**Battleground: Candidate Selection and Violence in Africa’s Dominant Political Parties**

**Introduction**

This article addresses two questions. First, why do some political parties conduct orderly elections to select political candidates, while in other parties, these selection contests descend into violent disorder?[[1]](#endnote-1) Second, if we can explain why some selection contests become more than a figurative battle, can we make a prediction about why some political parties are more vulnerable to an outbreak of violence inside their ranks? I examine these questions in one type of party: the ‘dominant party’ that selects candidate ‘democratically’.[[2]](#endnote-2) It is an important category because it is both populous and, as the Introduction to this special issue underlines, populated by some of the most violent cases in this study. It is also interesting because it seems so implausible, unsettling even, that a party that governs itself democratically might be disproportionately violent. It follows that an unstable political party – especially an unstable *dominant* party – can undermine democratic stability.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It is surprising but nonetheless true that the existing literature on African political parties does not provide a theoretical or empirical road-map to study intra-party relationships. There is a preponderance of research on various aspects of party *systems*, including their classification,[[4]](#endnote-4) sources of fragmentation,[[5]](#endnote-5) level of institutionalization[[6]](#endnote-6) and nationalization,[[7]](#endnote-7) and social basis[[8]](#endnote-8) – but there is very little work on the type of processes at work inside party *organizations*. This imbalance is not coincidental: it is notoriously difficult to conduct research on the content of African political parties, rather than the metadata that describes African party systems (effective number of seats, volatility of support, manifesto policy position, legal status, etc.).

There is also a fundamental reluctance to study party organization in Africa, which can be traced to a stubborn tendency to dismiss African political parties as *sui generis*.[[9]](#endnote-9) If researchers do look inside individual cases, the emphasis is often on ethnicity rather than organization.[[10]](#endnote-10) The prevailing narrative, then, raises a standard lament that African political parties, as a rule, are little more than ‘political cabals or clubs’, dominated by the charismatic personalities of their leaders.[[11]](#endnote-11) But if this orthodox view of African parties is accurate, how can we explain such intense and at times violent competition between rival candidate for selection as a party candidate? If the competition involves a stable cast of protagonists, unfolds on a party stage, and becomes in timing and conduct an almost ritualistic part of the election cycle, does it not follow that it is organized?

I contend that canny party leaders – operating in the space between a divided society and a weak state – make an ideological turn to a ‘congress-like’ political party, which provides a institutional mechanism to govern authoritatively. [[12]](#endnote-12) This strategic turn is clever in the short-term because it essentially endogenizes social tensions inside its ranks, which provides party leaders with an in-built electoral majority, but it is also dangerous because it displaces social competition for state resources away from the *public* sphere to the *partisan* organization. This competition, in turn, can degenerate into conflict for privileged access to state resources, which places an onus on party leaders to design a system that can regulate factional conflict in an orderly manner.[[13]](#endnote-13) I contend that intra-party elections can provide the basis for orderly competition, but *only if* there is an impartial party agency to regulate this electoral competition inside the party’s ranks.

The article’s road-map is as follows. First, I describe how the dominant party became a party ‘machine’ that *endogenizes* conflict between its constituent formations, who compete to secure privileged access to state patronage. Second, I develop an explanatory typology that outlines how intra-party elections incentivize orderly competition for candidacies, but *only if* the party invests in a mechanism to guarantee these elections are conducted lawfully. Third, I apply this theory to analyse how the African National Congress (South Africa) has managed to conduct orderly competition inside its ranks. Fourth, I draw lessons from the case that speak directly to the community of policy-makers who fund political parties. Fifth, I conclude with some general statements about the relationship between party organization and democratization.

**The turn to party in post-colonial Africa**

Independence is a critical juncture in the history of modern African states. It is a moment of pride for ‘new’ states, but also a moment of vulnerability for new state leaders, who – in the face of popular and competing pressure to redistribute wealth – needed to devise a strategy to govern authoritatively in a weak state. State leaders have the option to choose one of two roads at this juncture: the institutional route (leaders invest in a national organization to broadcast power) or the personal route (leaders dismantle institutions and rule patrimonially).[[14]](#endnote-14) The institutional road is the harder and less travelled road because it takes a certain type of political acumen to appreciate that while institutions constrain, institutions also empower. In this section, I describe how some leaders turned to the political party as the ideological and institutional solution to the dilemma of how to govern authoritatively in a weak state. These leaders created *dominant* political parties, which stabilized (fragile) regimes by acting as a site to regulate social competition for (scarce) public resources.

The genetic origin of the dominant party can be traced to the weakness of the archetypal state in Africa, which has rarely, if ever, exercised a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence inside its territorial boundaries. The weakness of the state’s central authority means that while a state may have full juridical sovereignty, its empirical content is low.[[15]](#endnote-15) In order to govern such vast (and “uncaptured”) expanses of territory, colonial administrators empowered ‘traditional’ leaders to rule indirectly, while encouraging private corporate enterprises to invest in an infrastructure – located, primarily, in new capital cities, presided over by a bureaucratic elite – to coordinate the extraction, transportation, and export of mineral and agricultural commodities.[[16]](#endnote-16) This policy produced a peculiarly dissonant sociological outcome. It established ethnicity – rather than occupation or religion – as the single most important dimension of a person’s political identity, but by making traditional leaders complicit in the colonial project, it simultaneously demolished their legitimacy.

This elevation of ethnicity as the primary social cleavage is a defining feature of the colonial legacy, which produced – according to Joel Migdal – a strong society that exists alongside a weak state.[[17]](#endnote-17) The ‘strong society, weak state’ formula has an axiomatic status in the study of African politics, but how does it help us theorize the dominant party in African politics? The short answer is that every party leader in Africa who inherited a weak state occupied a position of extreme ‘vulnerability’, which left the leadership of these new governments with a decision about how to manage their exposure to the sudden wave of popular pressure.[[18]](#endnote-18) This pressure was manifested in two ways. The new government of each state was not just incapacitated by the ‘extreme weakness’ of the state,[[19]](#endnote-19) which made it vulnerable to the sudden opening of a ‘floodgate of claimants’, who pressed hard to secure privileged access to the resources of the state,[[20]](#endnote-20) but these governments also had to think about how the transfer of power had produced a ‘frenzied attempt, through political organization, to maximize the position of one’s primordial [sic] group in the new and uncertain civil order’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

This pressure on the government to deal with economic inequality and social fragmentation produced a ‘strain’ on the fledgling state which, according to a White Paper of Nkrumah’s government in Ghana, was equivalent to the strain on a ‘developed country in wartime’.[[22]](#endnote-22) The moment of independence, then, provoked a crisis, which demanded a response from party and state leaders: how to deal with the ‘staggering problems of nation-building and modernization’.[[23]](#endnote-23) It provoked what historical institutionalists call a critical juncture, because it forced African leaders to make a choice about how to govern their divided territories. It provoked, in particular, a dilemma about whether to turn to the political party. It made sense because the national movement was ‘the most visible, immediately available’ and perhaps the only national organization that could tackle the twin problems of economic modernization and national integration.[[24]](#endnote-24) But it was also a risky move because the empowerment of the party organizations would ultimately constrained the autonomy of party leaders.[[25]](#endnote-25)

In many, perhaps most, African cases, the leadership eschewed the institutional option and chose, instead, to dismantle the political party and all other institionalized avenues of civil and political opposition.[[26]](#endnote-26) In some cases, however, political leaders made a deliberate *ideological* turn to the political party as an instrument that could provide ‘an integrative and stabilizing structure’ and ‘an organizational means for conflict resolution’.[[27]](#endnote-27) The ideologues of the dominant party become the autocrats of the one-party state, so we should treat their motivations with scepticism – but, if we look at the ideology of the one-party state as a political theory alone, we can see how it is designed explicitly to manage conflict. Sékou Touré writes forcefully (and in the Marxian terminology of the day) about how the ‘internal contradictions of our societies’ can only be resolved if all parties unite into a ‘single anti-colonialist front’. It might have been self-serving, but – as an abstract construct – it was at least plausible that in a divided society, the political party was a type of necessary evil because, in its absence, political order becomes unlikely in ‘nations [that] rest on such shaky foundations and are confronted by such urgent and monumental task of integration and development.’[[28]](#endnote-28)

The purpose of this essay is not to disinter the reputations of dead ideologues, but if we accept that many (vulnerable) leaders acted in good faith out of a sense of institutional necessity and ideological conviction, it follows that the turn to party was not an elaborate feint, but rather a genuine attempt to activate the political party to perform two important functions: first, brokering the state’s relationship with its citizens; and, second, providing a site to accommodate competing social formations. The transformation of the nationalist movement into a political party that *endogenized* competition across social cleavages – rather than acting as an outcrop of a single social formation – is an important moment in the history of African political parties. It establishes the template of a viable institutional mechanism – a prototype, in fact, of the modern dominant party – that political leaders have turned to consistently to strengthen their (weak) grip on power, but it also displaced social competition from the public sphere to the private organization of the party, which in turn has made the dominant party uniquely vulnerable to disorder inside its ranks.

The dominant party, then, becomes a space inhabited by a plurality of social categories, who competed – in the party’s earliest days as a nationalist movement – for control of the movement’s ideological direction. This benign character, however, undergoes a dramatic change when the movement enters office as a party of government. First, the ‘chief’ centralizes power in the office of the executive, which becomes ‘the dominant institution in the one-party state’.[[29]](#endnote-29) Second, this power is used to inflate and politicize the public sector, which opens up a source of patronage to reward allies and co-opt rival elites.[[30]](#endnote-30) Third, the ideologues of the one-party state write a script that imbues the dominant party with a moral character, which simultaneously invalidates the legitimacy of an opposition. Fourth, the president copper-fastens this *de facto* dominance by re-writing the institutional rules to either, in some cases, create *de jure* one-party states (Tanzania, 1965; Zambia, 1972; Kenya, 1982) or simply make opposition politically unviable (Côte d’Ivoire, 1960; Kenya 1969, Senegal 1966).[[31]](#endnote-31) Finally, and critically, the state leadership transforms the dominant party into a ‘machine’ to regulate the distribution of state resources to loyal constituencies, which had a sound short-term logic, but it raised considerably the stakes of political competition inside the dominant party. [[32]](#endnote-32)

The construction of the dominant party provided an institutional and ideological solution to the regulatory problem of how to govern authoritatively in a weak state. It wasn’t, however, the first step on the road to democracy, even if the dominant party had some democratic characteristics. There is undeniably an ideological purity in the origin of the dominant party, but when the dominant party became fused to state structures it transformed into a machine that regulated popular access to public resources, which destroyed its moral legitimacy and (in many, if not all cases) had a ruinous effect on the provision of public goods. If this reading of the dominant party as an institutional safety-valve is correct, it reverses our understanding of the relationship between candidate selection and violence in Africa’s dominant party systems. It suggests that dominant parties are not more prone to disorderly competition, but rather that fierce – and, indeed, on occasion violent ­– competition for candidacies is *endogenous* to the dominant party in Africa.

**Candidate selection and violence in Africa’s dominant political parties**

The question, then, more precisely is not just about how a political party conducts an orderly contest to select public representatives; the question, in a dominant political party, becomes: how does a party design a system that allows a dominant party to maintain its cohesion, but not descend into a violent competition for state resources?[[33]](#endnote-33) The literature on party ‘institutionalization’ is a useful point of departure, which sets out a wide range of factors ­– an autonomous leadership, a coherent infrastructure, a set of values, roots in society – that help describe the process that leads to a party’s acquisition of value and stability.’ This literature provides useful lines of inquiry for this study, but its multi-dimensional approach is also its great weakness because the literature, according to Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, ‘fail[s] to identify clearly what the relationship is between the different dimensions and institutionalization. Are they causes or prerequisites; are they intrinsic characteristics; or are they indicators or consequences?’[[34]](#endnote-34)

If there is any way through this pea-soup of a literature, it lies unquestionably in a reductive approach. I believe the elemental issue is whether the party’s leader(ship) is willing to invest in a party organization. It seems obvious that this investment is *necessary*, but it is also deeply problematic because it involves a sharp reduction in the personal power of the leader(ship). And why would any leadership ‘accept that partial *diminutio capitis*, that reduction in personal power’, even if it is, as Angelo Panebianco made clear, ‘indispensable to organizational institutionalization?’[[35]](#endnote-35) The sharpest point of this diminution involves investing in a system to select the party leadership that is­ *beyond* the control of the leadership. The development of this kind of ‘succession’ system, according to Samuel Huntington is a ‘major turning point’ in the consolidation of a party because it helps resolve the ‘inherent conflict between personal leadership and party institutionalization’.[[36]](#endnote-36)

If a leader makes this investment in a mechanism to regulate competition between ambitious partisans for coveted posts, a (personal) political vehicle becomes an (organized) political party.[[37]](#endnote-37) This investment in organization is an *elemental* property of a political party, but its application is variable. The ideal leadership makes a credible commitment to establish a *neutral* agency, which acts as a referee to interpret and enforce the party’s ‘rule of law’ in internal competitions to select the party leadership. If there is no formal agency, the leadership makes an informal or tacit commitment to remain above the fray, as it were, in the process of candidate selection. We can hypothesize that, ceteris paribus, if the national leadership – or a faction of the national leadership – intervenes ‘unlawfully’ in a local contest to select candidates, this interference will provide local contestants with a legitimate grievance that might, in turn, form the moral justification to turn to violence. (For a more detailed exposition of this type of argument, see Anne Mette Kjœr in this volume).

If a party leadership does empower the party organization to (re)produce the party leadership, it can – once this neutral agency is in position – design a wide variety of different types of electoral mechanisms to select candidates (see Seeberg *et al.* in the introduction to this Issue).[[38]](#endnote-38) It follows that different types of selection system can produce, or discourage, disorderly competition between candidates. I’m interested in one sub-type of system: the party that uses a democratic method to select candidates. I’m interested, in particular, in one type of political party: the dominant party that competes in a proportional electoral system. This category includes the ANC in South Africa, which is the centrepiece of this article’s later empirical analysis. It is a substantially interesting case because Closed-List PR, unlike Single-Member Plurality systems, is ‘the only family of [electoral] systems in which there is no role for the electoral rules in allocating seats to candidates.’[[39]](#endnote-39) Closed-List PR, in other words, gives the party leadership total control over the design of its internal selection processes.

The empirical examination of this type of system invites a prior question: why would the party leadership makes the counter-intuitive decision to *democratize* the process of selection, when it could legitimately empower a much smaller – and, presumably, more biddable – selectorate to nominate public representatives? The literature on elections in authoritarian regimes suggests a clear resolution to the apparent paradox of party primaries: leaders use elections as a device to stabilize a ruling coalition (the dominant party). The canny autocrat uses elections to acquire valuable information about opponents, signal strength to rivals, distribute patronage efficiently, and monitor supporters at the local level.[[40]](#endnote-40) The effect, according to Barbara Geddes, is a striking difference in the durability of autocracies that use elections compared to regimes that do not.[[41]](#endnote-41) It follows, too, that party leaders can use party primaries in precisely the same way – which raises a reasonable suspicion that party leaders use party primaries as a system of ‘competitive clientelism’ to create a stable mechanism to regulate access to state patronage, which redistributes patronage efficiently (to loyal supporters), but also provides a way to keep these local brokers in check.[[42]](#endnote-42)

If party leaders enfranchise the party membership to stabilize the regime, rather than out of any high-minded normative commitment to democracy inside the party, how might the leadership design this system? Do party leaders open up *all* executive office to selection from below? Is the party president popularly elected, or is the competition restricted to lesser party offices? And who, precisely, is enfranchised to select this leadership? Does the ‘selectorate’ include all citizens (the open primary), or all members (the closed primary), or just a sub-set of members and party officials? We can speculate that different types of ‘selection systems’ lead to varying levels of disorder – up to and including violent disorder – inside a political party? We can hypothesize that a more inclusive system is, all other things being equal, more likely to stabilize competition – partly because it legitimizes the winner of the contest, but also because it provides the loser with a reliable return route to power at the next (s)election contest. If the leadership shuts down this avenue, I expect that it will raise significantly the likelihood of violence in the local contest – not simply because it closes the ‘return route’ that encourages a losing candidate to accept defeat,[[43]](#endnote-43) but also because it damages local party candidate’s trust that the party centre can act credibly as a neutral agent to arbitrate fairly.

It is possible, now, to use the literature on party institutionalization to generate a parsimonious framework that prioritizes two explanatory factors: party organization (neutral or biased) and candidate selections systems (inclusive or exclusive) – that might help explain why some parties conduct orderly competition for political candidacies, while competitions in other parties descend into violent disorder. Figure 1 presents a two-by-two table, which illustrates the variables’ interactive relationship, which is the core theoretical statement in this article. I contend that inclusive procedures will encourage orderly competition (and maintain party cohesion), but *only if* there is a neutral party agency to regulate this competition (Type 1). If, conversely, the party uses an inclusive procedure to select its leadership, but does not have a neutral party agency to referee the contest, we are more likely to see a disorderly selection contest, although this disorder is unlikely to threaten the cohesion of the party (Type 2). The third and fourth categories characterize the counter-factual: if a dominant party centralizes control over candidate selection, but still nonetheless selects these candidate according to the party’s rules, it will destabilize the party, but not necessarily produce disorderly competition (Type 3). A centralized party that does not follow its own rule-book, on the other hand, is more likely than any other category of party to collapse in disarray (Type 4).

Figure 1: Explanatory Typology of Candidate Selection Procedures and Impact on Party Cohesion and Order

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Candidate Selection System | |
|  |  | Inclusive | Exclusive |
| Party Organization | Neutral | Type 1:  Cohesive/  Orderly | Type 3:  Incohesive/  Orderly |
| Partisan | Type 2:  Cohesive/  Disorderly | Type 4:  Incohesive/  Disorderly |

**Candidate selection and political order in the African National Congress (South Africa)**

If this typology provides a valid theoretical account of how a political party can encourage orderly competition for political candidacies, it ought to shed light on the dynamics of social competition inside Africa’s dominant political parties. I apply this framework to analyze an important case of party dominance: the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. The case study is based on interviews with a wide range of figures inside the ANC during the course of successive fieldtrips, which were conducted in 2005/06, 2011 and 2013. I interviewed approximately 75 members of the party, some on several occasions over time, including members of the party’s National Executive Committee, National Working Committee, office-bearers in the senior leadership, members of parliament, and senior cabinet ministers. I selected informants from across the party’s constituent components (geographic and sectoral) who could provide a broad range of opinions about the ‘state of the party’. I provided each informant with a guarantee of anonymity, but made clear that the material would be used for the production of public research.

South Africa has a proportional electoral system, Closed-List PR, which is used every five years to elect the 400 members of the state’s lower house of parliament (the National Assembly). Voters select a single political party on the ballot-sheet, which determines each party’s share of the vote. There are two tiers of allocation to translate votes into seats: a set of nine ‘provincial’ districts (in proportion to the area’s population) and a national district (with 200 members), which compensates for any disproportionality in the provincial allocations. The allocation in both tiers is conducted according to the Droop formula. There is, effectively, no disproportionality in the South African system: the ‘cost’ of a seat in the most recent national general election (2014) was just over 30,000 votes (out of almost eighteen and a half million valid votes). This extreme level of proportionality places South Africa among the most permissive electoral systems in the world.[[44]](#endnote-44)

This electoral system establishes two important parameters in the application (and extension) of the explanatory typology to the case study. First, it underlines just how extraordinary it is that the ANC – operating in one of the world’s most diverse societies, using one of the world’s most permissive electoral systems – is able to maintain such a broad coalition of support inside its ranks. There are few, if any, structural obstacles to the formation of new parties; the electoral system’s ‘barrier to entry’ is, effectively, non-existent, which permits the leadership of a breakaway faction inside the ANC to consider more readily the option to ‘exit’ the party. In other systems with a higher barrier to entry, the logic of intra-party competition will change accordingly. Second, the electoral system does not present the ANC with a legally-binding method to select candidates; the ANC, as it happens, selects candidates to mirror the ‘locus’ electoral systems configuration – the nine provinces nominate nine lists, while the national executive signs off on a national list – but Closed-List PR gives the ANC total flexibility to enfranchise as many, or as few, ‘electors’ as it wishes to select the party’s leadership.

In spite of the permissiveness of the electoral system, and diversity of its society, the ANC has maintained its broad social coalition since 1994. The party governs South Africa as the principal member of the Tripartite Alliance, which includes the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party. This broad sectionalcoalition of left-wing constituencies is the mainstay of the ANC’s electoral dominance – the continued loyalty of the Alliance partners is the main barometer of ANC cohesion – but the ANC’s ‘congress-like’ character also encompasses (historically) the full spectrum of social categories in South Africa. There are, according to one of its leaders, ‘socialists in the ANC, communists in the ANC, highly religious and devoted Muslims and Christians, liberals, conservatives … everyone is in the ANC.’[[45]](#endnote-45) It is a party with an ‘exceptionally diverse’ range of intellectual and ideological tendencies.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The ANC, in short, is not designed to represent a single social category; it is not, in this sense, an ordinary political party. It is a party that has sought historically to *endogenize* conflict inside its ranks in order to create a space – populated by *all* major social categories – to seek national reconciliation and economic transformation. The ANC’s genetic wiring as an inclusive *movement* provided a type of moral legitimacy, which was indispensable during the anti-Apartheid struggle, but this consociational character became a source of tension when the ANC entered office. The party became caught, according to Patrick Bond, in a ‘pincer movement’ between its disenfranchised (popular) base and its (liberal) parliamentary elite, who were inclined to make the standard compromises.[[47]](#endnote-47) The base, however, expanded rapidly into the party’s new organization – membership of the ANC has almost tripled since independence – but while the old generation was motivated ideologically, the new generation of cadre focuses on the ANC’s capacity to deliver patronage (and services). ‘The people who are joining the ANC today’, according to one of my informants:

‘are driven by one desire: to have access to power, in order for them to have access to resources and patronage. So what is dividing us now is not an ideological problem. We are just divided because every person wants to be a chairperson of a branch at all cost, in order for him then to have some access to resources and (…) the patronage system. That's what divides the ANC now.

There has been a quickening appreciation among scholars that democratic institutions, operating in the conditions of economic inequality, have ‘activated and expanded’ social fault-lines, which in turn increases the risk that these social groups compete fiercely and, at times, violently for access to state resources.[[48]](#endnote-48) In a dominant party system, the ruling party – designed, as we have seen, to endogenize (and regulate) this competition, becomes the primary site of political contestation. It is hardly surprising, then, that the ANC – in spite of the tendency, bordering on a prejudice, to treat South Africa as an exceptional case[[49]](#endnote-49) – has followed so closely the experience of not only Africa’s ‘congress-like’ parties in the post-colonial period, but also the experience of other liberation movements in other world regions.[[50]](#endnote-50)

There is a wealth of material that documents how the party’s electoral machinery has become geared primarily to pick winners in a ‘battle for loot’.[[51]](#endnote-51) Tom Lodge describes how competition in the ANC’s first decade as a party was ‘wholly and singularly caused by corruption…the scramble for state resources, and a tendency for local comrades to regard local structures as their own fiefdoms.’[[52]](#endnote-52) Alex Beresford, more recently, introduces the ‘gatekeeper’ framework to demonstrate how the ANC has colonized the state to transform ‘networks of *public* authority [into] a vital facilitator of *private* capital accumulation.’[[53]](#endnote-53) The ANC, in the eyes of Roger Southall, has become ‘overwhelmed by the predatory behaviour of its elites.’[[54]](#endnote-54) The ANC, too, has underlined how the sins of incumbency” has opened up internecine competition for state resources that has pushed the party to the “cusps of paralysis’.[[55]](#endnote-55)

The ANC is hard-wired to produce competition inside its ranks: it is, ideologically, committed to provide an open space to accommodate competing social formation but it has become – via its electoral success – the most valuable piece of political real-estate in South Africa. When Huntington wrote that ‘organization is the road to political power’, he might as well have been writing about the ANC.[[56]](#endnote-56) There is, as a consequence, a level of ‘conflict and tension within the ANC’, according to one MP, ‘that will be a constant factor. What matters for the leadership is … how does it manage these tensions?’[[57]](#endnote-57) This, indeed, is the critical question: how does the ANC – a party configured to pick winners in one of the world’s most unequal societies – manage to conduct the race in an orderly way?

The answer is in two parts. First, the unprescriptive nature of Closed-List PR gave the ANC the flexibility to design a candidate selection system to manages these tensions. Second, this flexibility of Closed-List PR gave the ANC space to design a system that enfranchises its million-plus membership to select branch-level delegates, who attend periodically a conference – depending on the geographic area (branch, region, etc.) – that elects the party’s leadership. So, for instance, the entire national membership nominates delegates (in proportion to the size of the branch) to attend a national conference to select the party’s leadership (including the president, the chief ‘office-bearers’, and the party’s national executive committee). These delegates use a modified version of the block-vote (a highly disproportionate electoral system) to vote for rival ‘slates’ of candidates. The democratic nature of the elections matters because it legitimizes the winner, who is empowered to govern authoritatively. Second, the elections – or, more precisely, the prospect of future elections – provides the losers with a predictable return route to power. An informant describes the logic that works out in the mind of the unsuccessful candidate in ANC, irrespective of whether the candidacy was branch secretary or member of the NEC.

‘those who are defeated in the slate, they don’t dissolve. They simply plan their comeback. We win today, but we know that already those who are defeated in the conference today, they start planning your downfall the day you win the election. It’s a continuous struggle in the movement. Not in terms of refining our ideas about government, but about how to win again.’[[58]](#endnote-58)

In the first decade of democracy, the ANC avoided open competition for the party’s national leadership, but this changed when Jacob Zuma challenged the incumbent, Thabo Mbeki, at the ANC’s 52nd National Conference, which was held at the University of Limpopo (Polokwane) in December 2007.[[59]](#endnote-59) Frank Chikane described it as ‘dramatic, rough, very hostile, and totally uncharacteristic of the ANC’ – but, critically, the election at Polokwane was conducted *peacefully*. It could have spiralled out of control, but it didn’t.[[60]](#endnote-60) Why? First, the election provided Jacob Zuma with a moral claim to the presidency, which legitimized his victory. Zuma won a convincing majority – over 60% of the delegates’ votes – which, filtered through the conference’s (disproportionate) electoral system, became translated into an overwhelming victory, not just for Zuma, but for his entire ‘slate’ of candidates.

Second, President Mbeki and his supports could only have been disrupted the moral basis of the victory with a rival claim that Zuma had broken to rules to win the contest. There were claims that each camp had bribed delegates to vote one way or the other, there were allegations of procedural irregularities in the accreditation of delegates, but there is a general consensus – borne out in the correlation between the breakdown of provincial nominations and the overall national result – that the delegates’ vote reflect the will of the party’s members. It was a critical moment, pregnant with the danger that resides in all moments of succession, but in the aftermath, President Mbeki accepted defeat graciously. A close ally, and member of the party’s outgoing NEC in 2007, describes the president’s behaviour:

‘It [the scale of Zuma’s victory] wasn't as decisive as it seems on the surface. There was enough support still for Mbeki, but the majority voted for Zuma and Mbeki was the first to accept it. There were a lot of people who complained, who said – "there was manipulation [in] the Western Cape" – but he said, "No. The delegates have voted." And he's the first to go onto the stage to congratulate Zuma. Then those of us who were also members of the NEC went on the stage. We said, "Let's accept this election result. We can't destroy this movement."’[[61]](#endnote-61)

There was a lull in the ferocity of competition in the subsequent election for the presidency of the ANC in 2012, which the incumbent, President Zuma, won by a handsome majority. The looming vacancy in 2017, however, was a more closely contested race between Cyril Ramaphosa and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, which culminated in Ramaphosa’s slim victory. The contest contained an equivalent level of vitriol – it was understood as yet another defining moment in this history of the party – but it was also conducted in a largely orderly manner. The party’s national apparatus oversaw the electoral process in an impartial manner, which – in precisely the same way as Polokwane – removed any justification that the loser, Dlamini-Zuma and her supporters, might have had to challenge the result. Richard Calland, in the lead-up to the election, underlined how the central office of the ANC, located in Luthuli House, ‘have gone out of their way to try to insulate the branch mandates from undue provincial leadership interference, adopting extraordinary measures. This includes having an ANC national executive committee member present at each branch general meeting.’ [[62]](#endnote-62)

These episode in the ANC’s recent history underlines the core contentions in this article. First, they demonstrate how a canny party leadership empowers the party organization to select public representatives *democratically* – not out of any high-minded commitment to democratic values, but rather because elections are a smart way to stabilize the dominant party. Second, these episodes demonstrated that when the system is calibrated correctly – the party invests in an inclusive selection process, which is underwritten by a neutral party agency to conduct these elections impartially – we see a more orderly form of competition. If, conversely, the components of the system has been out of sync, we would have expected to see a breakdown in the orderliness of these intra-party relationships and a higher potential for conflict, including violent conflict. There was a risk of violence at Polokwane and Johannesburg, but it was neutralized because the losing candidates had neither the justification, nor (apparently) the inclination to contest the validity of the election’s outcome.

These episodes at the national-level demonstrate the usefulness of the explanatory typology, which outlines how inclusive electoral procedures, and a neutral party agency, stabilizes competition between party factions. It is, however, striking that the fierce but orderly competition for national party candidates is not replicated at the sub-national level. This latter category of elections, especially at local level, are equally inclusive, but ‘political violence’, according to von Holdt, ‘has come to characterize internal conflict over power and access to state resources”.[[63]](#endnote-63) This intra-party violence – including the assassination of ANC candidates and representatives – is most prevalent in Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal (KZN); in an ANC investigation into rising levels of violence in the latter province, the party put the number of fatalities at 38 in the period between January 2011 and September 2012.[[64]](#endnote-64) The violence in KZN can be attributed, in part, to the ‘increasing militarization of the province from the 1980s onwards”,[[65]](#endnote-65) but the general factor that explain the higher base level of disorder in local areas can be traced directly to the “lack of a centre of authority in the ANC”, which can intervene decisively to regulate the ferocious competition for candidacies and state resources.[[66]](#endnote-66)

**Can we reform candidate selections systems to encourage orderly competition?**

We get to the heart of the matter now: how, if at all, can we make organizational prescriptions that might reduce the level of political disorder inside Africa’s dominant political parties? Or, more cynically, how might the leadership of dominant political parties design an ‘intelligent’ system that allows it to redistribute patronage efficiently, maintain its grip on power, and keep good order among its rival constituencies? The critical factor is whether the national party leadership establishes a neutral party agency that acts as a referee, who holds the ring in the contest between rival constituencies for control of the local party machine. If the party leadership isn’t able to create an apolitical agency on these lines, or commit to a neutral position, it undermines fundamentally the logic of the electoral process – which relies on the ‘losing’ candidate being able to access reliably a ‘return route’ to power. If, conversely, the losing candidate believes that he lost because of illegitimate (or unlawful) interference from the centre of the party, he is more likely to challenge the decision rather than accept his opponent’s victory. In a two-party or multi-party system, this unhappy candidate can defect to a rival party, or set up his own party, or perhaps run as an independent candidate – but, in a dominant party system, there are fewer alternative exits in the system.

If, however, the disgruntled candidate cannot reasonably expect to launch a future challenge to return to power, he is more likely to use extra-constitutional – including, *in extremis*, unlawful and even criminal – means to contest the party’s decision to nominate a rival. If the stakes are high enough – and they often are when candidates are under enormous pressure to deliver private and club goods to political networks – we can expect, all other things being equal, to see a rise in intra-party violence. The problem with this prescription, obviously, is that it requires myopic elites to cooperate in the short-term in order to achieve a long-term pay-off (party cohesion). This kind of cooperation requires trust, which is precisely what is missing in a factional crisis. Still, if donors do engage with political parties, it suggests that they should encourage party leaders to establish a central party agency, beyond partisan control, that can act to maintain the integrity of the party’s electoral process.

If the party leadership cannot concede control over the electoral process inside the party, are there other options to consider that might make party competition more orderly, or less prone to violence? I interviewed a leading figure inside the ANC a number of years ago – before the ‘insurgency’ at the party’s national conference at Polokwane – who warned, presciently, that ‘local is not always *lekker* in politics; it can in fact be despotic.’[[67]](#endnote-67) It seems obvious, in retrospect, that the openness of ANC procedures enabled a charismatic candidate (Jacob Zuma) to unleash a populist wave of support, which was extremely difficult to regulate (hence the popular description of the campaign as a ‘Zunami’). Under these circumstances, it might have been better had the procedures not been so inclusive – or, perhaps, *more* inclusive. The genius of the Zuma campaign is that it targeted the branch and regional patrons, who ‘traded’ blocks of support in return for future access to state resources. If the party used a one-member-one-vote formula, it might have been considerably harder for the challenger to use a clientelistic strategy to mobilize such a large base.

The prevalence of violence at the sub-national level highlights a contradiction in the design of the ANC’s organization: the party branch is the building-block of the party’s democratic infrastructure, but it is also the locus of ‘the insidious internal strife and factional battles for power”.[[68]](#endnote-68) The ANC’s leadership appreciates that the party must strengthen the organization’s “Integrity Commission and dispute resolution mechanisms”, but now that the genie is out of the bottle, as it were, it is difficult to se how such a correction, alone, can counteract the ferocious popular pressure to secure access to party candidacies.[[69]](#endnote-69) There is also a dire need to insulate state agencies from party penetration, while empowering law enforcement agencies to investigate impartially and prosecute successfully the perpetrators (and, in particular, the criminal gangs who supply professional assassins), who – in the absence of a credible state commitment to enforce the rule of law – will continue to use violence as a tactical weapon in the battleground of party politics.

**Conclusion**

What can this case study tell us about how, if at all, we might ‘craft’ a democracy?[[70]](#endnote-70) First, the case underlines how electoral institutions, operating in a context of social diversity and economic inequality, can lead directly to disorderly (and even violent) clientelistic competition for state resources. Von Holdt reaches the dismal but nonetheless compelling conclusion that violence is “inherent” to democratic institutions in this environment.[[71]](#endnote-71) It is, however, unduly pessimistic to imagine that constitutional engineers and party leaders cannot take practical steps to reduce the risk of disorderly competition inside political parties. In this article, I develop a theory that explains both why a dominant party in a divided society is especially prone to outbreaks of violent competition inside its ranks, and how party leaders can design an organizational apparatus to reduce this risk. There is no panacea, of course, but there are concrete steps that can be implemented to stabilize competition.

This case also provides a theoretical insight into the anatomy of a dominant party. If the political party is indispensible to a democracy, it is also dangerous: the party is a powerful instrument that elites can manipulate to undermine the public interest. If this axiom applies to all political parties, it applies doubly to the dominant political party – not simply because it has an in-built majority, or tends to degenerate into a clientelistic ‘machine’, but also because its endogenization of social conflict makes it especially prone to disorder inside its ranks. This vulnerability places an onus on party leaders to design an organization to regulate this conflict in an orderly way. The stand-out conclusion of the experience of the ANC in South Africa suggests that an electoral mechanism can produce orderly competition, *only if* the party invests in an organization that applies impartially the rules governing the election.

Finally, this case highlights an important continuity in the political development of postcolonial states: the new and insecure leadership – operating in the space between a divided society and weak state – must make a choice about how to govern authoritatively. If the new leadership empowers the political party to act as a vehicle to regulate social competition for state resources, it opens up an institutional space to stabilize the regime – but this strategy also displaces competition from the public arena to the partisan organization. It is a risky manoeuvre to perform in *any* context; it is especially risky in a divided and unequal society. If venal elites use elections to capture the organization, the dominant party – irrespective of whether elections are conducted in an orderly manner – can be transformed into an instrument to penetrate, strip and ultimately weaken the state institutions of a new and fragile democracy.

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1. Candidate selection is ‘the predominately extralegal process by which a political party decides which of the persons legally eligible to hold an elective public office will be designated on the ballot and in elections communication as its recommended and supported candidate or list of candidates’ (Ranney 1981: 75). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I consider a party system to be ‘dominant’ when one party manages to win an absolute majority of seats in parliament, and exercise control over the political executive, over at least three consecutive elections. For a detailed discussion on how to define dominance, see Bogaards, “Counting Parties and Identifying Dominant Party Systems in Africa.” For a detailed discussion on how to define different types of candidate selection system, see Rahat and Hazan, “Candidate selection methods.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Carothers, *Confronting the weakest link,* 6–7. Mainwaring, *Rethinking party systems in the third wave of democratization*, 3–14. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Van de Walle and Butler, “Political parties and party systems in Africa's illiberal democracies”; Bogaards, “Counting parties and identifying dominant party systems in Africa”. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mozaffar, et al. “Electoral institutions, ethnopolitical cleavages, and party systems in Africa's emerging democracies”; Brambor, et al. “Are African party systems different?”; Lindberg, “Consequences of electoral systems in Africa: a preliminary inquiry”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Kuenzi and Lambright, “Party system institutionalization in 30 African countries”; Lindberg, “Institutionalization of party systems? Stability and fluidity among legislative parties in Africa's democracies”; Manning, “Assessing African party systems after the third wave”; Mozaffar and Scarritt, “The puzzle of African party systems”. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wahman, “Nationalized incumbents and regional challengers: opposition-and incumbent-party nationalization in Africa”. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Basedau, et al. “Ethnicity and party preference in sub-Saharan Africa”. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Gunther and Diamond, “A new typology of political parties”. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Elischer, *Political parties in Africa*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Carothers, *Confronting the weakest link,* 6–7. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On this classification of Africa’s political parties, see Günther and Diamond, “A new typology of political parties”. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This kind of clientelistic competition also creates a severe long-term problem: it demolishes the party’s moral claim to govern in the public interest. See Mac Giollabhuí, “The fall of an African president”. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Allen, “Understanding African politics”. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Jackson and Rosberg, “Why Africa’s weak states persist,” 1–24.­ [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Migdal, *Strong societies and weak states*. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Bienen, “One-party systems in Africa”, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Coleman and Rosberg, “Conclusions”, 663. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Zolberg, *Creating Political Order*, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Lemarchand in C&R, double-check. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Coleman and Rosberg, “Conclusions”, 668. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 656. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. This dilemma was not unique to Africa. In authoritarian Spain during the 1960s, Huntington describes how ‘the Franco was caught in a dilemma. If such political participation were channelled into the Falange, it would disrupt the balance within the regime. But if it were not absorbed into some element of the regime, it would eventually threaten the system itself’. Huntington, “Social and institutional dynamics of one-party systems”. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. This strategic decision to demobilize political institutions has had a long-term and deleterious effect on politics in Africa (see Wanyama and Elklit in this issue). On how the suppression of a *corps intermédiares* eradicated viable alternatives to ethnic parties, see Lebas, *From parties to protest*; and Coleman and Rosberg, Conclusions, 670. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Coleman and Rosberg, Conclusions, 670. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Emerson, “Parties and national integration in Africa”, 269 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Gertzel, “The dynamics of the one party state in Africa”, 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Van de Walle, *The politics of permanent* crisis. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Cheeseman, “Nationalism, the one-party state, and military rule”, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For the original statement on how political parties assumed the characteristics of a ‘machine’, see Aristide Zolberg, *Creating Political Order.* Roger Southall extends Zolberg’s thesis southern Africa, documenting how liberation movements have become ‘a machine for the allocation of positions, privileges, resources, and contracts’, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. A party that experiences a (negative) change in its cohesion suffers from a high level of resignations, defections, splits and, in the worst case, the complete breakdown or collapse of the party. A cohesive party is not necessarily highly ‘orderly’. See Seeberg et al., in this Issue, for a definition of varying degrees of disorder that mark contests to select candidates. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Randall and Svåsand, “Party institutionalization in new democracies”, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Panebiano, *Political parties*, 32 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Huntington, “Social and institutional dynamics of one-party systems”, 31–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Aldrich, *Why parties*. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Gallagher, “Introduction”. See, also, Rahat and Hazan, “Candidate selection methods”. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Shugart, Comparative electoral systems research’, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. For an excellent review of this literature, see Dawn Brancati, “Democratic authoritarianism: origins and effects”. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Geddes, “What do we know about democratization”. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Lust-Okar, “Elections under authoritarianism”. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. See Mac Giollabhuí, “How things fall apart”. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Using the least squares index of disproportionality, South Africa has an average score of 0.33. On the calculation of this index, see Gallagher, “Appendix C”, 621. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Interview with ANC MP, September 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Butler, How democratic is the African National Congress?’, 726. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Bond, “In power in Pretoria”, 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Von Holdt, “South Africa: the Transition to Violent Democracy”, 591. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. On South African exceptionalism, see Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. ANC, *Organizational renewal*, 18–21. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Suttner, cited in Southall, “Understanding the ‘Zuma Tsunami’”, 327. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Lodge, ‘The ANC and the development of party politics in modern South Africa’, PN!? [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Beresford, “Power, patronage, and gatekeeper politics in South Africa”, 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Southall, “Democracy at Risk? Politics and Governance under the ANC”, 59 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. ANC, *Organizational renewal*, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Huntington, *Political order in changing societies*, 461. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Interview with ANC MP, September 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Interview with ANC MP, September 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. For a more detailed account of President’s victory at Polokwane, see Mac Giollabhuí, “The Fall of an African President”. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Chikane, *Eight Days in September*, 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Interview with ANC MP, August 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Calland, ‘Cyril Ramaphosa leads, but foul play may snatche victory’. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Von Holdt, “South Africa: the transition to a violent democracy”, 597. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Bruce, “A provincial concern? Political killings in South Africa”, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Taylor, *Justice denied*, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Van Holdt, “South Africa: the transition to a violent democracy”, 598. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Interview with Kader Asmal, December 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. ANC, “Organizational renewal and organizational design’, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. *Ibid*., 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Di Palma, *To craft democracies*. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Von Holdt, “South Africa: the transition to a violent democracy”, 602. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)