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HOW CHINA IS INVERTING DEMOCRACY ENABLING INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Innocent Batsani-Ncube, Ph.D.

STUDY

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Author

Innocent Batsani-Ncube, Ph.D.

Editor

Fungisai Sithole

Contact

Phone: +27 11 880 8851
Email: africa@freiheit.org

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Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
BDS	Building Design Services
CCM	Chama Cha Mapinduzi
CNPC	China National Petroleum Company
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCP-ID	CCP International Department
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FLMSA	Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação Moçambique
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOC	International Olympic Committee
MMD	Movement for Multiparty Democracy
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola
NIMD	Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy
PF	Patriotic Front
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SOE	State Owned Enterprises
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SLPM/A -IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army - In Opposition
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UPND	United Party for National Development
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
ZANU PF	Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front

Executive Summary

As China's economic interests and political influence in Africa have increased, so have its concerns about the long-term security of its investments. Governmental turnover – leading to anti-China policy changes - and loss of influence are two key variables that China has to contend with. To hedge its bets it has, of late, been investing time and resources into developing the domestic political institutions of African states, inclusive of political parties and parliaments.

However, China's direct role in political parties and parliaments in Africa raises questions about the extent to which it is reshaping – in its authoritarian image - these ostensibly democracy-enabling institutions on the continent. Political parties and parliaments represent two sides of the democratic governance value chain. At the basic level, political parties supply civilians/volunteers, who are converted into public representatives through elections. Parliaments are vested with institutional power to make laws and scrutinise the actions of those carrying out executive tasks in government. Realising the utility of these institutions in African political systems, China has especially inverted them as cogs in its political influence building exercise in Africa.¹

China has constructed or refurbished over 15 parliament buildings in Africa. This has provided the opportunity for China to access cross-party legislative elites through long-term maintenance of these parliament buildings. China uses a two-pronged engagement strategy in Southern Africa. It has built a school to train the next generation of leaders from former liberation movements that are dominant governing parties in their countries. It also actively maintains ad hoc cooperation with ruling parties, especially in countries where political turnover regularly occurs. Collectively, this enables China to project its influence in strategic political institutions and to have direct access to influential political elites in African countries.

The significant takeaway for policymakers is that China has emerged as a critical player in (re)shaping domestic political institutions in Africa. This is particularly important given the pressing need to support the development of inclusive political institutions that undergird accountable governance. Flowing from this, we suggest three recommendations to agencies that support the development of inclusive political institutions in Africa:

- Invest in research that deepens understanding of the details of China's political influencing strategies in Africa and use the findings to develop a comprehensive communication and stakeholder engagement strategy that will help to explain China's political influencing activities in Africa.
- Integrate China into mainstream parliamentary strengthening programme planning in order to limit the negative effects of its unilateral support to parliaments and enable a collaborative effort in supporting African parliaments.
- Invest in developing resilient democratic institutions – such as political parties, independent media and civil society - that can be a counterfoil to China's authoritarian political influences.

Introduction

This paper spotlights China's investment in parliaments and political parties in Southern Africa. Drawing on interviews with political, bureaucratic and civil society elites, as well as press reports, we provide evidence from Southern Africa that China has of late been directly targeting and inverting African political parties and parliaments in a bid to secure its economic interests and political influence in the long term. The use of the term 'invert' in this paper specifically denotes the concerted ways in which China has identified and used parliaments and political parties to serve its political influence building agenda in Africa.

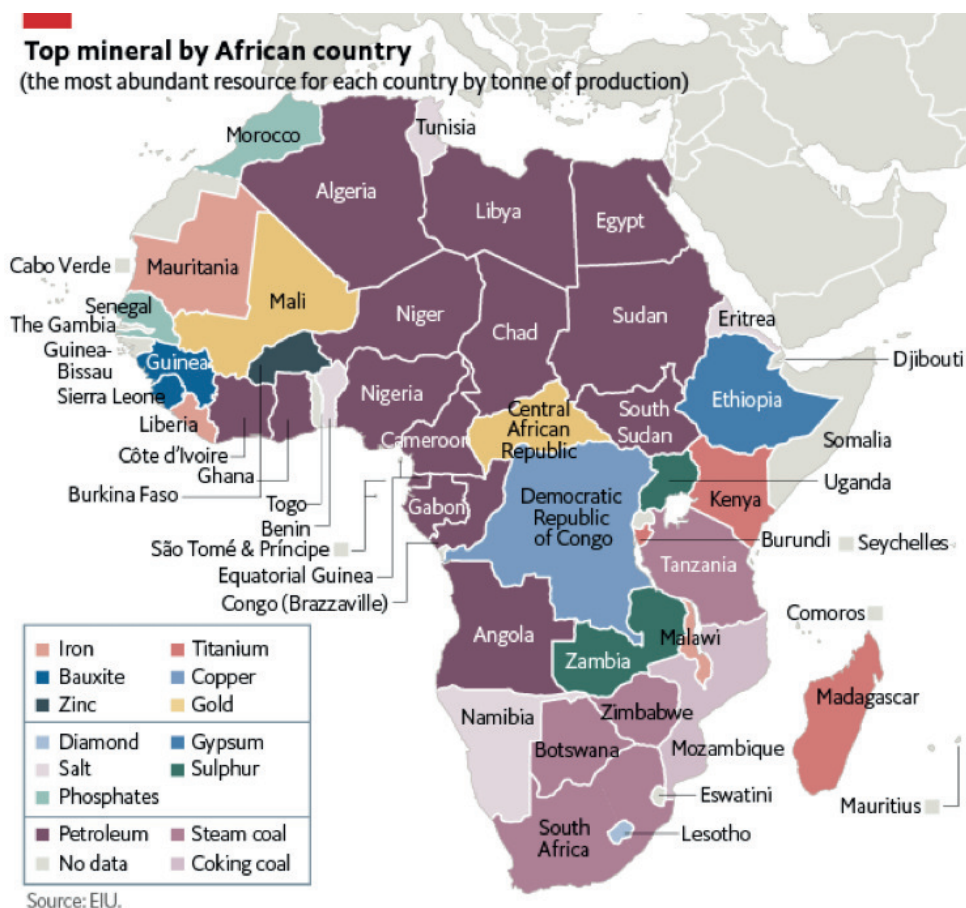
China's motivation to invert political parties and parliaments flows from the scale of its interests and the uncertainty as to whether the long-term political environment will remain positively disposed towards it. Significantly, China has to contend with the entrenchment of electoral democracy in Africa - which at the minimum now produces multi-party legislatures and at the top end results in governmental turnover. Such political diversity and change create uncertainty, hence political parties and legislatures have become important targets for China in cultivating links with African political elites (potential and actual ruling elites) in order to sustain its influence in the long term. This paper explores the nature and scale of China's political engagement activities; their net effect on democracy enabling political institutions; and what domestic and other international actors could do to counter China's authoritarian leaning aid to Africa.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first puts into context the drivers of China's political manoeuvres. The paper contends that, as China's economic interests and political influence in Africa have increased, so have its concerns about the long-term security of its investments. China's political engagement is aimed at building political capital that, in the long term, will mitigate reputational damage in its ongoing geopolitical battle with Western powers for influence in Africa. The second section discusses the conceptual and practical significance of contemporary African political parties and parliamentary institutions, and why they are at the centre of China's gameplan in the continent. The third section concentrates on providing concrete case studies of the ways in which China engages with political parties and parliaments in Southern Africa. The fourth and final section reflects on the implications of China's inversion of democracy enabling institutions and offers three recommendations to policy and practitioner communities.

I. State of play: drivers of China's political manoeuvres in Africa

China requires a constant supply of primary commodities in Africa, such as oil and minerals, to spur its large-scale industrial production and meet the demands of its markets. Africa holds considerable deposits of key minerals, including bauxite, cobalt, copper, diamonds, phosphates, platinum and uranium (see fig 1.). China's appetite for primary commodities, especially energy, is unparalleled. China is the world's leading energy consumer, accounting for 175.65 exajoules in 2021. This represented 30% of total global consumption at that time. To meet its needs, China has secured 25% of its oil and gas supplies from Africa – representing its second largest supplier region after the Middle East. In 2022, China imported oil worth more than US\$20 billion from Angola alone. Although recent events have indicated that China is keen to exert political influence in the Middle East, the geopolitical turbulence in that region and the United States' dominance there, makes Africa a more reliable energy source.

Fig. 1



China's trade with Africa - US\$282 billion in 2022, up from US\$10 billion in 2002 - illustrates the magnitude of its economic interests in Africa. China's imports – including much sought-after primary commodities such as cobalt, iron ore and copper - reached over US\$117 billion in 2022. China is further tied to the continent through its financial exposure, as it has emerged as the Continent's major bilateral lender.

Between 2000 and 2020 Chinese financiers signed loans worth US\$160 billion with African state entities (governments and state enterprises). However, China is also aware that the scale of its loans to African countries has attracted strident criticism, as from Brahma Chellaney, an expert in geostrategic affairs, who has described China's loan scheme as a debt trap. China is cognisant that criticism of this nature undermines its credibility amongst the political classes in Africa and erodes its standing as an ethical major power.

Added to growing concerns about its financial leverage over African countries, China has to grapple with another reputational risk, owing to its perceived support to authoritarian, oftentimes corrupt, African ruling elites. It is these relationships that invariably are at the centre of the loan and aid arrangements. Some commentators have gone as far as to call China a rogue actor that seeks to plunder African resources and promote its authoritarian model of governance.

These concerns have manifested in strident criticism by the political opposition in Africa. For example, in Zambia, Michael Chilufya Sata's Patriotic Front (PF) in its initial electoral platform attacked China and its interactions with African governments. At the height of the Darfur crisis, China's decision to overtly support the Omar Al Bashir Government was met with derision, both across the continent and in the West.

Furthermore, the footprint of Chinese firms in Africa has expanded. McKinsey estimates that there are over 10 000 Chinese firms operating in Africa. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE) and private companies face various obstacles due to, among other factors, policy inconsistencies and nationalisation discourse in key natural resource countries, such as Angola, Nigeria, Chad and Sudan. Chinese companies were some of the biggest casualties of the 2011 turmoil in Libya. At the time, according to China's Ministry of Commerce, 75 companies were operating there, including the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC). The Ministry is reported to have confirmed that China "suffered large-scale direct economic losses in Libya, including looted work sites, burned and destroyed vehicles and tools, smashed office equipment and stolen cash".

As a corollary to the above, the scale of Chinese nationals working in the continent has created a human security challenge for China. For example, in 2019, before the onset of COVID-19, there were almost 200 000 Chinese nationals in Africa. Since the Libyan debacle, China has prioritised the safety of its nationals abroad in its foreign policy considerations and actions. When tens of thousands of Chinese workers were trapped in the frontline of the 2011 Libyan civil war, the government of China managed to evacuate 35 860, using multiple transport sources over 10 days. They were spurred, in part, by the backlash from their own citizens, who took to the internet to express their criticism of the government's inaction. China's engagement in Africa has thus become an important domestic issue, which shapes how it responds. This experience has transformed China's engagement with African countries and perhaps influenced a change to its long-held policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its cooperating countries. This policy shift was first seen in China's engagement in Sudan and later in South Sudan. In 2008 China's reputation took a heavy knock, due to its failure to speak out against Al Bashir's excesses in Darfur. The international outcry threatened to torpedo China's "Olympic moment" – the hosting of the 2008 IOC Olympics. In material terms, China's economic installations in Sudan, represented by its oil production operations run by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), a state enterprise, were targeted and a spotlight was cast on China's lack of regard for environmental, labour and political standards when conducting its business in Africa.

Consequently, China's approach in South Sudan a few years later indicated a new approach that was more engaged in shaping internal political settlements, in sync with regional and other international stakeholders. When the civil war started between the Salva Kiir government and the rebel SPLM/A-IO led by former Vice President, Riek Machar, China sought actively to support and influence the conflict mediation, under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), reportedly having behind the scenes access to both the Salva Kiir and Riek Machar camps. The mediator, Mr Seyoum Mesfin, was a person known to Beijing, having served as Ethiopia's Ambassador to China and China was able to be a stabilising influence in "bridging the differences" between South Sudanese leaders and Western countries involved in the peace process. Beijing deployed its diplomats to participate in the peace process held in Ethiopia and, at the international level, Beijing diplomats at the United Nations Security Council proactively shaped the resolutions.

Significantly, China sent peacekeepers and made financial contributions towards the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and, upon invitation by IGAD, China unhesitatingly joined the August 2015 Peace Agreement Oversight Body. This approach marked a significant departure from China's non-interference model and a move to one of active engagement in peacekeeping on the continent. As of 2021, China was the highest contributor amongst UN Permanent Security Council members to United Nations peacekeeping missions. China's armed forces are currently actively engaged in peace missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Darfur, and Mali.

II. Rationale for targeting political parties and parliaments

Beyond China's engagement in peacekeeping operations and its shift from non-interference, it has of late been focussing on working closer with domestic political institutions in Africa, such as parliaments and political parties. The context of this strategy is premised on the changing political environment at national, continental and global levels. Within African countries, China has to contend with critical political opposition parties and vibrant civil society and media. In addition, China tussles for political influence with Europe and the United States of America. Jointly, these actors challenge and question China's intentions in Africa and accuse it of promoting its authoritarian development path and undermining democratic governance.

Significantly, China also has to deal with contemporary political change and governmental turnover in Africa. While China's previous approach was characterised by exclusively supporting incumbent strongmen, this is now a major risk, owing to the consolidation of electoral democracy on the continent. Elections in Africa now produce, at a minimum, multi-party parliaments and, at best, a change in the party in power. For instance, between 2017 and 2021, elections in the SADC region ushered four opposition parties into government (the DRC, Malawi, Seychelles, and Zambia). Added to this, constitutional term limits have enabled intra-ruling party leadership change. Between 2015 and 2021, all the SADC member states - except Eswatini (which coincidentally maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan) - changed their head of state and government. These realities have increased China's cost of doing business in Africa and underpin its new mechanisms for cultivating political relationships beyond the present ruling elites to encompass the media, opposition party leaders, and legislators.

The logic of targeting political parties and parliaments is based on the inalienable fact that they are at the epicentre of governance. They represent two facets of the governance value chain. At the basic level, political parties supply civilians/volunteers who are converted into public representatives through elections, and these representatives then serve in the legislature and the executive.

Those political actors, who are elected or appointed into executive positions, become responsible for administering public affairs, including negotiating with external partners such as China. In other words, political parties produce and deploy leaders who run public offices, whereas parliaments are vested with institutional power to make laws and scrutinise the actions of those carrying out executive tasks in government. In this way, parties and legislatures are critical institutions at the epicentre of national decision-making, be it political, economic or security decisions.

China is not the only actor that has zoomed in on the utility of political parties and parliaments in Africa. Since the third wave of democratisation in Africa, countries in the global North, intergovernmental organisations, democracy-building institutions and not-for-profits have identified these two institutions as central to nurturing and consolidating accountable governance. Organisations such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) actively support the development of democratic and inclusive parties in selected African countries. In Zambia, the WFD worked with the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND) for 15 years until their electoral breakthrough in 2021.

Parliaments are also seen as essential tools in the democracy toolkit. Former Director of NIMD, Dr Roel von Meitjenfeld, emphasised the instrumental role of parliaments in deepening democracy. He lamented that research on African parliaments falls into the "category of important social and political subjects that have not gained the attention they deserve from the academic and publishing community".

Since their emergence multi-party African parliaments have been considered a valuable, important arena of influence by international actors. The Western donor nations have sustained their presence in African governance architecture through parliamentary strengthening programmes. For example, notwithstanding frosty political relations with Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom has continued to support the Zimbabwean Parliament. African parliaments have grown in political stature and importance in the last two decades. Studies on the performance of the parliamentarians and parliamentary organisations in Africa have referenced both their historic institutional weakness - stemming from the legacies of one-party dictatorships - and their sputtering signs of improving capacity. Political scientist Joel Barkan contends that, while historically legislators in African countries "were often seen as lackeys and well-paid spongers", strengthening of African parliamentary institutions has occurred in recent years. In Zimbabwe, the new constitution provides parliament with the power to control the declaration of war, ratify treaties, and approve loans and budgets. In Lesotho, only parliament can bring together under one roof the country's constitutional monarch, the executive, the judiciary, and members of parliament. The executive is drawn from parliament and its leader, the Prime Minister, must command a majority in the National Assembly. The robust electoral competition amongst political parties has resulted in multi-party parliaments and the diverse membership has strengthened the stature of African parliamentary institutions. In the SADC region, all countries except Eswatini – which has outlawed political party organisations – have two or more parties represented in parliament. For example, the DRC, South Africa, Lesotho, and Namibia have 34, 14, 14 and 11 political parties in their National Assembly, respectively. Furthermore, in the DRC, Malawi and Lesotho opposition and independent parliamentarians constitute more than 50% of total members (see Fig 2).

Fig. 2

Country	No of parties in National Assembly	% Opposition/independent members of parliament
Angola	5	49
Botswana	4	29
Comoros	2	39
DRC	34	94
Eswatini	-	-
Lesotho	14	52
Madagascar	7	44
Malawi	6	72
Mauritius	4	40
Mozambique	3	26
Namibia	11	39
Seychelles	2	32
South Africa	14	42
Tanzania	4	7
Zambia	3	44
Zimbabwe	3	34
Source: Author		

The number of political parties in these parliamentary institutions does not necessarily signify well-developed legislative systems. However, China's marked interest in them shows that it is playing a really long game in some countries where parliamentary strength is still in its infancy, but given the trends, and even small movements, China is really thinking ahead. It is very much aware that liberal-democratic parliaments are central to the political institutional structure in African countries and instead of undermining them, China seems to be interested to work through them to its advantage. This means that instead of behaving like a proverbial "bull in a China shop" by foisting its own model, China is amenable to using the established parliamentary institutions to project influence. If it ain't broken, why fix it? In other words, China understands attachment to these institutions in their existing forms. Below we detail China's methods of engaging these political institutions.

III. China's accelerated party-to-party engagement in Southern Africa

China uses a two-pronged party-to-party engagement strategy in Southern Africa. It primarily supports the generational transformation and strengthening of liberation movements that are dominant governing parties in their countries. It also structures ad hoc cooperation with ruling parties in countries where political turnover regularly occurs. Collectively, this enables China to have access to powerful political actors in all countries. The paper spotlights the two aspects of the strategy below.

In February 2022, China inaugurated a political leadership school - the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania - to teach its model to Southern African ruling party officials. The school was earmarked for party executives from six dominant ruling parties in Southern Africa, namely, the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) of Tanzania, Frente de Libertação Moçambique (FRELIMO) of Mozambique, Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) of Angola, South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) of Namibia and the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) of Zimbabwe. These parties have uninterruptedly governed their countries since achieving political independence. The six are all founding members of the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa (FLMSA), which is the successor to the Frontline States, a solidarity platform that was established to support each other to challenge and defeat colonial rule. As liberation movements, these parties collectively shaped the regional political architecture by establishing the Southern African Development Community (SADC). As dominant governing parties they continue to influence the political and socio-economic trajectory of the SADC region. While the rhetoric surrounding China's exclusive support to these parties legitimises it as comradely aid dating back to the liberation struggle, its contemporary pragmatic significance is in the strategic importance of influencing the most powerful political organisations in SADC.

The Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School located in Kibaha (See Fig 3), about 40 kilometres from Dar es Salaam, was financed and constructed by the CCP International Department (CCP-ID). According to the official description, "construction of the school began in 2008 and was completed in February 2022. It [the school] occupies about 10 hectares of land, with a floor area of 24,600 square metres, incorporating the main building, dormitory, canteen and facility building, with an accommodation capacity of 200 attendees."

Fig. 3

Source: <https://www.mjnls.ac.tz/abouts>

The school aims to become a major hub for deepening relations between China and the next generation of FLMSA's leaders. From 25th May to 2nd July 2022, the school hosted what it termed a FLMSA 'Leading Cadres Workshop' for 120 party executives, aged 22 to 45. Some notable attendees at this workshop were an assistant chief whip of the SWAPO party, the head of the secretariat of the ANC Presidency, a member of the ZANU PF Politburo and a district commissioner from Tanzania. Participants at the workshop learnt about China's development path and how it has moved large parts of its population from poverty. The participants also received a letter from Xi Jinping, in his capacity as General Secretary of the CCP, in which he challenged the participants to "take an active part in the cause of the China-Africa friendship, carry forward and pass on the spirit of China-Africa friendship and cooperation, and contribute to the building of a high-quality China-Africa community with a shared future". In response to Xi's letter the participants pledged to devote themselves fully to this mission, "seeking the development of their countries and the happiness of their people".

The second strand of China's party-to-party relations entails establishing ad hoc cooperation with transient ruling parties in countries where political turnover is prevalent. China has adapted its strategy to suit the political situation in those countries where political turnover is recurrent, such as Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia. It has to deal with the complexity of political change and the possibility of a hostile shift in policies, being ready to shift quickly from the losing party to the new governing party.

The paper demonstrates how China achieves this through a study of its political engagement in Zambia. When Michael Sata's Patriotic Front (PF) won the 2011 elections on the back of strident criticism against Chinese investment in Zambia, commentators expected a radical shift in policy and the loss of leverage by China, which had seemingly tied its fortunes to the continued hegemony of the ruling Movement for Multi-Party Democracy party (MMD). However, China was able quickly to establish a relationship with Mr Sata and the PF. China's then-ambassador to Zambia, Zhou Yuxiao, became the first diplomat in Lusaka to pay a congratulatory courtesy call on Sata. Chinese President Hu Jintao followed this up with an invitation to Sata for a state visit.

Within one month, Sata and the PF government had re-adjusted their China policy. Sata was now publicly endorsing Chinese investment and pledging to utilise their investment in his term of office. Countering the criticism of Chinese actors in Zambia, Sata is reported to have quipped;

Don't blame the Chinese, blame yourself because the Chinese are willing to work, they are very hard-working people. The Chinese can do with one meal a day; use them properly and if you find there are more Chinese on one job, don't blame the Chinese, blame the immigration officer who gave them work permits.

Once the government-to-government relations were reset, the CCP and the PF developed a close relationship, to the extent that by the time the PF lost power in 2021, it was largely seen as an enabler of China in Zambia, even more than the MMD had been. Indicatively, a month before the 2021 elections, the PF national chairperson, Mr. Samuel Mukupa, and central committee members were privileged guests at the online CCP and World Political Parties Summit. However, in August 2021 when the United Party for National Development (UPND) – a party with a strong liberal ideological outlook - swept into power, China repeated its tactics of promptly reaching out to the winning party. Again, its ambassador, Li Jie, was the first diplomat to meet and congratulate President-elect Hakainde Hichilema. Although some commentators have praised Hichilema for what they perceive as his assertive stance on China, evidence shows that the UPND has established a direct working relationship with the CCP. In October 2022, its general secretary, Batuke Imelda, was a guest at the 20th CCP National Congress where he praised the CCP as “committed to serving the people and [that it] has provided a useful reference for the UPND”. China’s approach in Zambia is not isolated. China has repeated this modus operandi in all the SADC countries where political turnover has occurred, such as Lesotho, Malawi and the Seychelles.

IV. China’s ongoing presence in parliamentary institutions

China has established a direct presence in over fifteen African legislative institutions, through financing, constructing and maintaining parliament buildings. As highlighted earlier in the paper, the strategic importance of African parliaments has increased due to their multiparty membership and functional utility in national governance. However, China’s game-changing has been overlooked by most Africa-commentators, who see this as an undifferentiated part of China’s broader participation in infrastructure projects in Africa. China’s donation of parliament buildings has made it a key actor. It has fulfilled a need for purpose-built parliament buildings in African countries and managed to do so in a way that allows it long-term access to these facilities and, by extension, to the political representatives. The fact that China spatially organises the work of beneficiary African parliaments – an emerging aspect of China’s foreign aid - gives it high-level visibility in African political institutions. Added to this, the scale of the parliament buildings – landmark structures – has transformed the cityscapes, which gives prominence to the Chinese presence in these African states (see Fig 4).



Photograph by author. The new parliament building in Maseru Lesotho, September 2019.

These projects provide interesting insights into China's political game plan. China gifts parliament buildings to countries that need them and who would have been planning to construct purpose-built parliamentary facilities. In this way China is certain that when they donate buildings to these states, they will be used. For example, in Lesotho, the building was the result of a 2004 government resolution to construct a new building with modern amenities on the outskirts of Maseru at Mpilo Hill, as part of a wide-ranging parliamentary reform programme. In Malawi, a new parliament building was urgently needed as the legislature was operating in a 300-room presidential palace, where the banqueting hall had been transformed into a parliamentary chamber and tea rooms converted into committee rooms.

China deliberately controls the architectural design of these buildings, even where the beneficiary states have prior developed blueprints. Once the government of China offers to finance the construction of the parliament building – through its Ministry of Commerce - it commissions Chinese architects to create design prototypes that largely ignore extant designs by local architects. This control of the design process ensures that Chinese contractors become the preferred contractors and the expertise is brought in from China. A senior planner in Lesotho said that, prior to China's involvement, a design had been produced by the Building Design Services (BDS) in the Ministry of Public Works, which had been approved by an inter-departmental government steering committee. However, when China got involved, the BDS design was set aside and the interdepartmental steering committee ceased operations.

In Malawi, China's desire to control the parliament building process was more obvious than in Lesotho. Prior to Malawi's 2008 diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China, the parliament building project had been designed by a consortium of local architects and financed by Taiwan. The building was already under construction. From the outset, China insisted on making adjustments to the original plan. They prevailed on the Government of Malawi to compel architects to hand over every document pertaining to the construction of the parliament building. China unilaterally appointed a Chinese construction firm and exclusively sourced building materials and key artisans from China. It also had full control of labour recruitment, contractor supervision and maintenance planning.

Instead of enabling beneficiary countries to construct buildings using their plans and expertise, China deliberately chose a method that would give them control of these buildings in the long term. The legacy of this method is that not only is the signage in these buildings in Mandarin, but the recipient states have to depend heavily on China to maintain them. Recipient governments sign three-year maintenance agreements with China and at the end of each cycle these agreements are renewed, thereby ensuring that China, through its public officials and companies, remains active in the management and maintenance of these parliamentary facilities. Encapsulating the problem, a senior parliament officer in Malawi singled out maintenance of the building as one of their biggest challenges; "we need to do our own maintenance but we still work with the Chinese who have not totally left us. So, we cannot do the needful because they are still assisting in the maintenance".

Eight years after the building was commissioned, a prominent member of parliament in Lesotho expressed his discomfort at the continued presence of the Chinese in the parliament building: "If there is a blockage on the plumbing, then they will come and fix everything. If there is an electric fault, they will come and fix the electricity. Now they were busy painting inside walls this while". The most important takeaway here is that these parliament buildings were deliberately made to be dependent on China, creating an avenue for China for long term influence and leverage.

V. Implications of inverted democracy enabling institutions

The foregoing sections have collectively illustrated that China's manoeuvres in political parties and parliaments are at the core of its overarching strategy of safeguarding its economic interests and political influence in Africa. China has deliberately targeted these democracy enabling institutions and repurposed them for its foreign policy goals in Africa. In doing so, China has emerged as a critical player in (re)shaping African domestic political institutions. This is a significant takeaway for policy makers who are keen to support the development of inclusive political institutions that undergird accountable governance. Any engagement in and with these institutions should take into cognisance the net effect of China's activities. In this concluding section, the paper reflects on three possible implications of China's manoeuvres, namely the possible impact on electoral democracy, democratic governance and the salient values of the political system.

First, China's strategy of engaging and establishing relations with political parties in Southern Africa presents a dilemma for the strengthening of the virtues of electoral democracy. Conceptually, having more than one political party contesting elections in a political system provides voters with a real opportunity to choose between options offered. While regular competitive elections have become the norm rather than the exception on the continent - in some countries resulting in turnover - it is striking that China is not necessarily concerned about which political party wins the electoral contest. From the case study of Southern African political parties discussed in this paper, China has an enduring partnership with dominant ruling parties and has also been successful in establishing durable relations with new parties in states where political turnover occurs. Viewed from this angle, elections lose their utility in providing opportunities for change with regard to a fundamental foreign policy that is critical of China. China's strategy entrenches its access to ruling political elites in Africa and places it at an advantage compared to other actors such as the European Union, the United States and other international actors.

Second, China's determined long term involvement with parliaments - institutions that are meant to work to aid democratic governance - raises questions about the extent to which its presence undermines their effectiveness.

Despite the absence of evidence to measure the qualitative impact of China on African parliaments, parliamentary strengthening programmes by bilateral and multilateral donors from the West and domestic civil society organisations should factor in and contend with China's own version of supporting legislatures. While traditional partners have identified parliaments' potential to support inclusive, democratic and accountable governance, China's model of investing in African parliament buildings enables it to hedge its influence by getting involved in their day-to-day activities through maintaining the buildings which provides opportunities to access the legislative authorities. These two approaches to parliamentary strengthening run in parallel to each other. While the former has explicit designs of consolidating democratic governance, the latter is about political access and espionage through these buildings cannot be dismissed. Third, China's vested interests in African political parties and legislatures have long term implications on the dominant values that will shape political life on the continent. The tussle for influence in the global South between China and Western powers has often been characterised as a contest between the former's authoritarian and the latter's democratic values. If this is the case, and *ceteris paribus*, the scale of China's influence on political parties in Africa – as shown here in relation to Southern Africa – has the potential to tilt the scale towards authoritarian values. As shown in the paper, China's leadership school in Tanzania is designed to support the propagation of its values to the next generation of leaders of the dominant political parties. The Zambia case also illustrates China's success in drawing into its fold ruling parties that emerge from political turnovers; parties that prior to governing were either critical to or had no relationship with China. As China expands its influence, the question of which values hold sway in the political life of African countries will be salient.

Recommendations

In conclusion, we suggest that democracy strengthening policy makers in Africa should:

1. Invest in research that deepens understanding of the details of China's political influencing strategies in Africa and use the findings to develop a comprehensive communication and stakeholder engagement strategy. There is a lot that we do not yet know about China's political engagement in Africa. For example, an insight into the curriculum / training details of the CCP run Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania and the ways graduates of the school are deployed in public offices would provide knowledge that will support both the theory and practice of understanding and explaining China's political influencing activities in Africa.
2. Outright exclusion and elimination of China's influence in these parliaments is no longer possible, especially in the short term. It is however, possible to strategically integrate China into mainstream parliamentary strengthening programme planning in order to limit the negative effects of its unilateral support to parliaments. The current arrangement creates parallel processes and this potentially impacts the bottom line – strengthening the democratic governance capabilities of the parliamentary institutions. Such a move could potentially transform China's involvement in legislative institutions into a controllable aspect for the agenda of building democratic institutions.. Bringing them into the mainstream fold could enable a collaborative effort in supporting African parliaments.
3. Invest strongly in developing resilient democratic institutions – such as political parties, independent media and civil society - that can be a counterfoil to China's authoritarian political influencing activities. This should also include understanding how China has succeeded in developing its partnerships.

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About the author



Dr Innocent Batsani-Ncube (Ib) BA (UNISA), Dip Ed (UZ), PGDip (NUST), MSc (Royal Holloway) PhD (SOAS) Ib is a Lecturer in African Politics within the Queen Mary University of London's School of Politics and International Relations (QMUL-SPIR). He specialises in the politics and political economy of Africa relations with China and Russia. He has a forthcoming book on China's engagement in African parliaments and his academic articles have been published in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS) and *Parliamentary Affairs*. Before QMUL- SPIR, Ib was an Usawa Postdoctoral Research Fellow at SOAS University of London and prior to that he served in the top tiers of African civil society for over 16 years where he conceptualised and coordinated projects that sought to promote political participation and civic engagement.

