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## The “Hegemonic Presidency” in African Politics

George Klay Kieh, Jr., University of West Georgia

**Abstract:** *The post-colonial era in Africa has witnessed the emergence of the “hegemonic presidency,” which has been variously referred to as the “imperial presidency” and the “Big man/Big woman syndrome.” Essentially, the phenomenon entails the illegal exercise of presidential powers beyond both the constitutional and statutory boundaries. Against this background, this article examines three major interrelated issues. First, it interrogates the historical development of the phenomenon. Second, it probes the factors that have caused the emergence of the “hegemonic presidency.” Third, the study suggests some ways in which the phenomenon may be curtailed. In the case of the historical development of the phenomenon, the “hegemonic presidency” has its roots in colonialism, especially the ubiquity and the unfettered exercise of power by the chief colonial administrator—e.g. the governor-general. As for the major causes of the phenomenon, they include the constitution, statutes, weak public institutions, especially the legislature and the judiciary, and the acts of ultra vires, which are consequences of presidential arrogation of power. Finally, the article suggests various ways for curtailing the phenomenon, including constitutional redesign to limit the appointive and financial powers of the presidency and the strengthening of public institutions, particularly the legislative and judicial branches, so that they can play their effective roles as countervailing forces.*

**Keywords:** Hegemonic presidency, imperial presidency, Big man/Big woman syndrome, African politics, colonialism, constitution

### Introduction

Since the dawn of the post-colonial era in Africa in the 1950s, the “hegemonic presidency” has become an enduring fixture on the continent’s political landscape. That is, the presidency has become the dominant institution in African politics by wielding tremendous unfettered powers that span the broad gamut of the public sector—from unbridled control of the “national purse” to expansive appointive powers. Both the ubiquity and the dominance of the president led Jackson and Rosberg (1982: ii) to refer to the typical African president as a “prince, autocrat, prophet and tyrant.” Significantly, the suzerainty of the presidency over political power has witnessed the corresponding weakening of the legislative and judicial branches that are supposed to serve as countervailing forces in providing “horizontal accountability.” In other words, the growth of the “hegemonic presidency” has created a “zero-sum framework” in which the increase in presidential powers leads to a decrease in legislative and judicial powers and the broader weakening of all other public institutions.

Interestingly, the emergence of the “third wave of democratization,” and the resulting liberalization of politics in 1990, raised hopes that the “hegemonic presidency” would be caged, as democratizing African states made the transition from political systems based on personal rule (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982; Hyden, 2012) to those based on formal norms embodied in constitutions and statutes. However, the hopes have been dashed as the “hegemonic presidency” has remained ensconced on the African political landscape, due to its resilience and adaptability (Tull and Simons, 2017). Prempeh (2008a:63) puts the case this way: “However, despite the recent democratic backlash against decades of authoritarian presidential rule in Africa, and the regime change this has wrought in several African states, the phenomenon of the ‘imperial presidency,’ long associated with politics and government in Africa, persists.”

Against this background, this paper seeks to address four major questions. First, what factors and forces have shaped the historical development of the “hegemonic presidency” in Africa? Second, what are the nature and dynamics of the phenomenon? Third, what are the major causes of the phenomenon—what are the major axles? Fourth, how can the pathologies of the “hegemonic presidency” be addressed?

### Literature Review

Leon (2010) posits that the initial three decades of the post-independence era in Africa were marked by what he calls “the specter of one-party states, ‘presidents for life,’ violent usurpations of power either through assassinations or military coups” (Leon, 2010: 2). He notes further that these political developments revolved around an “imperial presidency” that was anchored on the personalization of power, the suppression of human rights, and predation. In addition, he observes that “imperial presidents” on the African continent were entrenched in power. For example, by the end of the 1980s, only six of the approximately 150 presidents who had ruled various African states voluntarily relinquished power, howbeit, after tenures in excess of 20 years.

Prempeh (2008a) asserts that the phenomenon is rooted in “aspects of the post-colonial history and the evolution of the African state; and in aspects of the constitutional design and politics in Africa’s new democracies” (764). Moreover, he posits that, even in this era of the “third wave of democratization,” presidential suzerainty persists because of the continuation of the practice of the centralization of power at the national level, weak legislatures and courts and other public institutions, and presidential monopoly over the control of public financial resources (Prempeh, 2008a: 820).

Similarly, Igwe (2011) argues that the “imperial presidency” in Africa is mainly powered by presidential control over the financial, material, and logistical resources of the state. Using this position of dominance, he notes that the “imperial presidency” has then created a vast patron-client network. Operationally, the “imperial president” serves as the chief patron and is assisted by a coterie of national and local pro-consuls, who serve as the intermediaries with ordinary citizens. Particularly, given the pervasiveness of mass poverty in Africa, these patron-client networks have become the sources of survival for ordinary citizens. Ultimately, these ordinary citizens have been trapped by a dependent relationship with the “imperial presidency.”

In the same vein, Hyden (2012) posits that several key elements are pivotal to sustaining the “hegemonic presidency” in Africa. The pivot is the establishment of reciprocal relations between the president, the chief patron, and his or her coterie of lieutenants, followers, and clients. Another factor is that access to resources by the president’s vast clientelist network is the glue that holds the relationships together. Essentially, the “clients and followers expect something in return for their loyalty” (Hyden, 2012:104).

Ronning (2010) examines the phenomenon of the “Big man” by using various “hegemonic presidents”—Dos Santos (the former President of Angola), Afwerki (the President of Eritrea), Mugabe (the deposed President of Zimbabwe), Zenawi (the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia), and Museveni (the President of Uganda)—as case studies. He then argues that the foundational pillar of these “Big men” is anchored on the fact that they “are too willing to use undemocratic means to silence their vocal opponents” (Ronning, 2010; 13). In other words, the use of repression is crucial to the maintenance of presidential hegemony.

Using Cameroon as a case study, Fru Doh (2008:155) postulates that the “Big man syndrome” in Cameroonian politics, as personified by the presidency, “is a gorgon that was

inherited from the colonial administrations...” Functionally, according to Fru Doh, the “hegemonic presidency” in the country has been notorious for fostering a culture of corruption and graft, amid neglected human needs. In other words, while the hegemonic president and his clients have used various corrupt means to accumulate wealth, they have paid very little attention to the needs of the majority of Cameroonians. The resulting effect is that the institution is despised and unpopular with the majority of the citizens of the country.

Amutabi (2009) probes the travails of the “hegemonic presidency” in Kenya. Specifically, he asserts that the phenomenon is shaped by two major sets of factors: ethnicity and partisanship. In the case of the former, presidential hegemons, such as Kenyatta, Moi, and Kibaki, used the dominant Kikuyu ethnic group as a major anchor of presidential dominance. In the latter case, the three former presidents employed the vast party machinery—Kenyatta and Moi used the Kenyan African National Union (KANU), while Kibaki used the “DP and its subsequent metamorphoses as NARC, PNU, etc.”(Amutabi, 2009:56).

Treading on the same path, Isumonah (2012) interrogates the dynamics of the “imperial presidency” in the specific context of Nigeria. Broadly, he observes that the phenomenon has undermined the legal and other formal guarantees for political competition and participation in the country (Isumonah, 2012: 43). Using the Obasanjo regime as the case study, he postulates that the pivots were presidential domination of the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC).

Fombad and Nwauche (2012) examined some of the major effects of what they termed “presidential absolutism” on democratic governance in Africa (Fombad and Nwauche, 2012:91). They conclude that, by and large, conventional constitutional checks have not succeeded in curbing the excesses of the “imperial presidency.” One of the resultant effects has been the abuse of power with impunity by various presidents.

For their part, Tull and Simons (2017) interrogated whether term limits, as by-products of constitutional design and engineering during the “third wave of democratization,” have served as constraints on the “hegemony presidency” in Africa. According to their findings, term limits have not help to cage the “hegemonic presidency.” The main reason is that the “hegemonic presidency” has demonstrated the “strong capacities of adaptation to changing environments” (Tull and Simons, 2017:96). Particularly, even in the era of the “third wave of democratization,” the “hegemonic presidents” have maintained power even through legal means. For example, they have used terms limits, which were ostensibly designed to constrain their excesses, as instruments of domination, including in “[strengthening] their power vis-à-vis both outside donors and local foes” (Tull and Simons, 2017:96).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Drawing from the literature reviewed and the broader corpus of scholarly works on the “hegemonic” or imperial presidency,” the study designed a theoretical framework of the “hegemonic presidency” as the analytical compass. The framework has several interrelated elements. The historical context dimension is anchored on the argument that the “hegemonic presidency” is the by-product of both colonialism and post-colonialism. The former is rooted in what Ake (1996:2-3) calls the traditions of the “totalistic state”—a construct that exercised unbridled power over virtually every sector of society. In the case of the latter, the foundations are the authoritarian civilian and military regimes that adorned the political landscape of the African continent from the 1960s to 1990. The “third wave of democratization” is stymied by

these historical antecedents of the “imperial presidency,” because the post-colonial state has not been democratically reconstituted—a comprehensive and transformative process covering the nature, character, mission, political economy, policies and sectors of society.

Another element concerns the nature and dynamics of the phenomenon. In terms of its nature, the “hegemonic” or “imperial presidency” revolves around the exercise of unchecked powers that makes the presidency into what Eagle (2012:1) calls a “monarchy.” The ancillaries are the preponderance of power (both constitutional and extra-constitutional), executive supremacy (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982; Prempeh, 2008a; Prempeh, 2008b), arbitrariness, and the mythology of presidential “omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience.” The dynamics entail the operational pivots of the phenomenon—the subordination of the other public institutions (legislature, judiciary and the public bureaucracy) to the presidency, the usurpation of law-making powers, unfettered control over the “public’s purse,” the ubiquity of “presidential directives” (Prempeh, 2008a; Prempeh, 2008b), and the suzerainty over patronage and “pork” (government-dispensed largesse).

The major axles or drivers of the phenomenon are the political culture, constitutional design, weak public institutions, legislative acquiescence and abdication of responsibilities to the presidency, presidential control over the financial, material, and logistical resources of the state, mass poverty and the resulting reliance on government largesse, expansive presidential appointive powers, presidential control over the ruling party, ineffective opposition parties, and the realpolitik-based foreign policies of the major global powers, like the United States, France and China. At a particular historical juncture or moment, one or more of these axles or drivers may be ascendant (Agbese, 2007). However, in such a case, although the others may be dormant, they are present (Agbese, 2007).

### **Conceptualizing the “Hegemonic Presidency”**

The concept of the “hegemonic presidency” is used interchangeably with the terms “imperial presidency” and the “Big man/Big woman syndrome.” Drawing from Schlesinger’s (1973) seminal study on the “imperial presidency” in the United States,” the “hegemonic presidency” is conceptualized as a phenomenon that is characterized by a president deliberately stretching the boundaries and exceeding the legal limits—constitutional and statutory—of his or her powers, by particularly abusing the authority through unlawful actions.

### **Historicizing the “Hegemonic Presidency” in Africa The Pre-“Third Wave of Democratization” Era (1950s-1990)**

The “hegemonic presidency” has its roots in colonialism, especially the character of the “Berlinist state.” The core of the character of the “Berlinist state” was absolutism. As an absolutist construct, the “Berlinist state” controlled virtually every aspect of life—cultural, economic, political, religious, and social. There were several derivatives from the core of the “Berlinist state.” A critical one was the control of access to resources. As Berman (1998:313) notes, “The state in colonial Africa, within the broader context of the intrusion of capitalist modernity was the central institutional force in the organization, production and distribution of social resources.” Another tenet was the centrality of the use of repression as the dominant method for inducing compliance from the colonized. Linked to this was the disdain for popular participation that the functionaries of the “Berlinist state” demonstrated toward the colonized. Also, the governor-general model was the framework for rulership. Under the model, executive, legislative, and judicial powers were in reality fused in the governor-generalship. In other words,

the governor-general exercised law-making, law enforcement, and law adjudication powers even in those cases where colonial legislative assemblies and courts existed. The critical pivot was that the governor-general exercised unchecked powers and, consequently, operated above the law.

Drawing from the colonial legacy, the “hegemonic presidency” became a pervasive feature of the various authoritarian regimes that adorned the landscape of the African continent during the initial three decades of the post-colonial era. Jackson and Rosberg (1982:1) referred to the emergent all-powerful presidents as “prince, autocrat, prophet and tyrant.” In this vein, as part of the tragedy of the “hegemonic presidency,” the presidents of various African states arrogated unto themselves multiple roles to accentuate their statuses as the “big men:” the chief administrative officer, the chief legislative officer, the chief judicial officer, the chief financial officer, and the chief procurement officer of the government (Sawyer, 2005: 20-22).

The emergent “hegemonic presidency” was rationalized by its apologists as an imperative for both nation-building and state-building. In the case of the former, the central argument was that given the fact that virtually all of the independent African states were multi-ethnic societies, a strong presidency was therefore required to mediate the competing ethnic agendas and the resulting conflicts. In addition, the argument was made that in the aforementioned context the strong presidency was critical to the promotion of national integration, peace, and stability. In the latter case, the rationale was that the “hegemonic presidency” was indispensable to the promotion of socio-economic development. This was because the complexity of the developmental process, especially the challenges that are usually posed by various competing interests, required the leadership of a strong president who could adroitly use the confluence of “sticks and carrots” to tame the forces and factors that were inimical to national development.

In order to perform their twin roles as the anchors of national integration and the motor forces of national development, some of the first generation “hegemonic presidents” developed personality cults. For example, Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya) was referred to as Mzee, Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana) was known as Osagyefo, and Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) as Mwalimu. Over time, these personality cults elevated the respective “hegemonic presidents,” as well as others, to the level of deities, who personified the state. In justifying this outcome, the late President Leopold Senghor of Senegal argued, “[T]he president personifies the nation as did the monarch of former times the peoples. The masses are not mistaken who speak of the ‘reign’ of Modibo Keita (Mali), Sekou Toure (Guinea) and Houphouet Boigny (Cote d’Ivoire), in whom they [saw] above all else, the elected of God through the people” (Meredith, 2005:162). President Senghor’s assertion was from the “play book” of King Louis XVI of France, who boldly declared, “I am the state” (Bent, 1887). Also, the claim is grounded in the *ancien* “divine rule,” which was the contrived basis for monarchical rule in Europe.

Over time, the “hegemonic presidency” did not promote integration, development, and democracy. In fact, the “hegemonic presidency,” for example, became the primary source for the promotion of ethnic division by, among other things, according preferential treatment to particular ethnic groups that were connected to the president. Eventually, various African states became what Mengisteab (2007: 108) calls “ethnic states.”

On the development front, some of the “hegemonic presidents,” like Nkrumah and Nyerere, made some laudable efforts to promote socio-economic development by the government, for example, investing in public education, public health, and the infrastructure—the construction of roads, bridges, etc. However, hamstrung by monocrop economies that revolved around the production of a single major raw material—agricultural products, minerals, and oil—as well as

other domestic factors, and a hostile global political economy, the development agenda got derailed.

On the democracy front, virtually all African states, with the exception of Botswana and Mauritius, became authoritarian (Freedom House, 2017). For example, with the “hegemonic presidency” as the main driver, political rights and civil liberties were violated with impunity, one party rule became the modal system of governance, and elections became charades that were designed for regime legitimation. In terms of elections, there were sixteen nominally contested ones on the African Continent from 1960-1989 (Posner and Young, 2007: 131). Only one incumbent president lost—Aden Abdullah Osman of Somalia was defeated by challenger Abdirashid Ali Shermake in the country’s 1967 presidential election (Posner and Young, 2007: 131). Also, some African Presidents, like Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, became “presidents for life” (Nwabueze, 1974).

Cumulatively, the “hegemonic presidency” exercised unfettered powers over a broad range of policy areas, including the police, internal security, the economy, land allocation, and state corporations (Eagle, 2012:1). Simultaneously, the other public institutions, like the legislature and the judiciary, became peripheral players in national decision-making. The late Ivorian President Houphouët Boigny makes the point more poignantly when he asserts, “There’s no number two or three or four...in Cote d’Ivoire... [T]here’s only number one, that’s me and I don’t share my decisions” (Meredith, 2005: 368-369).

### **The “Third Wave of Democratization” Epoch (1990-Present)**

The sustained efforts by the various reform movements on the African continent reached their crescendo in 1990, as the “garrison state” that had served as the major wall of defense for the various authoritarian regimes broke down. Beginning with the demonstration by students in Algeria in 1988, the struggles for political and socio-economic reforms on the continent spread like an epidemic, ushering in the “third wave of democratization” on the continent (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1997). In some of the former French colonies, like Benin, Mali, and Niger, for example, the reform movements, using the “sovereign national conference” as the instrument for promoting change, wrestled away the control of state power from the various authoritarian regimes (Le Vine, 2004). Subsequently, transitional modalities, including the drafting of a new constitution, the establishment of a multiparty system, and the removal of the shackles of political repression, were formulated and set into motion. Ultimately, multiparty elections were held, and new governments were elected with the right to govern derived from the people.

More than two decades later, major progress has been made in the political domain. For example, multipartyism has become the major tapestry for the legal contestation of power, and competitive elections the dominant modes for choosing leaders. In addition, the phenomenon of “president for life” has become a relic of the past. This is evidenced by the fact that term limits have become major vehicles for checkmating presidential tenure (although some presidents, like Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, succeeded in removing terms limit from the constitution, so that he could run for an unlimited number of terms).

However, in spite of the laudable strides that have been made in the area of political democratization, including the emergence of several democratizing states on the continent, the “hegemonic presidency” has remained ensconced on the political landscape. In fact, the “hegemonic presidency” has been unaffected by the wave of political and legal reforms. Prempeh (2008b: 110) provides an excellent summation of the staying power of the “hegemonic presidency,” amid the “third wave of democratization” on the African continent:

Africa’s current presidents may be term-limited, but by all accounts they have not yet been tamed... In fact, the modal African presidency has emerged from the recent round of democratic reforms with extant powers substantially intact...power in the African state, and with its control of resources and patronage, continues to rest with the president, making the capture and control of the presidency the singular ambition of African politicians.

Several major factors account for the continuing existence of the “hegemonic presidency,” even in the continent’s democratizing states. The overarching factor is that the broader democratization project that is the centerpiece of the “third wave” has focused more on the liberalization of the “political space” (reform), and less on the democratic reconstitution of the state (transformation). Accordingly, the “hegemonic presidency” has been sanitized, but not transformed. The latter process is what is required, given the history and resulting pedigree of the phenomenon.

Another factor is that the elites, who led the various reform movements, were not interested in the transformation of the presidency. They saw nothing wrong with the “hegemonic presidency” as anathema to democratic governance; instead, they blamed the personalities who occupied the presidency. In other words, the reformers made the faulty determination that personalities rather than institutions matter. Therefore, a “democratic-minded person” who occupies the “hegemonic presidency” would then use the powers judiciously and prudently. But, the empirical evidence has not borne this out. In fact, the repository of evidence supports the view that institutions matter more than the individuals who occupy positions within them. In short, the focus needs to be on institutional transformation as part of the broader process of the democratic reconstitution of the state.

Also, during the processes of constitutional design (new constitutions in the cases of some African states) and constitutional re-engineering (in the cases of other African states that made changes to existing constitutions), the “hegemonic presidency” was not transformed. In some cases, the presidency was given more powers. Hence, the constitutions of African states are major contributors to the continuation of the phenomenon.

## **The Nature and Dynamics of the “Hegemonic Presidency” in Africa**

### **The Nature**

The overarching tenet of the nature of the “hegemonic presidency” is the exercise of unfettered powers. During the pre-“third wave of democratization” era (1950s-1990), African presidents, by and large, exercised unbridled power in virtually every sector of the state, including the political, economic, and social. For example, operating within the context of the one-party state (both *de jure and de facto*), presidents chose the candidates of the ruling party for the various nominal parliamentary and local elections. Eventually, the continuing political survival of these office holders, and their access to state resources through the process of primitive accumulation by using their respective offices to plunder and pillage the public treasury, receive bribes, and engage in sundry illegal activities, was dependent upon presidential whims. So, in order to remain in the good graces of the president, public officials refrained from serving as checks on the exercise of presidential power (horizontal accountability).



Also, presidential control over the coercive instruments of the state—the military, police, and security services—enabled the president to asphyxiate discussions and debates, both within the general public sphere, as well as within the government. This was done, for example, by harassing, intimidating, arresting, imprisoning, torturing, forcing into exile, and even killing the political opponents of various regimes across the continent. For example, the vitriolic abuses of political human rights by the Amin (Uganda), Mobutu (Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Barre (Somalia), and Doe (Liberia) regimes provide a repository of empirical evidence (Freedom House, 2017).

Although the exercise of political rights and civil liberties in the democratizing states (Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, etc.) on the African continent is not stymied by the “hegemonic presidency” during the current “third wave of democratization” epoch, the resulting open public discussion and debates about various policy issues have not been able to check the unbridled exercise of presidential powers. This is because presidents are still able to use their control over states resources, expansive appointment powers, and the machinery of the ruling party, among others, to exercise unchecked powers. In other words, the liberalization of the “political space” in Africa’s democratizing states has not fundamentally altered the nature of the “hegemonic presidency.” In fact, the nature of the “hegemonic presidency” has survived the whirlwind of democratic reforms (Prempeh, 2008a; Prempeh, 2008b).

In terms of the ancillaries, the preponderance of presidential powers, for example, is made possible by the constitutional design of various African states. For example, the Liberian Constitution gives the president expansive appointment powers. Under Article 54,

The President shall nominate and, with the consent of the Senate appoint and commission: a) cabinet ministers, deputy and assistant ministers; b) ambassadors, ministers, consuls; and c) the Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and judges of subordinate courts; and d) superintendents, other county officials and other officials of other political sub-divisions; e) members of the military from the rank of lieutenant or its equivalent and above; f) marshals, deputy marshals; and sheriffs (Constitution of Liberia, 1986).

In addition, under Article 55, the president appoints and commissions notaries public and justices of the peace (Constitution of Liberia, 1986). In addition, in 2008, the Supreme Court of Liberia ruled that the president of Liberia has the constitutional authority to appoint city mayors (Boweh, 2008:1). In this vein, the president of Liberia virtually appoints all public officials, with the exception of legislators. Also, the executive supremacy dimension has led to, among others, the emergence of the executive as the first and dominant branch of the government. Based on this, the “hegemonic presidency” has been able to control, for example, the allocation of resources to both the legislative and judicial branches (Prempeh, 2008a; Prempeh, 2008b). The resulting dependence on the executive for resources has undermined the capacity of the legislative and judicial branches to serve as countervailing forces. Using its expansive constitutional powers and the tradition of executive supremacy, the “hegemonic presidency” is then able to govern, in part, based on arbitrariness. For example, there is the general tendency for some African presidents to make decisions that have law-making implications without first seeking legislative approval. Importantly, the nature of the “hegemonic presidency” is anchored on the mythology that the

president is an all-powerful (omnipotent) “Big man” or “Big woman,” is present everywhere (omnipresent) whether through the agency of state functionaries or “supernatural powers,” and knows everything about every subject (omniscient).

Cumulatively, the nature of the “hegemonic presidency” enables the chief executive, whether in authoritarian, semi-authoritarian, or democratizing states, to, with some variations, exercise enormous unchecked powers. In some instances, this leads to presidential disregard for the constitution of the country. In such cases, as Fondong (2013:1) observes, “[these leaders then] generally...conduct themselves as medieval emperors, who act with little regard for the other branches of government, and who seem to be guided by the notion that the president is above the law, and what he [or she] orders is law.”

### **The Dynamics**

Operationally, the “hegemonic presidency” functions in several general ways. A major one is the perennial practice of subordinating the other public institutions, especially the legislature, the judiciary, and the public bureaucracy, to the executive. This is done through the arrogation of presidential pre-eminence in the making and implementation of public policies. That is, the way public policy is both made and implemented tends to reflect the preferences of the president, even if it is determined to be inimical to the general interest and well-being of the citizenry.

Another major way is the practice of presidents usurping the law-making functions of the legislature. As Prempeh (2008b:110) argues, “Presidents in contemporary Africa routinely pronounce ‘laws’ and announce major policy decisions without recourse to parliamentary legislation.” For example, in 1986, then Zambian President Frederick Chiluba declared the country a “Christian state” without amending the constitution’s secular and multi-religious provisions (Prempeh, 2008a; Prempeh, 2008b). In fact, interestingly, President Chiluba got his party-controlled parliament to give formal legal backing to his pronouncement after the fact.

Using presidential control over the “public’s purse,” the “hegemonic president” spends the state’s money without the constitutionally required legislative approval. For example, during the Obasanjo regime in Nigeria (1999-2007), there were various expenditures without legislative approval under the nebulous practice of “anticipated budgetary approval” (BBC News, 2000). In other words, the state’s financial resources were expended for various reasons as determined by President Obasanjo on the basis that these expenditures would had been approved later by the National Assembly. This practice helped solidify the president’s control over the “public purse,” and undermined probity and accountability, two of the key planks of the democratic governance architecture.

Also, the presidential directive—“government by press release”—remains a common mode of governing (Prempeh, 2008b: 110). In some cases, rather than formulating public policy through the constitutionally required process, some presidents would subvert the process by issuing press releases from the presidential palace announcing new policies. This method of governance bolsters the “hegemonic presidency” by making the president the sole determinant of policymaking, even where legislative action is legally required.

Further, the “hegemonic presidency” operates through the patronage system. Using presidential control of the state’s financial, material, and logistical resources, including the awarding of contracts, and vast appointive powers, the “hegemonic presidency” is able to dispense largess through neopatrimonial networks at various levels of the society (Bach, 2011). In effect, the “hegemonic president” is analogous to a “Tammany Boss,” who dispenses largess as the *quid pro quo* for support from the public and the members of the political class

(Lowenkopf, 1976). The resulting dependent relationship between the president, the patron, on the one hand, and his lieutenants and ordinary citizens, on the other, enables the “hegemonic presidency” to thrive. This is because public officials and citizens alike make the determination that their continual access to state resources is dependent upon the personal whims and caprices of the president. Hence, being pliant in allowing the president to exercise unchecked powers is indispensable to their economic survival.

### **The Axles**

Generally, the “hegemonic presidency” in Africa is propelled by several interlocking axles or drivers. The political culture is a major propellant of the phenomenon. Since the post-colonial era, the emergent dominant societal ideas and beliefs have supported the existence of the “hegemonic presidency” for a variety of reasons, including, as has been discussed, the need for a strong president as the promoter of national integration, unity, and development. Further, there is the expectation that the president would use state resources to dispense largesse. Interestingly, in the age of democratic governance and its emphasis, in part, on accountability and transparency, a dialectical tension has developed between the mass expectation for the continuation of presidential patronage and the need to fight corruption and promote meritocracy.

Another driver, as has been discussed, is the constitutional design/constitutional re-engineering process. Under this situation, the tentacles of the “hegemonic presidency” have been spread even more broadly into various policy domains. Ultimately, this has provided the legal foundation for the continual existence of the phenomenon. In addition, even the so-called “democratic-minded” individuals, who have occupied the presidency, and continue to do so, use the constitutional foundation of the phenomenon for its continuation as a fixture on the African political landscape—the claim of only exercising the powers that the constitution invests in the office.

Weak public institutions are among the major enablers of the “hegemonic presidency.” The crux of the problem is that the legislative and judicial branches, as well as other public institutions, are not strong enough to serve as countervailing forces to the “imperial presidency.” Several reasons account for this. In the case of the legislature, there is still the enduring practice, despite the “third wave of democratization,” for presidents to exercise enormous influence in choosing the candidates for the ruling party. For example, during the Obasanjo presidency, he used his control of the machinery of the ruling PDP to choose the party’s candidates for the National Assembly, although primary elections were held (The Nation, 2007). Given the prevalence of election rigging, it was easy for President Obasanjo’s handpicked candidates to “win” the PDP’s nominations for the various legislative seats (Omotola, 2010). Subsequently, the legislators from the PDP became beholden to President Obasanjo for their political survival. Hence, they work to ensure that the National Assembly became a handmaid of the president. Also, given the unbridled control that the president exercises over state resources, legislators are therefore dependent upon the president for the primitive accumulation of wealth. For example, some of the members of the National Legislature of Liberia, who had worked to ensure the continuation of the “hegemonic presidency,” subsequently complained that the president failed to meet her end of the bargain by her failure to deliver the promised largesse to them (Pekin, 2011). Similarly, in the case of the judiciary, since judges are appointed by the president, and can be easily removed from office if they offend the president, they (the judges) are therefore reluctant to challenge the excesses of the “hegemonic presidency.”

Moreover, the “hegemonic presidency” continues to thrive because of legislative acquiescence and abdication of responsibilities. For example, in Zimbabwe, under the Presidential Powers Act, the president is authorized to unilaterally declare an emergency and rule by decree and cancel any law (Mawere, 2012:1). Also, in Ghana, one of the “crown jewels” of the democratization project on the continent, the president can unilaterally create state agencies and appoint the mayors of cities (Prempeh, 2008a; Prempeh, 2008b). As has been discussed, the control that presidents exercise over the machinery of the ruling party and state resources gives him or her enormous leverage over legislators both from the ruling and opposition parties.

Another critical axle is presidential control over state financial, material, and logistical resources. As has been discussed, the president not only controls the allocation of resources to the legislature, the judiciary, and other public institutions, but exercises enormous discretionary powers in expending public resources without legislative approval. In this vein, the “hegemonic president” decides the access to resources, both in terms of public institutions and individual office holders, including opposition legislators. In the case of the latter, given the centrality of the agency of the state to the primitive accumulation of wealth, it is the president who decides which public officials would have access to state resources and those who would not. Thus, the state becomes analogous to a “buffet service” in which the “hegemonic president” decides which public officials “eat,” and those who do not (Kieh, 2009a:10). Interestingly, this has led several opposition legislators in various countries, like Liberia, to decamp to the ruling party (Pekin, 2011).

The expansive appointive power is a major axle that helps provides the “oxygen” that keeps the “hegemonic presidency” well and alive. Typically, the “hegemonic president” in Africa appoints a vast array of public officials in both the executive and judicial branches—cabinet members, heads of state agencies, and judges, among others. As political appointees, these public officials then become reliant on presidential goodwill for holding these positions. Hence, the dominant survival strategy that these officials employ is to pander to the whims and caprices of the president. Even judges, who are supposed to be insulated from the “tugs and pulls” of politicking, are vulnerable to losing their positions, if they offend the “hegemonic president.” One of the major reasons is the lack of adequate and effective safeguards to protect them from being arbitrarily dismissed by the president.

Despite the introduction of some democratic values and practices within some of the ruling political parties, the “hegemonic president” still exercises unchecked powers over their machineries. Even if party primaries are held, for example, to choose legislative candidates, as has been discussed, the president remains the major determinant of the outcomes. In this vein, those candidates who are preferred by the “hegemonic presidency” usually emerge as the “winners.”

To make matters worse, the opposition political parties in Africa are generally weak, and, therefore, ineffective as additional sources of checks on the “hegemonic presidency.” The major reason is that these parties lack adequate financial, material, and logistical resources. Characteristically, the situation is made worse by “hegemonic presidencies” taking steps to ensure that opposition parties are deprived of resources. Specifically, the tactics of the “hegemonic presidency” and the ruling party include preventing private sources from assisting opposition political parties. The major resulting effect is that opposition parties lack the capacity to mobilize public support for the performance of their “checks” function. The prospects for opposition parties effectively performing their role as countervailing forces is made worse by the

common practice of major leaders of opposition parties joining the ruling parties in search of personal economic, political, and social opportunities (Pekin, 2011).

External powers also serve as major drivers for the continuing existence of the “hegemonic presidency.” Despite their pro-democracy rhetoric and the attendant support for democratic governance, major global powers, like the United States, have, and continue, to support the “hegemonic presidency” in various African states, even in democratizing ones. The primary reason is that the major global powers realize that their foreign policy agendas in Africa are at times antithetical to the general interests and welfare of the citizens of Africa. Therefore, in order to implement their agendas, both on the continent as a whole, and especially within specific African states, these major powers need “hegemonic presidents.”

### **The “Caging” of the “Hegemonic Presidency” in Africa:” Some Suggestions**

What steps need to be taken to help cage the “hegemonic presidency” in Africa? Broadly, efforts need to be made to address the axles or drivers of the “hegemonic presidency” and their adverse effects on democratic governance. The overarching measure that is required is the democratic reconstitution of the post-colonial African state (Kieh, 2009b). This should be a comprehensive and transformative process that transcends the realm of reforms. The transformation of the “hegemonic presidency” should be a major goal of the process. This would include the demystification of the office and the re-allocation of powers that are necessary for performing the responsibilities.

One of the specific steps would be for African states to rethink, for the purpose of changing, those aspects of their political cultures that help promote the “hegemonic presidency.” For example, the mythology of the imperative of the “strong man” or “strong woman” as the levers of national integration, unity, and national development needs to be thoroughly debunked through the process or re-socialization. Similarly, the mass expectation that the president should dispense largesse from the public coffers should be thoroughly discouraged and portrayed as a major contributor to corruption and mass abject poverty.

Another step that is needed relates to limiting the powers of the presidency as part of the much-needed process of constitutional re-engineering. The ostensible purpose would be to eliminate the constitutional foundation of the phenomenon. That is, by curbing the expanse of presidential powers, constitutional re-design would provide the motor force for ending the “hegemonic presidency” in the various African states.

Linked to the process of constitutional re-design should be the rethinking of the functions of the legislature and other public institutions. The central purpose should be to give them additional functions and the mechanisms for effectively serving as checks on the presidency. One key area should be the process of determining the allocation of resources. The legislature should be made the ultimate determinant. Also, it should be made illegal for the president to spend public funds that have not been approved by the legislature. In fact, it should be made an impeachable offense. In order for the legislature and other state institutions to play their roles effectively, they should be allotted adequate financial, material, logistical, and human resources.

Another measure should be to make it illegal for the legislature to transfer any of its constitutionally assigned powers to the presidency. There should be a constitutional provision that would make such an action automatically illegal and, therefore, null and void. This will help address the enduring challenge of the legislature abdicating a function by allowing the president to perform it.

The curbing of the expansive appointive powers of the president should be a major step. One of the major ways to approach this would be to establish a smaller cluster of political appointees, while simultaneously increasing the size of the merit-based professional civil service. The resulting independence of the merit-based civil service would be a key instrument in helping to curb the excesses of the presidency.

The democratization of the ruling parties would constitute a major challenge, especially the primaries for choosing candidates for various public offices. In this case, the primary responsibility would fall on the members of the ruling parties, especially those candidates who are not favored by the president. Specifically, the latter group would need to work to ensure that the totality of the party primaries, among other things, is democratized, especially ensuring that the results reflect the true choices of party members and not the president.

Similarly, opposition parties would need to be democratized as well. In addition, steps need to be taken to help mobilize financial, material, human, and logistical resources that would help these parties to effectively play their roles in checking on the regime in power by, among other things, providing alternative policies on a regular and consistent basis, both during and after elections. Further, as part of the process of democratizing opposition parties, internal mechanisms need to be established that would help hold party members in the legislature accountable.

Addressing the support of external powers, especially major global powers, for the “hegemonic presidency” would be the most formidable challenge in the efforts to end the phenomenon. This is because it is outside of the purview of the citizens of African states, their civil society organizations, and even the African Peer Review Mechanism. However, one possible step could be to make efforts to draw the attention of these major global powers to the importance of matching their pro-democracy rhetoric with practice, and the resulting implications for their prestige.

## **Conclusion**

Although pre-colonial African polities had the chieftaincy as the fulcrum of executive power, the institution was generally checked by a council of elders and other institutions that helped ensure both “horizontal” and “vertical” accountability. Hence, although the post-colonial “hegemonic presidency” is anchored on the idea of the institution of the chieftaincy, the former did not adapt the constraints that were imposed on the latter. Accordingly, in functional terms, the roots of the “hegemonic presidency” in Africa lie in the colonial state and its administrative structure in which the governor-general had unchecked executive, legislative, and judicial powers. In other words, the “hegemonic presidency” is the replica of the governor-generalship during the colonial period.

Operationally, the phenomenon is powered by the confluence of both the legal authority granted the president under the constitution and statutes of an African state, as well as the abuse of the authority. In the case of the latter, for example, it is quite common for “hegemonic presidents” to abuse their authority by plundering and pillaging the national treasury and asphyxiating the exercise of constitutionally guaranteed political rights and civil liberties, such as the freedoms of association, assembly, and speech.

Finally, while political liberalization and democratic transitions are important phases of the democratization project, they are not sufficient to occasion the caging of the “hegemonic presidency.” Instead, what is required is the democratic reconstitution of the post-colonial African state, including the transformation of the political culture, the public institutions, the

rules, and processes. Significantly, an informed, politically-conscious, civil-minded, and engaged citizenry is indispensable to this process. In other words, the citizens must set the boundaries within which the presidency and other public institutions would operate through, for example, sustained “vertical accountability.”

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