to promote women leaders and how the instrumentalization of women leaders served to enhance the longevity of their rule.

Rwanda, for example, has the highest rate of legislative representation of women in the world (61%) and the highest level of female cabinet representation in Africa (55%), while women hold 40% of the local executive committee positions. In Tunisia, President Kaïs Saïed suspended the parliament and the constitution, fired the prime minister, and then appointed a woman prime minister, Najia Bouden, in 2021. In Uganda, after a brutal election in which the opposition was severely repressed, President Yoweri Museveni appointed a woman vice president, a woman prime minister, and a woman deputy prime minister. He appointed a female Speaker of the House after the untimely death of her predecessor. The prior speaker, who served from 2011 to 2021, was also a woman. None of these appointments and electoral outcomes is an accident, nor is the fact that they are taking place primarily in authoritarian contexts in Africa. Moreover, they are being institutionalized in countries like Zimbabwe, Burundi, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Somalia, which have passed constitutions with extensive provisions to promote women leaders.

While it would be easy to explain away such legal measures as mere window dressing, authoritarian countries like Rwanda, Burundi, and Zimbabwe have among the lowest gender gaps in education, health, and political and economic opportunities, according to the World Economic Forum (2021).

Table 1. Authoritarian countries' objectives in promoting women as leaders

	Economic	Political
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand trade • Encourage foreign direct investment • Obtain foreign aid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soften country's image after civil war, jihadist activity, or military rule • Seek legitimacy against a dismal human rights record • Comply with international and regional targets for women's representation • Virtue signal to assert global or regional leadership
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand industrial production • Diversify the economy, especially oil-based economies • Expand export-oriented agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserve/expand vote share of ruling party • Expand patronage linkages, especially with key ethnic and religious groups • Isolate extremist jihadists and Salafists • Gain greater legitimacy among women voters

Authoritarian countries promote women's rights for both economic and political reasons through strategies aimed at both international and domestic audiences. Internationally, they may seek international favor to expand trade, foreign direct investment, and foreign aid. Domestically, they may also want to enhance women's status in order to increase women's labor productivity to improve key industrial or agricultural sectors and to diversify the economy (see Table 1).

Political strategies are equally important. Globally, countries may seek to soften a country's image after civil war or military rule or as a result of jihadist activity. They may seek legitimacy against a dismal human rights record; or virtue signal by showcasing women leaders to assert global or regional leadership. They may also wish to comply with international and regional targets for women's representation. Domestically, authoritarian regimes may instrumentalize women leaders in order to preserve or expand vote share of the ruling party, particularly through the use of quotas. They may seek to expand ruling coalitions, especially with key ethnic and religious groups, or they may use women's rights as a way of isolating extremist jihadist or Salafi elements. Finally, they may pursue strategies to increase favor among women voters (see Table 1).

Factors Influencing Authoritarian Strategies

The percentage of women in African legislatures tripled between 1990 and 2010, and most of these changes were found in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries. This was largely due to several phenomena that occurred at the end of the Cold War. First, the emergence of multipartyism set in motion dynamics that forced ruling parties to take measures to maintain or increase vote share. This

was especially the case in authoritarian countries, and especially in former military regimes, which had greater legitimacy concerns in the new political dispensation. One of these measures involved promoting women as leaders through gender quotas. The shift toward multipartyism also gave rise to new independent women's organizations and movements, creating additional internal pressures for reform in both authoritarian and democratic countries.

With the shift to multipartyism after the 1990s, in some countries, the proportion of vote share diminished, but the ruling parties remained dominant. However, they were presented with a new dilemma of how to remain dominant in the face of electoral competition. One way that ruling parties in authoritarian countries maintained vote share was through the use of reserved seats and other gender quotas. As a result, they were able to further solidify their party's dominance. Therefore, the level of longevity of a party in power is yet another factor that accounts for women's representation. This is equally true of authoritarian and democratic regimes (Tripp 2022).

Sartori (1976) defines a dominant one-party system as one in which parties claim more than three consecutive electoral wins (with a majority of votes in coalition governments). I call these *entrenched parties*. Women in countries with more entrenched parties hold considerably more seats in legislatures, subnational councils and ministerial posts than in those countries with less entrenched parties and institutionalized regimes (see Table 2). Entrenched parties did not emerge in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, or Zambia, where parties alternated in power, or in countries like Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, or Mali, where there have been multiple coups and coup attempts. Hybrid regimes are also less likely to have entrenched parties because they are often in flux. As a result, levels of political representation of women in these countries are low.

The end of the Cold War not only changed the dynamic between ruling and other parties, it also resulted in the end of many long-standing conflicts, which created opportunity structures (e.g., the establishment of peace accords, constitutional reforms, electoral reforms) that allowed for increased women's representation in postconflict settings, which were mostly authoritarian (Berry 2019; Hughes and Tripp 2015; Tripp 2015). The end of conflict also necessitated efforts to spruce up the country's image and advancing women leaders, many of whom had emerged during the war years.

Table 2. Entrenched party impact on women in power, 2021

	Ruling Party Entrenched*	Ruling Party Not Entrenched*
Women in legislature	28.4%	16.9%
Women in subnational councils	28.3%	17.6%
Women ministers	26.3%	21.2%
	N = 27	N = 25

Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021); UN Women (2021); Freedom House.

*Includes North African countries.

The rise of religious extremist movements also put new pressures on various countries to curate a positive international image. Thus, the use of women leaders and women's rights became one way to soften a country's image. Morocco and Tunisia had among the largest number of fighters joining Daesch in the region, which explains, in part, why women's leadership was promoted in these countries, even by Islamist parties (Tripp 2019).

Finally, changing international norms regarding women's representation after the 1990s fostered a new kind of virtue signaling around women's leadership globally and in Africa, particularly after the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, where a Platform of Action was adopted in which member states pledged to increase women's leadership in all areas and at all levels (Manuh and Anyidoho 2015). This was especially apparent in countries that wished to expand trade ties with Europe, increase donor support, or gain favor internationally.

How Authoritarian Regimes Promote Women as Leaders

Although the advancement of women leaders are instrumentalized by democratic and nondemocratic states alike, they take on additional importance in authoritarian regimes because of their greater need to gain and maintain legitimacy. Because the imperative of maintaining vote share became more important with the introduction of multipartyism in the 1990s, a variety of strategies were employed to increase support for purposes of enhancing legitimacy. It is no accident that none of the democracies in Africa have reserved seats for women, but at least 17 nondemocratic African countries have adopted reserved seats. The inclusion of women in the parliament through reserved seats is low cost because it does not come at the expense of any seats held by incumbent men. Moreover, they are easier for the ruling party to control than legislative or voluntary quotas that leave women's candidacy in the hands of the parties, including the opposition parties.

The promotion of women leaders can also be used to seek legitimacy in the international arena (Tripp 2019). It can be used for the purpose of international virtue signaling to divert attention from an overall dismal human rights record to enhance a regime's international reputation or soften the image of an illiberal regime to donors, potential investors and trade partners (Bush, Donno, and Zetterberg 2021). The audience for this virtue signaling is not just the West. In Africa, virtue signaling is also aimed at the African Union and regional organizations like the Southern African Development Community that have set goals in advancing women's rights and leadership. Thus, enhancing women's status can serve any number of goals that have little to do with women themselves.

Authoritarian regimes also promote women through mechanisms that are most likely to ensure clientelistic loyalty of women. Uganda, for example, employed reserved seats for the reasons mentioned above. Another mechanism is the expansion of the number of districts, which in Uganda increased from 39 in 1989 to 146 in 2021. Since each district has a woman holding a reserved seat, the expansion of seats increased the number of women in reserved seats. The ruling

party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), increased the number of appointed women as well as the number of pro-NRM women independents, many of whom had lost in the first round of elections and then successfully ran as pro-NRM independents. The NRM also vigorously de-campaigned opposition women candidates, repressed them, sometimes violently, paid candidates to run against opposition women, and coopted women in the opposition. All of these were efforts to expand ruling party's representation by increasing its cadre of loyal women parliamentarians.

Finally, some have argued that party-based authoritarian regimes matter more for women's rights than personal-based regimes (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016; Donno and Kreft 2019). Others have suggested that the degree of party institutionalization is the main determinant of women's political inclusion under authoritarian rule (Pelke 2021).

Conclusion

This essay has shown how women's leadership is used instrumentally in autocracies, mostly with entrenched parties, to gain electoral support and strengthen internal and external legitimacy, as well as to expand patronage ties. This allows the regime to sustain itself in power. It is used to divert attention from human rights abuses and soften the regime's image. This leads to a conundrum in authoritarian countries, unlike democracies, where the incorporation of women leaders and women's rights in response to pressures from women's movements and from women politicians themselves has resulted in strengthening and further legitimizing the country's autocratic leadership.

Some scholars have challenged claims that descriptive representation can democratize parties and legislatures and are skeptical it can enhance substantive representation because of the weakness of party systems and mechanisms of accountability. The effectiveness of quotas is limited by the weakness of political institutions and the lack of adequate collective mobilization in a free political environment (Hassim 2009). I would take this further to argue that in authoritarian regimes, women's leadership can be weaponized to further entrench an illicit regime, especially if unmoored from women's movements and activists.

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