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Democracy as Electoral Ritualisation? The Illusion of Democratic Consolidation in Ghana

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Abstract

Some accounts view the record of eight successive elections and three power alternations as a potential path to democratic consolidation in Ghana. However, there is little discussion that accounts for the limited effect of routine elections on democratic consolidation, especially in the context of the recent growing concerns of democratic backsliding, manifesting in political intolerance to dissent, vote-buying, electoral violence, and high cost of elections, among other key threats to democracy in the country. This article uses the elections-democratic consolidation nexus as an analytic approach to examine datasets, institutional and online reports, and multidisciplinary literature on the relationship between elections and democratic consolidation, focusing on Ghana. The central argument is that successive elections have not significantly translated into democratic consolidation in Ghana because of a long-standing limited political commitment to crucially required conditions—in particular, a

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viable and robust civil society, an independent judiciary, and a vibrant economy. This declining trend of democracy can be tackled through a more contextualised yet globally relevant democratic practice beyond elections, based on robust institutions and procedures, as well as constitutional review, to address the growing citizens' disaffection for democratic governance in Ghana and Africa.

Keywords: *democracy, democratic consolidation, elections, African politics, Ghana*

Introduction

The alternation of political power after 58 years of one-party dominance in Botswana, following the October 30, 2024 elections in the country, sheds further light on the complexity of African politics (Hyden, 2012; Thomson, 2022) and signals more scholarly interest in democracy in Africa. By the last quarter of the 20th century, many African countries had relapsed in their practice of liberal democracy, which they had adopted at independence. Most polities were characterised by clientelism, rent-seeking, and various forms of non-democratic governance, provoking political instability, marked by chequered regimes of short military and civilian spells, political conflicts, and generally unstable regimes (Christensen & Laitin, 2019). However, in the immediate post-Cold War period, most African countries returned to the practice of various forms of multiparty democracy (Ratsimbaharison, 2018). Yet, the post-Cold War democratising effect faced another threat in recent years, with many democracies in the continent relapsing, with five successful coups in the space of four years since 2020. The foundations of democracy were also shaken in Senegal, one of Africa's celebrated democracies. Then, President Macky Sall dissolved Senegal's parliament and postponed scheduled general elections from February to December 2024, creating a condition of a 'constitutional coup'. While Senegal's apex court ruling enabled the elections in March 2024, Macky Sall's gamble with Senegal's democracy and the regime turbulence across especially West, East, and Central Africa raise genuine concerns about the sustainability of democracy in Africa.

The fluctuation of multiparty democracy in Africa is traced to the peculiarity of the continent's political history, which distorts the functioning of liberal democracy and stifles its dividends (Cheeseman et al., 2021). As one of the most stable democracies in Africa in the past decades, Ghana's recent decline in democratic principles (Kumi, 2022) partly reflects the country's political history (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). After

a long period of a chequered political system characterised by interspersed civilian and military regimes since independence in 1957, Ghana experienced a relatively stable democracy under its Fourth Republic since January 1993, witnessing eight successive elections and alternation of power three times between the two main political parties, the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the main opposition, the National Democratic Congress (NDC).

However, in recent years, there have been growing concerns about the declining quality of Ghana's democracy because of major challenges such as falling standards of human rights and press freedom, increasing election-related corruption and violence, constricting civic space, and poor quality of participation in public policy (Afrobarometer, 2023; The Economic Intelligence Unit-EIU, 2022). This is reflected in Gyimah-Boadi's (2015) *Africa's waning democratic commitment*, which is partly concerned about the sustainability of Ghana's democracy.

Yet, to some scholars, the three decades of successive elections and power alternation in Ghana suggests a path to democratic consolidation⁴ (Botchway & Kwarteng, 2018; Agomor et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this optimist scholarship is less nuanced in discussing the connection between elections and democratic consolidation, especially in the context of the growing decline in Ghana's democratic credentials. Despite mounting concerns by political watchers such as donor partners, civil society organisations (CSOs) and democracy rating agencies about falling standards of democratic governance in Ghana (Centre for Democratic Development-CDD, 2024), there is limited scholarly depth concerning the challenges of transferring routine elections into a robust, sustained democracy in the country.

This article employs the elections-democratic consolidation nexus as an analytic approach to discuss the effect of periodic elections on democratic consolidation in Ghana's Fourth Republic. The analysis indicates that there is no clear link between successive elections and democratic consolidation in Ghana because the country's democracy has relied overly on periodic elections with less political commitment to crucially required conditions for democratic consolidation, particularly a

⁴ Democratic consolidation is a slippery concept. This article adopts Linz & Stephan's (1996) understanding of a consolidated democracy as a "political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase, "the only game in town".

viable and robust civil society⁵, an independent rule of law or judicial system, and a vibrant economy. We demonstrate that the challenges of these conditions in contributing to a robust democracy are complexly entwined in the political history of Ghana, which weakens the needed political will and social force to enable trusted electoral processes and related political governance, civic engagements, and economic transactions towards a consolidated democracy. This concern is further exacerbated by post-COVID reports that Ghana is on the verge of relapse from a flawed democracy⁶ now to a hybrid democracy (combining democracy with authoritarian and autocratic politics), indicating that about 88% of Ghanaians are dissatisfied with democratic governance (Afrobarometer, 2023). Therefore, this article offers potential nuance to scholarly and policy debates on democratic consolidation by pushing the boundaries of electioneering democracy. This helps to better understand the increasing political uncertainty and democratic deficit in the post-pandemic era.

The next section of the article briefly and broadly explores the theoretical stances on the centrality of multiparty elections in democratisation, focusing more on Africa's experience, to provide the prerequisite background on the case of Ghana. A succinct methodological note follows subsequently before a section on the theoretical discussions on the nexus between elections and democratic consolidation and how it is reflected in Ghana's democratic trajectory, centring on the link between civil society and democracy, an independent judiciary and democracy, and a vibrant economy and democracy. Following its conclusion, the article stresses the need to broadly pursue democratic consolidation in Ghana in ways that meaningfully address the varying disaffection for democratic governance, especially in the post-COVID-19 political order.

⁵ The civil society organisations (CSOs) here refer to self-organising and to some extent independent groups and movements that are linked with serving as checks and balances on governments to conform to principles of democracy such as probity and accountability, and the respect for human rights (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

⁶ A flawed democracy is used here to also mean a defective democracy, which may record free and fair elections, but also records serious infringements on human rights, media freedom, meaningful political participation, and an underdeveloped political culture. These conditions serve as major threats to the stability of democratic regimes (see The European Centre for Populism Studies-ECPS, 2018).

Review of literature on the nexus between multiparty elections and democracy

Elections are a core requirement and key tool for assessing democracy (Thomassen, 2014). A study by Amanda Edgell and colleagues reveals that “experiences with iterated multiparty elections have substantive importance for democratisation in sub-Saharan Africa, the post-communist region, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia” (Edgell et al., 2018: 422). The centrality of elections in democratic practices has been embraced in various dimensions across the globe, especially within the post-Cold War era of liberal universalist global governance. Within the period, most African countries returned to multiparty elections after a turbulent political terrain during the Cold War (Nur, 2015). This post-Cold War wave of democratisation across the Global South has also attracted debates about democratic consolidation.

The link between elections and democratisation is connected to the existence of at least two vibrant, competitive political parties (Van de Walle, 2001; Chu & Lin, 2016). In particular, free and fair elections are deemed to create opportunities for political competition and turnovers, as electoral turnovers enhance perceptions of fair play, especially among opposing parties (Lindberg, 2006; Moehler & Lindberg, 2007, 2009; cf. Huntington, 1991). Huntington’s (1991) “two-turnover test” posits that democracy is consolidated if power on the national level is peacefully turned over twice since the transition to multiparty democracy.

Within the debates linking elections and turnovers to democratic consolidation, the one-party dominance but stable democracy in Botswana since 1966 remained an outlier until the ‘political earthquake’, which saw the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) lose power to the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) in the nation’s general elections on October 30, 2024, after nearly six decades in power (Muia & Zane, 2024). Despite its 58 years of one-party rule, Botswana remained of the most stable, exemplary democracies in Africa because the country’s political processes demonstrate transparency and inclusion and guarantee significant human rights (EIU, 2022; Freedom House, 2024). While this deviated from the turnover claim, until now, the power alternation in Botswana has emboldened the link between elections, power alternation, and democratic consolidation (Freedom House, 2010). Moehler and Lindberg (2007), drawing on Huntington’s test and micro and national-level Afrobarometer, argue that the alternation of power in a peaceful manner results in the co-option of both the winners and losers, boosting

the legitimacy ascribed to institutions like the electoral commission (EC) and political leadership.

In this article, the elections and democratic consolidation nexus is used to analyse the effect of repetitive, multiparty elections and power turnovers on democratic consolidation in Ghana's Fourth Republic (see Botchway & Kwarteng, 2018). Despite Ghana's relative political stability in sub-Saharan Africa, after recording eight successive elections and three power alternations, including the loss of power by a sitting President in 2016 (see Agomor et al., 2020), recent years have witnessed growing concerns about the sustenance of the country's democracy, due to increasing cases of electoral malpractices and elections-related violence in recent elections, reducing civic space, and increasing exclusion in political participation, especially in the post-COVID era (see CDD, 2024). Here, the focus is on understanding the limited effect of routine elections and power alternations on the prospect of democratic consolidation in Ghana.

Methodology

The article uses the case of Ghana to examine the nexus between periodic elections and democratic consolidation. It is a desk review, relying on three main sources of data: (i) datasets from key organisations such as the Economic Freedom Index, Freedom House (FH), Polity 4 Index Country Report data series, the Economic Intelligence Unit, and Afrobarometer, (ii) electronic sources from CDD-Ghana, Star Ghana Foundation, and related media publications, and (iii) relevant multi-disciplinary literature from political science, economics, history, area studies, and development studies. The indicators and scholarly debates used in the analysis represent credible global sources with context-based relevance and are thus useful for understanding Ghana's democracy. While these ratings are sometimes associated with perceived biases and variations (Boese, 2019), they provide broad consensus about the required conditions for democratic governance and, therefore, offer vital lenses to assess how liberal democracy is reflected in Ghana, helping to develop recommendations for a better understanding and practice of both context-specific and globally relevant democracy in the country.

These sources are engaged and triangulated to explore the major factors that have shaped Ghana's democracy into being an 'elections machine', with a less promising impact on democratic consolidation, as will be demonstrated. The analysis of data is inductive, generating and

linking key themes, namely the civil society, the judiciary or rule of law, and the economy to democratic consolidation in Ghana.

Findings and discussion

Since returning to multiparty politics under its Fourth Republic in 1993, Ghana has witnessed eight successive general elections and three power turnovers in the context of the NPP and NDC duopoly (Agomor et al., 2020). However, concerns about a growing decline in Ghana's democracy (Afrobarometer, 2023; CDD, 2024) are reflected in the waning democratic commitment in Africa (Gyima-Boadi, 2015) and justify the need for a broader understanding of the prospects of democratic governance in the continent. This section discusses the link between elections and democratic consolidation in Ghana along three themes: civil society, the rule of law, and economy, which emerged from the data as the most crucial conditions that define the relationship between elections and democratic consolidation in the country. While the determinants of democracy cut across various socio-political and economic domains (see Rød, Knutsen, & Hegre, 2020), the data suggest that the three variables presented here have had the greatest impact on democracy in Ghana and Africa. In each case, we briefly present a broader understanding of the role of the particular theme in democracy and how it is reflected in Africa, followed by a more contextualised discussion on Ghana.

Civil society and democratic consolidation

A vibrant civil society is deemed a required atmosphere for democratic consolidation (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996). As Linz and Stepan (1996:3) assert, "...a robust civil society, with the capacity to generate political alternatives and to monitor government and state, can help start transitions, help resist reversals, help push transitions to their completion, and help consolidate and deepen democracy." This associates the indispensability of a robust civil society with all stages of the democratisation process (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996).

However, Africa's civil society front has fluctuated since its boom in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War period (Herbst, 2001). According to Mlambo et al. (2020), a seemingly growing civil society and non-state actor involvement in boosting democracy in Africa has been weakened by long-standing political and legal restrictions. This challenge

is linked to and compounded by other important concerns such as socio-political fragmentations, lack of the required resources, political targeting, and buy-ins, among others, cumulatively weakening civil society's contribution to democracy in Africa (Lewis, 2018).

Ghana has had a long history of civil society development, cutting across the trade unions, professional groups, religious bodies, and the current proliferation of not-for-profit organisations that have accompanied the 1990s democratic transitions. These organisations have held various political administrations to account, contributing to socio-economic and political changes and facilitating successive elections in the country (Arthur, 2010). Yet, CSOs in Ghana have faced grave challenges in contributing to democratic consolidation, especially in fighting corruption and human rights abuse, and championing participatory governance (see EIU, 2022). The CSOs' space is often characterised by partisan fragmentation (NDC-NPP tagging, ethnic toning, and the conflicting goals of several CSOs), while their contribution to probity and accountability in public policy is often stifled by the challenge of accessing critical institutional information (Arthur, 2010). While the Right to Information (RTI) Act 989 promised transparency in the public scrutiny of government businesses, the law has evidently done little to reduce the red tapes that CSOs and individuals face in accessing information (Star Ghana Foundation, 2022).

With this challenging political terrain, therefore, CSOs in Ghana have failed to substantially contribute to addressing issues challenging democracy and, indeed, have been further weakened by conditions of declining press freedom and growing restrictions and clampdowns on dissent and peaceful protests. This has stifled the civil society's effectiveness as a watchdog (EIU, 2022), leading to Ghana's flawed democracy status, which exhibits a high potential to further drop to a hybrid or authoritarian democracy (West Africa Civil Society Institute-WACSI, 2023).

Rule of law and democratic consolidation

A stable democracy is hinged on a robust system of law or a constitutional system which dictates political processes (Golubovic & Golubovic, 2019). As Linz and Stepan (1996:4) put it, "Constitutionalism and rule of law must determine the offices to be filled by election, the procedures of those office holders, and the definition of and limits of their power for people to be willing to participate in, and to accept the

outcomes of, the democratic game”. An independent rule of law, especially the judiciary, is, thus, *sine qua non* of democracy.

However, while trust in and independence of the judiciary has seen a global decline due to the rise of authoritarian tendencies and (neo) populism (see Geyh, 2020), Africa faces peculiar challenges with cultivating an independent judiciary, a challenge which is rooted in the colonial legacy of institutional and social identity manipulation, including through the courts (Shomade, 2021). This challenge weakens the synergistic force required of civil society, weakens the independence of the judiciary, and limits a broader legitimisation of the rule of law, further breeding the manipulation of constitutional order by the political elites (Ellett, 2013). This context enables political elites to entrench power, producing and sustaining conditions of democratic authoritarianism, whereby real political participation is thwarted, causing protracted political tensions (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

In the case of Ghana, data from the EIU (2022) and Afrobarometer (2023) have revealed that overall, trust and quality of the rule of law have significantly declined, reflecting in various aspects of democratic practice, especially worsening human rights regime, exclusion in key political processes, and growing electoral fraud and elections-related violence. The lack of trust in Ghana’s democratic processes is particularly a consequence of some excessive executive appointing powers granted by the 1992 Constitution to critical areas such as the EC, judicial service, and civil service. Accordingly, heads and management positions of these institutions in Ghana are usually appointed by the President of the day. This reduces public confidence in the neutrality of the EC and the judiciary, especially on political cases, as these appointments are usually at sensitive departments and sectors.

To address the potential abuse of incumbent and executive power in the appointments to and management of such critical state institutions, the 1992 Constitution has caused the establishment of many watchdog institutions, including the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, the Audit Service, the Economic and Organised Crime Unit (now Bureau of National Investigation) and most recently the Office of the Special Prosecutor. Yet, the constitutional provision that allows the president to appoint the heads and most officers of these institutions suggests that the fight against corruption, including those relating to elections and political cases, largely remains a *cul-de-sac*.

This complex challenge has caused ambivalence in the effectiveness of the rule of law in Ghana. The Heritage Foundation, which produces

countries' Economic Freedom Indices (EFI), has indicated that while the score for Ghana's broader respect for the rule of law is above the global average and the score for the integrity of its government the same as the world's average, the otherwise constitutionally backed political control of critical sectors and democratic processes has bred widespread political corruption. This environment of politically motivated corruption partly causes Ghana's low rank of 104/182 on the world economic freedom index-EFI (EFI, 2024). Similarly, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index-CPI (CPI, 2023) indicates that in the past decade, Ghana has consistently ranked low (between 70 and 85/177 countries), in a downward trend of below 50%. This is reflected in the 2024 Afrobarometer report, which exposes strong national concerns about the political influence of the judiciary and the EC. According to the report, this has led to these institutions, as well as Ghana's Parliament and other institutions in charge of promoting democratic development, being ranked as part of the most corrupt in the country in the recent corruption perception research (see CDD, 2024).

The broader consequence is the threat of perverse corruption in Ghana's democracy due to a manipulated judicial process, as the designated judicial and disciplinary institutions often fail to prosecute corruption cases, most of which are usually linked to political identities. This weakens the credibility of many elections and governance processes and institutions, thus threatening the sustainability of democracy in the country.

Economy and democratic consolidation

The third aspect of the discussion links democratic consolidation to a strong economy. While there is no scholarly consensus on the nexus between the system of governance and economic growth (see Sirowy & Inkeles, 2017), the role of a robust economy in democratic consolidation is established (Salahodjaev, 2015). Africa's struggle with building strong democratic political institutions is partly traced to weak internal economic support systems and fragile economic growth trajectories, including poor regional economic development and integration records (Kriekhaus, 2006; Narayan et al., 2011). Although externally imposed liberal economic structures in Global South settings are believed not to produce the desired political results (Ethier, 2016), it is tenable to support the view that democratic consolidation will depend on stable real income regimes to facilitate political participation and institutional

capacity building. A study of sub-Saharan Africa suggests that positive economic growth indicators such as GDP (per capita) and income have a direct reflection on enhancing non-economic variables such as education, health, poverty alleviation and reducing inequality, which in turn positively affect democracy (Narayan et al., 2011). Thus, democratic institutions are somewhat better at shaping economic policies and improving the well-being of populations, while a thriving economic path is also required to build robust democracies (see Gerring & Thacker, 2008), especially in contexts of highly educated and skilled populations (Salahodjaev, 2015).

Therefore, we can understand that part of the challenge with Ghana's democratic consolidation drive is the fluctuating and generally poor economic performance, which weakens the funding of critical units and processes of political development. Ghana has been one of the best-performing economies in West Africa, having attained a lower-middle income status in 2010 (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2015). For many years, Ghana has been one of the stable economies in the region, characterised by a booming middle class and increasing literacy rate, an advancing technology-reliant economy, and a relatively peaceful terrain. However, the recent debt and economic crisis (Ameyaw, 2024) and increasing corruption perception (CDD, 2024; CPI, 2023) have negatively affected the hitherto bulging domestic and foreign investment climate in Ghana (Ghana Netherland Business & Cultural Council-GNBCC, 2023). Additionally, Ghana's economy has faced related challenges, including widening inequality, increasing unemployment rate, and widespread rural and urban poverty coupled with insufficient diversification of the economy (CPI, 2023; Ghana Statical Service, 2024). This context is central to Ghana's current unsustainable debt situation, which, coupled with the impact of COVID-19 and the Russian-Ukraine war, high inflation rates, and the generally volatile financial sector (Ameyaw, 2024), must have further weakened the capacity of governments' funding of key institutions and processes for democratic governance.

While every economy is exposed to fluctuations due to the oft-complex mix of domestic and external policies and economic conditions, two entwined factors particularly weaken Ghana's potential to maintain a strong economy to boost democratic progress. First is the structure of the economy, which is broadly reliant on the primary production sector, importation, and informal economy (Mah, 2021). This means diversification and the tax bracket are limited while the economy is severely exposed to external shocks in primary commodity prices.

Second, corruption has become a trademark of the political class (and inevitably the public service), and the hindrances associated with the civil society and the rule of law system, as explored earlier, impede a meaningful push for structural transformation to address corruption. As indicated earlier (CPI, 2023; EFI, 2024), the economy has grown into a complex circle involving the political class that comprises business elites, elected representatives, top bureaucrats, traditional rulers, party henchmen, gullible voters, and ethnic actors, with the majority of state policies skewed in favour of these clicks, thus, maintaining the *status quo* of a defective democracy.

According to the EIU's 2022 and Afrobarometer's 2023 reports on the state of democracy in Africa, the complex nature of corruption occurring within the networked distributive and identity-based politics has caused deep-seated disaffection for democratic governance in most parts of the continent. These reports add that such politically motivated economic challenges further make Ghana a flawed democracy on a downward trend to becoming a hybrid or authoritarian democracy like many others, especially within West, East, and Central Africa. This means the nexus between economic performance and democracy is better understood when rooted within the political economy of economic growth and development.

Due to such endemic economic challenges, many of Ghana's major election-related activities and equipment are usually sponsored by external support in terms of foreign aid (see Gyimah-Boadi & Yakah, 2012). This means the weakened and complexly controlled economic structure has reduced Ghana's democracy to external sponsorship by advocates of liberal universalism, including the US, the UK, the European Union, and other allies. As reports of the recession hit major economies and sponsors of the liberal international order in the post-COVID era, it is tenable to predict that sponsorship of liberal democracy will continue to dwindle. Here, most Global South countries, including Ghana, may relapse into various non-democratic regimes, with negative implications for global order.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article explores the nexus between routine elections and democratic consolidation, focusing on Ghana's Fourth Republic. The three decades of relatively stable democracy in Ghana are marked by eight successive elections and three power turnovers between the ruling NPP and the

main opposition, NDC. With the established context of competitive elections in the country, usually seen through the NPP-NDC duopoly similar to the Democrat-Republican dominance of politics in the United States, some scholars generally position routine elections and power alternations as key signs of democratic consolidation in Ghana. However, this optimistic scholarly view is less nuanced and potentially less useful now, as it fails to engage growing common patterns of democratic backsliding in Ghana, as reported by reputable rating agencies, think tanks, and policy-based organisations, such as the EIU, Afrobarometer, and Freedom House, among others.

Addressing this knowledge gap, the article adopts the elections-democratic consolidation nexus as an analytic approach, relying on multidisciplinary, policy-based, and online materials to investigate how routine elections have affected the potential for democratic consolidation in Ghana. The central finding is that while elections have kept Ghana's democracy surviving, periodic elections have limited effect on democratic consolidation in the country, as even elections themselves have become increasingly compromised with attendant threats of regime instability. This is because of a lack of political commitment to ensuring crucially required conditions—namely, a viable and robust civil society, an independent judiciary, and a vibrant economy—that enable meaningful participation and robust, lasting democracy. The analysis suggests that this threat to Ghana's democracy is further exacerbated by the post-COVID global and continental decline in democratic principles, which has provoked instability in many African settings. In lieu of the growing concerns of backsliding democracy characterised by political intolerance of dissent, constricted human rights and civic spaces, and widespread cases of electoral fraud and election-related violence, among other key issues in recent times, it is right to be concerned about a potential relapse of the country's democratic regime, especially as this context threatens the long-standing elite pact in Ghana's political landscape.

The findings point to three angles of recommendations to potentially address the declining fortunes of Ghana's democracy, with implications for similar post-colonial settings. First, a more contextualised practice of democracy is required to embrace the multitudes of civil society bodies, social identities, and contesting sources of authorities, some of which predate the modern state in Africa and dictate its operational logic (Boafo, Paalo, & Dotsey, 2019). This helps to reduce identity-based politics and its threat to the sustainability of

democracy. Second, the findings indicate an urgent need to commit massive efforts, including through regional support and domestic political will, towards establishing strong bureaucracies (Dotsey, 2024). This will help to tackle the excesses of elite manipulation of political processes and economic transactions, which reduces state resource capacity and political legitimacy to sustain a democracy. Finally, as has been echoed for some years now (see Quashigah, 2024), the 1992 Constitution of Ghana requires a significant revision or amendment to reduce excessive powers of the executive, especially in the appointment of politically exposed persons to sensitive institutions, which thwarts probity and accountability and promotes a complex political economy marked by corruption and distributive politics. Such a revision will enable checks and balances, as institutional and bureaucratic procedures surrounding politics, the economy, and the judiciary could operate within some conditions of independence, thus enhancing transparency and reducing potential political instability.

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