# Despotism in Africa: Centralized or Decentralized?

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**Abstract**

Since independence, many governments in Africa have ruled despotically. Existing explanations locate the origins of despotism in precolonial conditions that hindered the development of constraining institutions (e.g., bad factor endowments), or in the artificial creation of local chiefs under colonial rule. We show that African polities were in fact considerably less despotic historically than commonly claimed, and instead develop an alternative perspective. Empirically, we examine political institutions for 475 Native Authorities in 12 British colonies. To measure colonial political institutions, we compiled information from Lord Hailey's surveys in the London archives and from reports on Native Administration in British Africa. To measure precolonial political institutions, we coded the powers of councils in major states from over 100 anthropological and historical sources. We find that councils were (1) prevalent, (2) predictable, and (3) meaningful. First, councils constrained routine decisions by chiefs in over half of precolonial states, and in 78% of polities outside of Northern Nigeria. During colonialism, only 17% of Native Authorities were solo chiefs, and the rest consisted of chiefs and councils or councils only. Second, the presence of solo Native Authority chiefs covaries strongly with areas that lacked strong councils before colonial rule, hence highlighting considerable continuity between the precolonial and colonial eras. Third, we document numerous ways in which councils constrained chiefs. Councils typically exerted greater powers in the colonial era than before, and Native Authority chiefs also lost important prerogatives such as control over armies. Our theoretical contribution is to contend that changes at the national, rather than local, level constituted the most important transformation of and perversion of political institutions in Africa during colonial rule. Traditional constraints on local chiefs that worked effectively could not usually be scaled up successfully to the national level. Thus, the roots of modern African authoritarianism are largely centralized rather than decentralized.