

**OPPOSITION IN A HYBRID REGIME: THE FUNCTIONS OF OPPOSITION  
PARTIES IN BURKINA FASO AND UGANDA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite growing interest in party politics in Africa, the activities and role of African opposition parties are still little explored, especially in the context of one-party dominant “hybrid” regimes where they are allowed to operate, but face a myriad of constraints. In these settings, opposition parties face a common dilemma: having to participate in the regime’s institutions and protest against them at the same time. Existing frameworks fail to provide a full and accurate picture of how opposition parties can erode the incumbent’s dominance and promote regime change. This article offers a novel functional framework, drawing from comparative research in Burkina Faso and Uganda. It identifies a set of three functions that opposition parties perform within a hybrid regime: denunciation; mobilization of dissent; and succession signalling. Understanding opposition parties’ functions in a hybrid regime through this alternative framework enables us to reconcile the seemingly contradictory behaviour of opposition parties that work both within and against the status quo, and to better evaluate their role in this setting.

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AFRICAN OPPOSITION PARTIES ARE OFTEN PERCEIVED as mere vehicles for individuals looking for patronage opportunities, empty shells created to legitimize the regime, or weak actors incapable of playing a major role in their country's politics.<sup>1</sup> African citizens themselves appear to share this sentiment, as illustrated by the low levels of trust in opposition parties across the continent.<sup>2</sup> One-party dominant regimes remain common, with opposition parties suffering from deep fragmentation and low electoral support.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, in the last decade, a shift occurred both on the ground and in academic studies. In 2014, opposition-led protests toppled the 27-year-old regime of Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso. Opposition parties unexpectedly defeated incumbents at the polls in Nigeria (2015) and The Gambia (2016). Elsewhere, they are still at work – employing a wide range of electoral strategies, from ethno-populist mobilization to securing a parliamentary foothold to building electoral coalitions.<sup>4</sup> Despite repressive violence in countries such as Uganda and Togo, opposition parties invariably lead fierce electoral campaigns. Others have successfully expanded their geographical reach through aggressive organizational exercises within one-party dominant regimes, be they competitive (South Africa) or more authoritarian (Tanzania).<sup>5</sup> These events have been accompanied by a new wave of more grounded and comparative research on

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1 Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, 'Political parties and democratic consolidation in Africa', *Democratization* 9, 3 (2002), pp. 30–52; Gero Erdmann, 'Party research: Western European bias and the "African labyrinth"', *Democratization* 11, 3 (2004), pp. 63–87.

2 Michael Bratton and Carolyn Logan, 'The viability of political opposition in Africa: Popular views' (Afrobarometer, 2015).

3 Nicolas Van de Walle and Kimberly Smiddy Butler, 'Political parties and party systems in Africa's illiberal democracies', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 13, 1 (1999), pp. 14–28; Renske Doorenspleet and Lia Nijzink (eds), *One-party dominance in African democracies* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2013).

4 Nic Cheeseman and Marja Hinfelaar, 'Parties, platforms, and political mobilization: The Zambian presidential election of 2008', *African Affairs* 109, 434 (2010), pp. 51–76; Ian Cooper, 'It's my party: Opposition politics, party motivation and electoral strategy in Namibia', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, 1 (2014), pp. 111–27; Nicole Beardsworth, 'Challenging dominance: The opposition, the coalition and the 2016 election in Uganda', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 4 (2016), pp. 749–68.

5 Dan Paget, 'The authoritarian origins of well-organized opposition parties: The rise of CHADEMA in Tanzania', *African Affairs* 118, 473 (2019), pp. 692–711; Shane Mac Giollaibhuí, 'How does an opposition party become successful in a dominant party system? The Case of South Africa', *African Affairs* 118, 470 (2019), pp. 147–67.

African political parties.<sup>6</sup> Yet, we still know little about what these parties actually do, especially within hybrid regimes.

Hybrid regimes combine democratic institutions and authoritarian practices, supporting the incumbent's power and endurance, but simultaneously allowing a level of competition.<sup>7</sup> In this context, opposition parties are allowed to operate, but face a myriad of constraints making the playing field particularly 'unlevel'.<sup>8</sup> This is especially true in one-party dominant regimes headed by so-called eternal incumbents, in which the state's institutions and the president as an individual tend to be entangled or fused – and the opposition to be perceived as an enemy of the state or the nation, rather than as a mere competitor. What is the role of opposition parties, then, in this setting?

This article presents an inductive analysis of how opposition parties engage hybrid regimes. By that, I mean the strategies they use to attack the incumbent's dominance, and carve a space for themselves within the political system upholding it. I take stock of the main activities that opposition parties pursue within these regimes, and ponder how they affect the political system they operate in.

Opposition parties engage a hybrid regime in various ways: they either boycott or run for elections; they organize protests and civil disobedience campaigns; they sit in Parliament, local councils, and other institutions; they introduce court challenges; they hold press conferences and lobby international stakeholders; and much more. Some of these strategies involve participating in the regime's institutions, while others take the form of (sometimes illegal) protests. The extraordinary difficulties they face, and the constantly shifting rules of the

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6 Sebastian Elischer, *Political parties in Africa. Ethnicity and party formation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013); Adrienne LeBas, *From protest to parties. Party-building and democratization in Africa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013); Issaka K. Souaré, *Les partis politiques de l'opposition en Afrique. La quête du pouvoir* (Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, Montréal, 2017).

7 Andrea Cassani, 'Hybrid what? Partial consensus and persistent divergences in the analysis of hybrid regimes', *International Political Science Review* 35, 5 (2014), pp. 542–558.

8 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive authoritarianism. Hybrid regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010).

political game, create a dilemma for opposition parties, who have to decide between ‘inherently divisive strategic choices’ between participation and protest.<sup>9</sup> By participating in the political process, they may legitimate the incumbent, but by staying out, they concede the whole public space and risk becoming irrelevant. When they do both, this is often used to discredit them and to say they are not sincere.<sup>10</sup>

To make sense of the role of opposition parties in their political environment – meaning their broad purpose in relation with the system they are in – I use a functional approach. Functions refer to how parties contribute to the broader political system, instead of merely referring to what they do.<sup>11</sup> In a democracy, where competition for political office takes place within an agreed upon institutional framework that all stakeholders (including opposition parties) aim to preserve, party functions designate what parties must achieve to sustain the democratic system. The hybridity of the regimes at hand creates confusion over what opposition parties are contributing to: sustaining the political system (which tends to be fused with the incumbent they oppose), or fostering regime change.

Some scholars have analysed the role of African opposition parties by assessing their performance in regard to classic party functions, and have often found them lacking.<sup>12</sup> This approach highlights what these parties fail to do, rather than what they actually do. It assumes a loyal or institutionalized opposition, and a distinction ‘between opposing the state and opposing the ministers of the state’.<sup>13</sup> This distinction does not apply in regimes where seemingly eternal incumbents – such as Yoweri Museveni and Paul Biya, or (before their fall) Blaise Compaoré and Robert Mugabe – manipulate (nominally) democratic institutions to

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9 Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, ‘Defeating dictators. Electoral change and stability in competitive authoritarian regimes’, *World Politics* 62, 1 (2010), p. 60.

10 Interview, civil society activist, Kampala, 21/11/2016

11 Georges Lavau, ‘Partis et systèmes politiques: Interactions et fonctions’, *Revue canadienne de science politique* 2, 1 (1969), p. 32.

12 Randall and Svåsand, ‘Political parties and democratic consolidation’.

13 Geraint Parry, ‘Opposition questions’, *Government and Opposition* 32, 4 (1997), p. 459.

sustain their rule. In these settings, scholars who use this classic framework can only be disappointed in opposition parties' performance. Meanwhile, existing functional analyses of anti-system parties also focus on how these parties sustain this regime, albeit unwillingly.<sup>14</sup> How can we understand instead what these parties do to challenge the system and erode the incumbent's dominance?

I analyse opposition parties' strategies and activities in order to better understand the role that they play within these regimes. In the worst of times, these parties may be powerless to do more than 'piss off the regime'.<sup>15</sup> In other cases, they might 'keep the dream alive'.<sup>16</sup> On better days, they can be 'the engine pulling the wagons' of a popular insurrection toppling the regime.<sup>17</sup>

Based upon comparative and qualitative research focusing on four parties across two African hybrid regimes – Burkina Faso under Blaise Compaoré (1987-2014) and Uganda under Yoweri Museveni (1986-present) – I propose a new framework that includes three key functions that opposition parties perform in a hybrid regime: denunciation; mobilization of dissent; and succession signalling. Opposition parties performing these functions erode an incumbent's dominance and raise the costs of the system's survival – even if that may not directly lead to the incumbent's defeat or a democratic transition.

This new framework enables us to reconcile, in our analysis, the apparently contradictory behaviour of opposition parties working both within and against the regime – participating and 'defying' simultaneously. Just like the incumbent they face – who mixes repression and liberalization – these parties employ a mix of strategies that all contribute to eroding incumbent dominance and fostering regime change. This paper suggests an alternative approach, better

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14 Holger Albrecht, 'How can opposition support authoritarianism? Lessons from Egypt', *Democratization* 12, 3 (2005), pp. 378–397.

15 Interview, UNIR-PS local official, Bokin, 6 April 2018.

16 Interview, DP Member of Parliament, Constituency, 18 November 2016.

17 Interview, UPC activist, Yako, 5 April 2018.

able to assess the role of opposition parties within such settings than existing frameworks or mere election results. By analysing how these parties engage the regime and the functions they actually perform, this article contributes to a growing scholarship looking at how parties, elections, and other institutions work across Africa.<sup>18</sup> to debates about the role of opposition parties in hybrid regimes more broadly, where they have also been rather ignored, and their contribution to democratization prospects side-lined.<sup>19</sup>

It is structured as follows. After describing my methodology, I analyse opposition functions using existing frameworks: first, the classic party functions derived from the literature on Western liberal democracies; then, a framework condensed from different pieces of work on anti-system parties' functions. While opposition parties in hybrid regimes partly perform these functions, these frameworks – which focus on how parties contribute to sustaining the regime – fail to provide a full picture of their role. I therefore propose a new framework that is better adapted to this enquiry, and assess how these functions are performed by opposition parties in Uganda and Burkina Faso.

### *Methodology*

This article is based upon comparative research covering four opposition parties across two countries. This allows me to analyse similarities and differences between different parties operating within the same system, and to confront similar types of parties in different national settings. I selected two African countries considered hybrid regimes, based upon Polity IV and Freedom House indices, and categorization by country-specialists in the literature. Burkina

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18 Thomas Bierschen and Jean-Pierre Olivier De Sardan (eds), *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Brill, Leiden, 2014); Nic Cheeseman (ed.), *Institutions and Democracy in Africa: How the Rules of the Game Shape Political Developments* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018); Jaimie Bleck and Nicolas van de Walle, *Electoral Politics in Africa since 1990: Continuity in Change* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018); Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021).

19 Bunce and Wolchik, 'Defeating dictators'.

Faso under Compaoré (1987-2014) and Uganda under Museveni (1986-present) are both one party-dominant hybrid regimes.<sup>20</sup> Despite differences in their political dynamics – including the salience of ethnic and religious cleavages and the strength and politization of civil society – these two regimes imposed similar constraints to opposition parties, ranging from their weak resources, their frequent co-optation or violent repression, and an unlevel playing field. Yet they also followed opposite trajectories. Compaoré’s regime in Burkina Faso progressively became less repressive (though not necessarily more democratic), and was toppled by an opposition-led popular insurrection in 2014. In contrast, Museveni’s regime in Uganda remains entrenched and violent, illustrated by the country’s downgrading to ‘not free’ by Freedom House in 2019. This case selection allows me to analyse the role of opposition parties during a period of domination by the incumbent and ruling party, while accounting for diverging national trajectories and shifts over time within the regime. It cuts across both linguistic and regional cleavages, thus avoiding the pitfall of generalizing dynamics found in a handful of over-studied cases to the rest of the continent.<sup>21</sup> It also confronts francophone and anglophone cases and epistemological traditions, an approach long overdue.<sup>22</sup>

In each country I collected data on the activities of two opposition parties: one which emerged from a split within the ruling party and one older, historical opponent. The parties under study in Burkina Faso are the *Union pour le Progrès et le Changement* (UPC) founded in 2010 by Zéphirin Diabré, who had been part of the ruling *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (CDP), and the *Union pour la Renaissance-Parti Sankariste* (UNIR-PS), a smaller

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20 Mathieu Hilgers and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti (eds), *Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire. Le cas du Burkina Faso* (Karthala, Paris, 2010); Sandrine Perrot, Sabiti Makara, Jérôme Lafargue and Marie-Aude Fouéré (eds), *Elections in a hybrid regime. Revisiting the 2011 Ugandan polls* (Fountain, Kampala, 2014).

21 Ryan C. Briggs, ‘Explaining case selection in African politics research’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35, 4 (2017), pp. 565–572.

22 Patrick Quantin, ‘Entre déconnexion et réduction : l’étude des élections et des partis’, in Mamoudou Gazibo and Cécile Thiriot (eds), *Le Politique en Afrique* (Karthala, Paris, 2009), p. 167; Nic Cheeseman, ‘Introduction: Understanding African Politics: Bringing the State Back In’, in Cheeseman (ed.), *Institutions and Democracy*, p.16.

party that draws upon the legacy of the 1980s' sankarist revolution, created in its actual form in 2009 but resulting from a series of splits and fusions within a sankarist party lineage dating back to 1990. In Uganda, I observed the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) founded in 2004 by disgruntled members of Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) around the figure of Kizza Besigye, and the Democratic Party (DP), Uganda's oldest party founded prior to independence, in 1954. This selection allows me to go beyond the main opposition parties and to consider smaller, but enduring, parties.

Data collection was conducted over an extended period of fieldwork between 2016 and 2018. It consisted chiefly of semi-structured interviews with 146 stakeholders (89 in Uganda, 57 in Burkina Faso), including party officials and activists, legislators, local councillors, civil society representatives, and journalists. These interviews were conducted in each country's capital city and in other selected areas considered opposition strongholds, where these parties were better established and more active than the national average.<sup>23</sup> A necessary caveat is that this might not reflect what opposition parties do in areas dominated by the ruling NRM, and broader infra-national variations.<sup>24</sup> However this focus made it possible to identify salient functions opposition parties perform and allowed me to better understand their role.

Interviewees were identified using targeted and chain sampling methods. During interviews, I gathered information and perceptions about opposition parties' role and objectives, internal dynamics, activities, and difficulties. This fieldwork was conducted as part of a broader research project on the role, formation, and operation of opposition parties in these two countries, during which I could observe political dynamics on a day-to-day, long-term basis.

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23 In Burkina Faso: the capital Ouagadougou; and Koudougou, Tenkodogo, and Yako. In Uganda: the capital Kampala, and Gulu, Kasese, Masaka, Mukono, and Soroti.

24 On political dynamics in NRM strongholds, see Sam Wilkins, 'Subnational turnover, accountability politics, and electoral authoritarian survival: evidence from Museveni's Uganda', *Comparative Politics*, December 2020.



My analysis was based upon a review and coding of interview reports, complemented by additional material such as media coverage of opposition activities, grey literature, and party documents. I first analysed the data using existing functional frameworks to assess how the parties at hand fared at performing the functions commonly expected in the literature. I did so by compiling instances in which they were able to do so and identifying constraints restricting their capacity. This process of confronting the two existing sets of functions, and contrasting them with the observation of what parties in my sample actually did, allowed me to identify an alternative framework including three new functions – coined by modifying the premise of pre-existing frameworks – that opposition parties perform specifically in the context of a hybrid regime such as Uganda and Burkina Faso.

#### *Classic party functions in democratic settings*

The study of party functions has predominantly focused on liberal democratic environments. The literature lists a varying number of functions that political parties can and should perform, which can largely be summarized as aggregation and representation of interests, integration, elite recruitment and training, and accountability facilitation.<sup>25</sup>

Aggregation and representation of interests refers to the role that political parties can play in distilling different demands into policy platforms and in representing the interests of different sections of the population. Integration fosters citizens' attachment to the political system through their participation. Elite recruitment and training, meaning the identification and grooming of political leaders by parties, is performed by attracting people with an interest in politics, channelling their ambitions, and accustoming them to democratic processes. Finally, accountability facilitation refers to parties' ability to hold the government accountable to

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25 Summarized from Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, 'Introduction: The contribution of parties to democracy and democratic consolidation', *Democratization* 9, 3 (2002), pp. 1-10.

citizens, either in a vertical fashion – when an unpopular incumbent is defeated at the polls – or in a horizontal manner, when opposition actors draw attention to the government’s wrongdoings and set out alternative approaches.

In line with these classic expectations, most people I interviewed over the course of my fieldwork stated that the role of opposition parties in Uganda and Burkina Faso was, or should be, to provide alternative policy options, mobilize people around issues, and hold the government to account. Yet, as other scholars have previously argued, overall, (opposition) parties in African (hybrid) regimes only partially fulfil such functions.<sup>26</sup> The nature of the regime and the constraints it places on opposition activities heavily restrict their resources and capacity to perform this role. More significantly, I argue that the application of this framework is fundamentally flawed in the context of a hybrid regime, because it is grounded in the baseless assumption that the regime is democratic and clearly distinct from the incumbent – and that opposition parties are able to compete with the incumbent and support the regime simultaneously.

In both Burkina Faso and Uganda, opposition parties tend to compete for the same ill-defined pool of voters, rather than representing specific sections of the electorate defined by social identities. In Uganda, the post-independence ethno-religious cleavages have lost relevance.<sup>27</sup> Ethnicity or class rarely predict voters’ behaviour in either country.<sup>28</sup> These parties also fail to aggregate their voters’ interests into cohesive and distinctive platforms. The ideological labels they are attributed rarely do more than shaping their relationship with foreign political organizations.<sup>29</sup> Larger parties, such as the FDC in Uganda and the UPC in Burkina Faso, do

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26 Randall and Svåsand, ‘Political parties and democratic consolidation’.

27 Henni Alava and Jimmy S. Ssentongo, ‘Religious (de)politicisation in Uganda’s 2016 elections’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 4 (2016), pp. 677–692

28 Beardsworth, ‘Challenging dominance’; Centre pour la Gouvernance Démocratique, ‘Partis et système de partis politiques au Burkina Faso’ (CGD, Ouagadougou, 2009), p. 32.

29 Interview, DP activist, Kampala, 30 June 2016; Interview, NGO representative, Kampala, 21 September 2016.

produce party manifestoes, and all parties discuss substantive issues during and outside electoral campaigns, at the national and local levels. Yet they rarely succeed in becoming ‘issue-owners’. They also rarely present a clear alternative platform to the government’s agenda, whose ideological underpinnings are rarely questioned in campaigns dominated by valence debates.<sup>30</sup>

Opposition parties in Burkina Faso and Uganda appear to mobilize and integrate citizens into the outwardly democratic system: having discarded boycott strategies, they get their supporters to express their political preferences through the ballot in regularly held elections, thus helping to increase voter turnout. They sometimes file legal challenges against unfair results or decisions, using institutional means at their disposal. Yet in the face of electoral manipulations, opposition parties such as the FDC have chosen to challenge the results in the streets, rather than in the courts.<sup>31</sup> Recognizing the flaws of the regime, opposition parties criticize the institutions and their manipulation by the incumbent – from the control over the electoral commission or the judiciary, to the use of security forces to repress public rallies and campaign events – which works against the integration of citizens into the system as it is. In Burkina Faso, opposition parties and other institutions have contributed to nurturing a popular appropriation of democratic principles by progressively emancipating from Compaoré’s control.<sup>32</sup> Yet this fostered an insurrectionist movement that toppled Compaoré in the streets rather than in the ballot box.

Opposition parties contribute to the selection and grooming of political elite, though this is undermined by particular dynamics in each country. In Uganda, the movement system in place between 1986 and 2005 has left an important legacy: no-party elections were held based upon

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30 Bleck and van de Walle, *Electoral Politics*, p. 186.

31 Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa uprising. Popular protest and political change* (Zed Books, London, 2015), p. 128.

32 Augustin Loada, ‘Democratic struggle and state building in Burkina Faso: Between manipulation and resilience of institutions’, in Leonardo A. Villalón and Rahmane Idrissa (eds), *Democratic struggle, institutional reform, and state resilience in the African Sahel* (Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2020), pp. 105–36.

‘individual merit’, meaning that candidates stood ‘on the basis of personal qualities as opposed to party backing’.<sup>33</sup> This has had lasting consequences for Ugandan politics and remains an important feature of the circulation of political elites.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Burkina Faso has long suffered from political nomadism, with politicians frequently crossing to other parties, or between the opposition and the majority. Opposition parties make efforts to train their cadres, including MPs, local officials, and party administrators, but these efforts are constrained by a lack of financial resources.

Finally, the ability of opposition parties to hold the government accountable is extremely limited in both cases, despite various efforts. Opposition legislators run oversight committees which raise issues for reform; losing candidates challenge fraudulent elections in court; and opponents highlight and criticize the government’s failures in press conferences and rallies. However, these actions are often fruitless due to the ultra-dominance of the ruling party and the executive branch.

Overall, opposition parties may still (to varying degrees) represent the interests of sections of the citizenry, recruit and train a political elite, and integrate voters into the political system by participating in elections, and this can contribute to the appropriation of democratic norms by political actors and the average citizens. However, their ability to perform this role is curtailed by their lack of resources, internal weakness, and the repression they face – but also by the fact that the regime is not democratic. Contributing to sustaining a democratic system already in place is not the same as contributing to the emergence and adoption of democratic norms, an important difference not acknowledged enough by scholars who assess opposition parties’ functions for democratic consolidation using this framework.<sup>35</sup>

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33 William Muhumuza, ‘From fundamental change to no change. The NRM and democratization in Uganda.’, *Les Cahiers de l’Afrique de l’Est*, 41 (2009), pp. 21-42.

34 Richard Vokes and Sam Wilkins, ‘Party, patronage and coercion in the NRM’S 2016 re-election in Uganda: Imposed or embedded?’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 4 (2016), p. 586.

35 On the limitations of democratic consolidation theories, see Bleck and van de Walle, *Electoral Politics*, pp. 22-25.

### *The regime-sustaining functions of anti-system parties*

In authoritarian settings, studies on the role of parties have focused largely on ruling parties, and how they can help to consolidate an autocrat's hold on power in various ways.<sup>36</sup> Opposition parties have received far less attention from scholars working on non-democratic settings. In the case of single-party, personalistic, or military regimes, the reason why is rather self-explanatory: there is simply no opposition party to speak of – though opposition forces can exist in other forms. In other types of authoritarian regimes, this is more surprising.

One exception is the work of Holger Albrecht, who studied how political opposition contributed to the survival of Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian regime in Egypt.<sup>37</sup> His research unintentionally echoed the work Georges Lavau conducted decades earlier on the French Communist Party (PCF), arguing that this anti-system party actually performed regime-sustaining functions such as providing legitimacy, serving as a tribune to relay grievances, and diffusing dissent.<sup>38</sup> These cases, though quite different from those discussed in this article, provide valuable insights into what political parties working against the regime from within do, and how they can in fact contribute to the regime's survival.

Drawing from this literature on anti-system parties, I analysed three key regime-sustaining functions that opposition parties may play: legitimation, tribune, and moderation. Opposition parties, because they exist and participate, can provide legitimacy to the regime, and contribute to upholding its “democratic” credentials and its acceptance by citizens and the international community. Anti-system parties provide people with channels (or tribunes) through which they can voice their dissatisfaction in an orderly fashion, thus reducing the probability of a violent

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36 Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an age of democratization* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007); Jennifer Gandhi, *Political institutions under dictatorship* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008).

37 Albrecht, ‘How can opposition support authoritarianism’.

38 Lavau, ‘Partis et systèmes politiques’. I thank Dr Abdoul Karim Saidou, who first drew my attention to Lavau's tribune function as applicable to Burkinabè opposition parties during a personal interview.

uprising against the system. Finally, they moderate opposition by providing an acceptable alternative to the government within the system, therefore reducing the attraction to radical anti-systemic activism. It echoes the integration function observed in democratic settings: it similarly provides citizens opposed to the political system with an alternative within the regime itself, rather than outside.

The risk for opposition parties to contribute to legitimizing the authoritarian regime they denounce is real, and has been acknowledged by opposition politicians and activists during my research. Boycott as a strategy to deprive the regime of a democratic cover was abandoned in both countries, because it was deemed inefficient.<sup>39</sup> By running in elections, challenging results in courts, and sitting in Parliament, they accept the regime's institutions and abide by the rules of the game. Some small parties may be regime pawns or alibi-candidates wilfully playing this role. These can usually be identified as they are short-lived or quickly co-opted into the majority, such as the two candidates who ran against Compaoré in the 1998 elections in Burkina Faso. More coherent and enduring opposition parties contribute to this legitimizing process less willingly.

Opposition parties in Uganda and Burkina Faso perform a tribune function, channelling dissent and providing space for anti-regime activists. This is especially true of sankarist parties, particularly in the early years of Compaoré's regime when sankarism was still rather taboo. In Uganda, the Movement era saw opposition parties' activities heavily curtailed. Yet, parties such as the DP survived. Their underground activities, known as '*kakuyege*' ('small termites' in Luganda), can be assimilated to the performing of a tribune function.<sup>40</sup> Since the return to multipartyism, the protests organized by the wider opposition, such as the Walk to Work protests in 2011 or the Defiance Campaign in 2016, could serve a tribune function too.

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39 Interview, DP Member of Parliament, Constituency, 18 November 2016; Interview, PDS-Metba activist, Ouagadougou, 27 April 2017.

40 Giovanni Carbone, *No-party democracy? Ugandan politics in comparative perspective* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2008), pp. 117–118.

However, the fact that the regime tends to outlaw protests and repress them violently, and the consequent limitation of the public space available to opposition voices, prevents such a regime-stabilizing function to be properly performed in that way. The regime's violent repression provides more visibility to the opposition, and draws condemnation rather than stability.

Considering the instability characterizing both countries prior to Museveni's and Compaoré's accession to power, the moderation function of opposition parties that decided to take part in the system rather than attempt to topple it appears as particularly significant. In Burkina Faso, marked by a succession of military regimes and coups throughout the 1980s, most parties have complied with the new constitutional order set up in 1991. Sankarist parties such as the UNIR-PS had to transform the ideals of a revolutionary military ruler into a social-democratic party platform, and the UPC advanced ideas of alternance with a very moderate, reformist approach.<sup>41</sup> In Uganda, where the contested 1980 election was followed by a five-year civil war, the outright rejection of violence by most FDC and DP leaders ensures a more moderate approach to defeating Museveni's power and bringing change. In the words of an FDC activist, 'instead of resorting to guerrilla warfare, we are fighting through parties'.<sup>42</sup>

However, the credibility of this alternative is debatable – both because of opposition parties' own weaknesses, and due to the regime's undemocratic nature preventing any true alternative from gaining power from within. In the face of repeated unfair elections that undermine the possibility of defeating the incumbent through the ballot box, opposition leaders can be tempted to resort to other strategies. In Uganda, some in the opposition have increasingly resorted to revolutionary discourses and tactics.<sup>43</sup> An insurrection did take place in Burkina Faso – illustrating how even a reformist opposition cannot contain popular demands for change when the moment is ripe.

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41 A notable exception is that of the clandestine *Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire Voltaïque* (PCRV) which remains somewhat influential among trade unions and leftist organizations.

42 Interview, FDC activist, Mukono, 17 November 2016.

43 Interview, FDC activist, Soroti, 9 May 2018.

This framework of regime-sustaining functions is helpful in understanding how opposition parties in non-democratic settings can (inadvertently) contribute to the survival of the regime they oppose. Yet, it also suffers from two sets of limitations. On the one hand, the action of opposition parties is not the only (or even the main) factor explaining the endurance of the regime. As other scholars have shown, Museveni's hold on power is, and Compaoré's was, mainly fuelled by other variables, such as the control of security forces,<sup>44</sup> a strategic regional position making them agents of stability for the international community,<sup>45</sup> and fairly sizeable support among the population's rural majority fuelled by patronage.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, this framework is solely focused on these parties' contribution to sustaining the system, and ignores the ways they may erode it to bring out the regime change they profess. I therefore argue that these frameworks – though useful – need to be complemented with a further set of functions addressing how opposition parties engage a hybrid regime and challenge the incumbent's dominance.

#### *An alternative approach: opposition parties' functions in a hybrid regime*

The two frameworks discussed so far bring out interesting aspects of opposition functions in countries such as Burkina Faso and Uganda. Yet, they face significant limitations when used to understand the role of opposition parties in hybrid regimes. The first framework assumes a democratic regime, a clear distinction between the state and the incumbent, and a loyal

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44 Mathieu Hilgers and Augustin Loada, 'Tensions et protestations dans un régime semi-autoritaire. Croissance des révoltes populaires et maintien du pouvoir au Burkina Faso', *Politique Africaine* 131, 3 (2013), pp. 187-208, p. 194; Rebecca Tapscott, 'Where the wild things are not: Crime preventers and the 2016 Ugandan elections', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 4 (2016), pp. 693-712.

45 Jonathan Fisher, 'When it pays to be a "fragile state": Uganda's use and abuse of a dubious concept', *Third World Quarterly* 35, 2 (2014), pp. 316-332; Amy Niang, 'Blaise Compaoré in the resolution of the Ivorian conflict. From belligerent to mediator-in-chief' (Africa Peacebuilding Network, Working Paper No. 6, 2016), p. 33.

46 Augustin Loada, 'L'élection présidentielle du 13 novembre 2005 : Un plébiscite par défaut', *Politique Africaine*, 101, 1 (2006), pp. 19-41; Sam Wilkins, 'Who pays for pakalast? The NRM's peripheral patronage in rural Uganda', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 4 (2016), pp. 619-638.



opposition. The second focuses on how anti-system parties contribute to the system’s survival. In order to fully grasp the role of opposition parties in a hybrid regime, I argue that we need an alternative analytical framework. This must focus less on how opposition parties help to sustain the regime, and more on how they engage it, accommodate regime-related constraints, and work toward their stated objectives of regime change.

*Table 1* Opposition party functions

| <i>Classic party functions in democracies</i> | <i>Regime-sustaining functions of anti-system parties</i> | <i>Opposition party functions in hybrid regimes</i> |
|---|---|---|
| Aggregation of interests                      | Legitimation  | Denunciation  |
| Integration                                   | Tribune   | Mobilization of dissent                             |
| Elite recruitment                             | Moderation  | Succession signalling                               |
| Accountability facilitation                   |   |   |

Based upon my research in Burkina Faso and Uganda, I have identified three broad functions that opposition parties commonly perform within a hybrid regime: (1) denunciation; (2) mobilization of dissent; and (3) succession signalling. These functions are not necessarily the only ones that opposition parties may perform in such contexts, and they should be seen as complementing rather than replacing existing frameworks. Still, they significantly expand our understand of the role of (opposition) parties in hybrid regimes. Confronting the existing frameworks and interview data allowed me to adjust expectations to the reality of the hybrid system and the stated objectives of opposition parties, and to identify a set of three functions that the parties at hand were performing.

Denunciation is the exposition of the ruling elite’s wrong-doings and of the regime’s systemic failures, in order to erode the regime’s standing. It can be considered a limited version

of horizontal accountability facilitation, in a context where the government is *de facto* not accountable to its citizens. It echoes what Jung and Shapiro describe in a democratic setting as ‘asking awkward questions, shining light in dark places, and exposing abuses of power’.<sup>47</sup> It is also the opposite of legitimation: by denouncing its flaws, opposition parties erode the legitimacy of the incumbent and the regime they control. In a hybrid regime, opposition parties denounce the incumbent’s wrong-doings and the systemic failures of the institutions, ranging from poor service delivery to human rights abuses, election fraud, and corruption. It is a way to make people aware not just of the government’s failings, but of the flaws of the wider system, the skewed rules of the game. The denunciation function plays out domestically, but also internationally. Foreign partners notice opposition boycotts and the repression of rallies and marches, and opposition leaders have also taken to travel abroad and lobby foreign stakeholders themselves.<sup>48</sup>

Denunciation is performed during electoral campaigns and protests. Opposition parties and politicians criticize the incumbent and the regime through speeches at public rallies and the use of traditional and social media. These actions can trigger a reaction from the government. In Uganda in particular, this often involves violent repression, including arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, and alleged torture of opposition activists and MPs.<sup>49</sup> This violent reaction also illustrates the authoritarian nature of the regime and fuels the opposition’s denunciation efforts. Post-electoral court challenges can also serve a denunciation purpose. Even though they are unlikely to be successful, especially at the presidential level, they can be a way to document and publicize accounts of electoral fraud, and to erode the regime’s legitimacy.<sup>50</sup> This

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47 Courtney Jung and Ian Shapiro, ‘South Africa’s negotiated transition. Democracy, opposition, and the new constitutional order’, *Politics & Society* 23, 3 (1995), p. 272.

48 Stephen Kafecero, ‘Besigye in UK for post-Museveni lecture’, *Daily Monitor*, 8 September 2016.

49 Anders Sjögren, ‘Wielding the stick again: The rise and fall and rise of state violence during presidential elections in Uganda’, in Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen (eds), *Violence in African elections* (Zed Books, London, 2018); ‘Bobi Wine narrates his ordeal in Arua’, *Daily Monitor*, 3 September 2018.

50 Ben Kiromba Twinomugisha, ‘“Courts did not come from God”. Judicial power and electoral competition in Uganda’, in Joseph Oloka-Onyango and Josephine Ahikire (eds), *Controlling consent. Uganda’s 2016 elections* (Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, 2016), pp. 431-453.

denunciation can also come from within the institutions, for example from the parliamentary opposition. Opposition MPs can be ‘watchdogs’ who speak out in debates so that ‘the country hears’.<sup>51</sup>

All four parties studied here perform this denunciation function. In Burkina Faso, small sankarist parties such as the UNIR-PS denounced the ‘blood crimes’ committed by Compaoré in his quest for power, starting with the assassination of his predecessor, Thomas Sankara, in a coup in 1987. They denounced the ‘impunity’ of the ruling elite, the corruption of institutions, and the politization of the administration.<sup>52</sup> Trade unions and civil society organizations also contributed to that denunciation effort.<sup>53</sup> The UPC, formed in 2010 at a time when the regime was much less repressive, was less confrontational. Illustratively, the party’s motto was ‘to improve what has already been done, correct what is being done wrongly, and achieve what has not been done yet’. But the party still denounced the ‘locked’ nature of democratic institutions and Compaoré’s attempt to modify term-limits and extend his tenure.<sup>54</sup> In Uganda, where civil society has historically been comparatively weaker, opposition parties such as the DP and the FDC have performed this denunciation function. They have highlighted the violent repression, electoral fraud, and authoritarian nature of the regime.

Mobilization of dissent is the maintaining of popular pressure against the incumbent and their regime, in order to increase the cost of survival. Erdmann includes such a function in his typology but focuses largely on elections.<sup>55</sup> In a hybrid regime, this mobilization does not contribute to integrating people into the system, but on the contrary to fuel dissent and keep a

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51 Interview, DP Member of Parliament, Constituency, 18 November 2016.

52 Interview, UNIR-PS official, Ouagadougou, 10 April 2018.

53 Augustin Loada, ‘Réflexions sur la société civile en Afrique : Le Burkina de l’après-Zongo’, *Politique Africaine* 76, 4 (1999), pp. 136-151.

54 Union pour le Progrès et le Changement, ‘Pour un développement plus engagé’ (2010), p. 5.

55 Erdmann, ‘Party Research’, pp. 67–68.

certain level of pressure on the regime. According to activists in both countries, this involves ‘sensitizing’ people about their rights, and their own role in the struggle.<sup>56</sup>

This function is performed through campaign rallies during electoral periods, but also through protests outside of elections. In Uganda, the Walk to Work demonstrations in 2011 and the Defiance campaign in 2016 served as extensions of the election campaigns to keep people energized against the regime. This involved high-profile actions, such as politicians’ touring and public rallies, but also grassroots initiatives and mere rhetorical discourse not recognizing the incumbent as legitimate – illustrated by the mock swearing-in ceremony of Kizza Besigye as the People’s President and of a People’s Government following the 2016 elections.<sup>57</sup>

As recent work suggests, opposition legislators also play such a mobilizing role within and outside parliament.<sup>58</sup> A Ugandan legislator explained the importance of having opposition MPs despite their small numbers, stating that their presence ‘keeps the dream alive.’<sup>59</sup> Their parliamentary activities can contribute to preventing political apathy in the face of the system and its abuses. Opposition parliamentarians also play a key role in sustaining local mobilization in their constituency: they often maintain party branches and support party activities in the area, and are perceived as important figures within their communities.

In both countries, larger and newer parties have proven better able to perform this mobilization function, benefitting from larger financial resources and charismatic leaders. As for denunciation, civil society can also contribute to performing this function, and did so in Burkina Faso following Norbert Zongo’s assassination in 1998 and in the lead up to the 2014 insurrection. Parties such as the DP and the UNIR-PS, because of their limited resources and narrow supporting base, see their ability to effectively mobilize dissent curtailed. The UPC and

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56 Interview, FDC official, Kampala, 31 August 2016; Interview, UNIR-PS activist, Yako, 5 April 2018.

57 Interview, FDC activist, Mukono, 17 November 2016.

58 Bryce Loidolt and Quinn Mecham, ‘Parliamentary opposition under hybrid regimes: evidence from Egypt’, *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 41, 4 (2016), p. 998; Ken Ochieng’ Opalo, *Legislative development in Africa: Politics and postcolonial legacies* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019), p. 208.

59 Interview, DP Member of Parliament, Constituency, 18 November 2016.

the FDC have more resources and a broader geographical reach. The mobilization of dissent forces the incumbent to respond in order to protect their power. This can involve agreeing to some reforms to release the pressure – as Compaoré did following the Zongo protests<sup>60</sup> – or on the contrary increasing repression to deter opponents – as Museveni has been doing in the face of activism spearheaded by Besigye and, more recently, Bobi Wine.<sup>61</sup>

Succession signalling is the indication that a credible alternative to the incumbent and their regime is available.<sup>62</sup> This makes it less risky for citizens to support regime change, and can also encourage elite defection. It is related to both elite training and opposition moderation, and can be described as ‘ensuring that the people trust new stakeholders’.<sup>63</sup> Because of the existing constraints that they face, opposition parties may not be able to successfully topple the dictatorship despite their efforts at denouncing the regime and mobilizing against it. However, they can prepare themselves to take over when the opportunity arises, and can signal to citizens, elite, and the international community that there is a credible government-in-waiting. Eternal incumbents – such as Compaoré and Museveni – often portray themselves as indispensable to ensure stability.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, their opponents often suffer from a ‘liability of newness’.<sup>65</sup>

This function is partly performed by taking part in the state’s institutions, such as sitting in Parliament or local councils. Through these activities, opposition politicians develop an understanding of how governing works and acquire practical skills. They also obtain a status in their constituency through their elected position, and their ability to reinvest financial and

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60 Carlos Santiso and Augustin Loada, ‘Explaining the unexpected: electoral reform and democratic governance in Burkina Faso’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 3 (2003): 402.

61 Sam Wilkins, Moses Khisa, and Richard Vokes, ‘Contextualizing the Bobi Wine factor in Uganda’s 2021 elections’, *African Affairs* (Accepted/In press).

62 The phrasing succession ‘signalling’ was helpfully suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

63 Interview, UNIR-PS official, Ouagadougou, 17 January 2018.

64 Augustin Loada, ‘L’élection présidentielle du 13 novembre 2005’, p. 22; Frederick Golooba-Mutebi and Sam Hickey, ‘The Master of Institutional Multiplicity? The Shifting Politics of Regime Survival, State-Building and Democratisation in Museveni’s Uganda’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 4 (2016), p. 602.

65 Bleck and van de Walle, *Electoral Politics*, pp. 11-12.

political capital back into their community. Through these means, they build their credibility as an alternative governing elite.<sup>66</sup> This is also performed through the building of the party as an organization, the development of a supporters' base, and the design of policy proposals. Finally, appearing as a committed opposition to the regime (in Parliament or in the streets), and arousing popular support, places the opposition (as parties or as individuals) in a good position to claim legitimacy after the regime's fall.

The UNIR-PS and the DP have been unable to elect more than a handful of parliamentarians and to (re)establish themselves as nationally competitive parties. The UPC and FDC have performed this function better, by building a national presence and quickly becoming the main opposition force. They imposed themselves as more "credible", drawing this credibility from different sources. In Uganda, a component of Kizza Besigye's credibility (which benefited his party, the FDC), was his perception as someone who 'has gone through the trenches', 'has been beaten' and is therefore trustworthy.<sup>67</sup> In Burkina Faso, Zéphirin Diabré cultivated the image of a 'very good manager' with a respectable international career, able to manage the country's resources.<sup>68</sup> Yet, in both countries, the opposition's disunity has been perceived as a sign that they are not serious, and overall opposition parties still suffer from low confidence levels.<sup>69</sup> The Burkinabè opposition's ability to come together and join forces with other actors to resist Compaoré's attempt to modify term limits made it more credible, and played a key part in allowing the 2014 insurrection to occur.<sup>70</sup>

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66 Interview, PDP activist, Soroti, 10 May 2018.

67 Interview, NGO representative, Kampala, 6 April 2016.

68 Interview, civil society activist, Ouagadougou, 5 April 2017.

69 According to Afrobarometer data, 38.5% of Burkinabè respondents trusted opposition parties 'somewhat' or 'a lot' in 2012 (following rounds took place after the fall of Compaoré's regime). In Uganda, the response to this question has varied over several rounds, from 47.3% in 2012, to only 30.5% in 2015, and 35.4% in 2017 (Afrobarometer Dara, Burkina Faso (Round 5) and Uganda (Rounds 5, 6, and 7), available at <http://www.afrobarometer.org>).

70 Eloïse Bertrand, 'Nothing will be as before? the 2014 insurrection in Burkina Faso and its political impact.', in *Popular Protest, Political Opportunities and Change in Africa*, ed. Edalina R. Sanches (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

By performing these three functions, opposition parties raise the cost of the regime's endurance. By denouncing the regime, opposition parties can weaken both voters' support for the regime and international credentials it may have, while making it more difficult for the government to rig elections to stay in power. By mobilizing dissent, they maintain a level of pressure on the regime and may, under the right circumstances, produce opportunities for regime change. Finally, by preparing themselves for succeeding the regime, they can appear as a more credible government-in-waiting, in the eyes of citizens and foreign partners, and allow for a smoother, civilian transition if and when a regime change is possible. But contradictions between these functions, or rather the priority given to one over the others, often leads to tensions and factionalism both between and within opposition parties, contributing to their weakness. The succession function is also often left aside by opposition actors failing to form lasting coalitions and favouring denunciation as a more pressing concern, without a longer-term strategy.

Contrary to previous frameworks, these functions are not just performed through parties' participation into the system, and undermined by protest strategies. On the contrary, opposition parties can denounce the regime, mobilize dissent, and signal succession both through participation (running for election, campaigning, challenging results in courts, sitting in the legislature) and through protest (boycott, illegal demonstrations). Other actors can also perform these functions, especially if weak opposition parties leave a void. For example, a powerful civil society or populist independent figures can take the lead in denouncing the regime's authoritarian nature and abuses, and mobilizing dissent. Defecting elites can signal the existence of a credible successor. Nor are all opposition parties necessarily performing all three functions. In fact, a UNIR-PS activist in Burkina Faso complained that citizens only expected his party to 'play the role of a sentinel' and denounce the incumbent's wrong-doing, not to take power.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, I offer an alternative approach to understand the role of opposition parties in hybrid regimes, and the functions that they perform in this setting. Existing frameworks, discussed in some detail earlier, remain valuable. Within the democratic-looking institutions, parties often aim – and are expected – to perform classic functions. Meanwhile, how they contribute to sustaining the regime must be understood, and acknowledged. Yet, the framework proposed here broadens our understanding of what opposition parties do within a hybrid regime, shedding light on how they contribute to challenging the status quo, and not only to sustaining the regime.

This framework accounts for what parties achieve through both participation and protest strategies, reconciling two seemingly contradictory behaviours. Just as incumbents in hybrid regimes constantly shift between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ powers,<sup>71</sup> opposition parties also employ a mix of strategies. Just as incumbents create and manipulate formal institutions that they mix with informal practices in order to remain in power, opposition parties take part and manipulate these formal institutions and concomitantly use informal, anti-system strategies to maintain pressure on the incumbent. These two approaches can be seen as contradictory and counter-productive: in Uganda, the fact that divided opposition parties were participating and protesting concurrently was used to criticize their inconsistency. However, the 2014 insurrection in Burkina Faso demonstrates that protest and participation can be complementary and an effective way to challenge the regime.

Using this framework will allow scholars of hybrid regimes, across Africa and beyond, to make a fairer assessment of the strength and effectiveness of individual opposition parties and the political opposition as a broader collective. It shows that smaller parties (such as the DP and the UNIR-PS) can make a meaningful contribution to challenging the regime, even when they

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71 Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey, ‘The Master of Institutional Multiplicity?’.



are unable to present a credible alternative on their own – and that studies of opposition parties should look beyond the main opposition force.

The observation of the four parties examined here suggests that parties formed during periods of repression tend to perform denunciation better, while parties with increased resources, national reach, and charismatic leaders are stronger mobilizers. The same factors seem to foster succession signalling too, but are insufficient: internal factionalism or lack of cooperation with other stakeholders may impede this function. Further research is needed to analyse what factors inform opposition parties' ability to perform these functions, drawing from other cases and using diverse methodological approaches. The cases under study in this paper were two competitive-authoritarian regimes headed by an 'eternal' incumbent. I suspect that opposition parties in other one-party dominant regimes may perform similar functions, even if there is a level of elite circulation at the executive level. Future research is needed to test whether the alternative framework I present is applicable to hybrid regimes beyond the present subset.