

Political impact of decentralization in Africa

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Abstract

Decentralization is an outstanding phenomenon among the ongoing administrative and political reforms that have been undertaken in recent decades around the world, and it has had significant political effects in African countries. In addition, urbanization amplifies the political impact of decentralization. Decentralization and urbanization have expanded the economic and political gaps between local governments in urban and rural areas as devolution has progressed from the central government to local governments. Decentralization encourages international cooperation between African local governments and (non-)African partners. Decentralization and this international cooperation between local governments have significantly influenced local politics in Africa, and decentralization has changed the relationship between the state and local governments, and between the local government and residents. First, this paper briefly traces the history of decentralization in Africa. Second, it reflects on the impact of decentralization on African politics and international relations by focusing on local elections, decentralized cooperation, and political disputes in urbanizing local governments in Benin and Burkina Faso. It is an appropriate time to examine local governments to better understand the political and social transformations that are taking place in a decentralizing Africa.

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1. Introduction

What have been the effects of decentralization on African politics since the decentralization process began in the mid-1990s? In recent years, decentralization (accompanied by rapid urbanization) has been an outstanding phenomenon in African countries and has had significant effects on African societies, from the people's everyday lives to governance at the local and state levels. Urbanization has amplified the impact of decentralization on the governance of African countries. Decentralization and urbanization have also expanded the economic and political gaps between urban and rural local governments as devolution has progressed from the central government to local governments. Decentralization encourages international cooperation (called *la coopération décentralisée* in Francophone African countries) between African and non-African local governments, and among African local governments (hereafter “decentralized cooperation”).

Furthermore, decentralization has significantly influenced the local politics and behavior of local (political) actors, and it may change the relationship between the state and local governments and between a local government and its residents. The political influence of elected mayors of big cities (i.e., not appointed by the state authority), especially in the capital cities, has strengthened as decentralization has progressed to its full scale.

Although decentralization has had significant political effects in African countries, it has not been sufficiently studied in investigations into African politics. Decentralization has been principally focused on the issue of administrative reform while neglecting political dynamism or struggles. Thus, this paper highlights the political impact of decentralization on African countries by focusing on local governments in the context of rapid urbanization.

First, the paper traces the brief history of the contemporary decentralization process in Africa. Second, it reflects on the effects of decentralization on post-electoral African politics¹ and international relations by examining local elections, decentralized cooperation, and political disputes in urbanizing African local governments in Benin and Burkina Faso.

1. The author of this article has previously studied the effects of decentralization on elections in Benin by examining three consecutive elections (Presidential 2006, Legislative 2007, Municipal 2008) after decentralization was initiated officially (Iwata 2011). Therefore, this paper does not examine local elections as the main subject.

2. Decentralization Process in African Countries

2-1. Overview of decentralization in Africa

Decentralization is generally defined as the process of financial, human, and technical devolution from the central government to local governments for empowering local governance. In Africa, decentralization reforms began in the mid-1990s as a condition for receiving foreign aid from Western donor countries to carry out “good governance.”

Since independence, almost all African countries have had more or less authoritarian regimes at their helm. Such one-party or military regimes have endeavored to maximally centralize the political control under the central government (or in the leader’s hands) to ensure and maintain economic, political, and social dominance.

African countries have experienced decentralization through two decades of political and administrative reforms, and this decentralization has had significant political effects on local politics. Insofar as the devolution process progressed, local governments in African countries have expanded their direct international cooperation with foreign local (and central) governments. Thus, decentralization has included African local governments in the globalizing world (Iwata 2012, 145).

While this contemporary decentralization process was initially requested by Western countries as a means of carrying out “administrative” reform, decentralization did not remain an administrative reform; as the devolution process progressed, it exposed its political effects on African countries. In general, more local representatives were elected in basic local governments after the decentralization process took place, in contrast to some local representatives (e.g., the governor of a supervising local government body) that are still appointed by the state authority. Thus, the progress of decentralization has raised questions about democratization (Iwata 2012, 146).

Decentralization significantly stimulated the international activities of African local governments working with foreign local governments because devolution allowed the local governments to more actively undertake international cooperation activities (Iwata 2012, 147). Decentralized cooperation brought about a new political dynamism and momentum in African localities. The decentralization reform was aimed at redefining the roles and responsibilities not only of the central government but also local governments. In other words, essentially, decentralization has been a political reform (Saito 2008, 284).

When the decentralization process started in African countries, Western donor countries presumed that it would improve the quality of local governance. Furthermore, these Western donor countries seemed to naïvely expect that decentralization would foster democratization from local governance to national politics (Iwata 2016a, 10–11).

Although the process of decentralization has occurred according to the unique socio-political situation in each African country, we can find commonality in its initiation as a requirement for receiving foreign aid. In contrast to democratization reforms, African governments have not faced strong pressure for decentralization from the people or civil society. Moreover, decentralization seemed to be a less (politically) risky “administrative” reform for authoritarian African leaders because it was unlikely to threaten their political dominance, at least in the short term. Therefore, many authoritarian African leaders have been willing to accept the requirement of decentralization reform and showing their positive involvement in “good governance” because the Western donor countries have not seriously required democratization as a condition for receiving aid.

Before the 1990s (the dawn of democratization), African governments had already taken place a “deconcentration” reform of local governance without any significant devolution of executive power or financial and human resources. Therefore, the transfer of power and resources from the central government to local governments is the crucial issue in decentralization. However, democratization is an inseparable factor in considering and evaluating decentralization. Often, international assistance with decentralization has been derived from the naïve idea that decentralization will install local democracy in African countries, rather than being based on the real experiences or historicity of Africa (Iwata 2012, 146–47).

2-2. Brief history of politics and decentralization in Benin and Burkina Faso

This part briefly traces the history of politics and decentralization in Benin and Burkina Faso. Over the last two decades, Benin has been seen as a model of democratization in Africa by the international community². However, Benin experienced political storms in its first 30 years after independence and until the dawn of democratization³.

2. After the democratization process started, Benin had six presidential elections, six National Assembly elections, and three local elections with no suspension caused by the military coup or civil war.

3. For the first 12 years after its independence in 1960, Benin had six regime changes resulting from military coups. Finally, the Marxist-Leninist military regime led by Mathieu Kerekou held

After three decades of authoritarian regimes (including a pseudo-Marxist-Leninist revolutionary regime), in the late 1980s, teachers, students, and labor unionists repeatedly and increasingly held protest demonstrations demanding the resignation of President Kerekou. In 1990, the first Sovereign National Conference (*Conférence Nationale des Forces de Vive de la Nation*; see Iwata 2000, 2004) took place to launch democratization without bloodshed⁴.

According to the new Constitution, *Etats Généraux de l'Administration Territoriale* (Forum for Administrative Reform) was held in 1993 with the aim of realizing the reorganization of the local government structure and reforming Benin's local administrative bodies from districts and sub-districts (*sous-préfectures*) to "communes" as the basic local government bodies. Seventy-seven communes were established as the main actors in local development through devolution from the central government (Iwata 2011, 101).

After the introduction of decentralization-related laws and institutions, local elections took place, enabling local residents to directly choose their local representatives, "*les conseillers de conseil de commune*" (the councilors of the Commune Council)⁵. The mayor (*le maire*), the head of the commune, is indirectly selected by the councilors themselves. The mayor is also the concurrent chairperson of the Commune Council (Iwata 2011, 101)⁶.

Like Benin, Burkina Faso's political history has experienced considerable turbulence since independence. After having experienced repeated regime turnovers through military coups d'état, the revolutionary regime (1983–87) led by young military officers such as Thomas Sankara and Blaise Compaore came to power. Compaore became head of state after the last successful military coup in 1987, killing his elder comrade, President Sankara, and he retained power for 27 years. Although Compaore's Burkina Faso had been recognized as one of the most authoritarian and stable regimes in Africa, he was unexpectedly easily ousted. At the end

office for 17 years (October 1972–February 1990). Meanwhile, political freedom was strictly limited and the national economy was heavily degraded.

4. After a one-year transition period, the Seventh Constitution was adopted through a referendum in December 1990. The presidential election, the first free election after independence, took place in March 1991.

5. The number of councilors (9–49) is determined according to the population size of the commune.

6. In addition, the 12 regional administrative units, the "*Départements*" (prefectures), were established. The role of a prefecture is to coordinate with the communes and the central government. The prefecture maintains a superiority of functions in terms of the supervision (*tutelle*) of commune administration, while the central government continues to assign a "Préfet" (i.e., the Governor of the Département).

of October 2014, two days of popular insurgency, which followed demonstrations conducted by opposition parties and civil society over weeks, mobilized half a million people across the country, who were protesting Compaore's attempt to enact constitutional change for ensuring his presidency for life. This insurgency ended Compaore's regime (Iwata 2016b, 147–48)⁷.

Even under authoritarian rule, the Compaore administration attracted significant attention from Western donor countries (especially France and Germany) and developed a positive reputation as the model of decentralization and decentralized cooperation among the French-speaking West African countries.

The decentralization process in Burkina Faso started in 1995. Under the Local Government Act of 2004, the legal framework for decentralization was established, and 359 communes (including 8 wards in Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouagadougou, cities with special status) were set up as basic local government bodies. In addition, 13 municipalities (*régions*) were established as the supervising bodies of communes. In 2006, municipal elections, which were the first ever since the full implementation of decentralization, took place to elect commune councilors. After the election, mayors were selected among the elected councilors.

After Compaore was *de facto* ousted from power in 2014, decentralization-related institutions and local governments (communes) were immediately suspended and then dissolved⁸. The transitional government sent governors to temporarily govern local government bodies until new local representatives could be installed in municipal elections held under the new regime (Iwata 2016a, 23). After one year of rule under the transitional government, presidential and legislative elections took place in November 2015 after a failed coup attempt two months earlier by the special armed forces (*Régiment spécial présidentiel*, RSP) supporting former President Compaore. Subsequently, municipal elections took place in May 2016. Since then, Burkina Faso has been gradually normalizing its decentralization process.

7. The Compaore administration was recognized as one of the most stable and authoritarian regimes in Africa after the death of Colonel Kaddafi. The ousted President Compaore escaped to neighboring Cote d'Ivoire, escorted by French troops. France and the United States fervently supported Compaore in the interest of ensuring regional security in West Africa under the threat of armed jihadist groups.

8. The positions of mayors and councilors of the communes were dissolved by the transitional government to eradicate the influence of the former regime as well as the National Assembly, as the representatives of the local governments (the Commune Council) were dominated by the Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP, *le Congrès pour la démocratie et le progrès*), the dominant party founded by Compaore (Iwata 2016a, 23).

3. Political Impact of Decentralization

3-1. Local governance under decentralization

Decentralization inevitably activated local politics in African countries, thereby enhancing the politicization of local governance. Before decentralization started in African countries, politics had generally been focused on political issues in the capital city, as indicated by an examination of various incidents, from military coups d'état to democratization. However, local politics is no longer a negligible subject in understanding the situation of African politics, even at the national level, as decentralization continues to progress to its full scale.

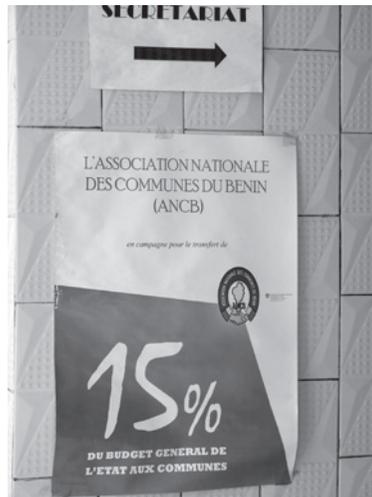
As devolution gradually progressed, the political influence of elected local leaders, especially mayors, over their localities increased. Today, mayors can more directly mobilize financial and human resources in their constituencies, rather than having to rely on members of (national) parliament. As decentralization continues to progress, the status of mayor is becoming more attractive to, and crucial for, ambitious politicians to achieve their political goals. Accordingly, decentralization significantly stimulates local politics. We can observe what Bayart pointed out as “the politics of the belly” (*la politique du ventre*) and “extraversion” in local politics in Africa as well as national politics (quoted in Iwata 2012, 149–50).

The political reactivation brought about by decentralization exposed the political revival of local or traditional authorities. Invariably, (re-)election depends on local leaders being locally recognized, prominent people (*filis de terroir*) or individuals who can attract massive support by virtue of being traditionally prestigious personalities in the locality. Their local authority and political influence often derive from traditional chieftaincy. It is quite significant that decentralization as a modern administrative reform made the traditional authorities more politically influential in the decision-making and electoral processes in African local governance (Iwata 2012, 150).

Thus, decentralization has significantly affected the political power balance in local communities (Iwata 2011). However, a few researchers have focused on the political impact of decentralization on elections because few African countries have had repeated local elections since the establishment of full decentralization. Decentralization stimulated the international activities of local governments (decentralized cooperation) in Africa. Newly elected representatives in the local governments face many requirements from residents regarding local development and individual requests. African local governments needed to establish international

cooperation with foreign local governments to supplement resources because of the lack of financial, human, and technical devolution from the central government (Iwata 2016a, 11).

Figure 1: Request from the national association of local governments of Benin for increasing financial devolution



Source: Author (February 2017, Cotonou, Benin)

Currently, 77 communes (total number of basic local governments) are allocated only 4% of the whole national budget in Benin⁹. The National Association of Communes of Benin (*l'Association nationale des communes du Bénin*, ANCB) has repeatedly requested that the central government authorizes financial devolution of up to 15% from the national budget. Under the current conditions, only the big urban local governments can afford to invest in and manage local development.

In some African countries where democracy is taking root, local elections have become more crucial in the political scene even in national politics. Local elections can even affect the next presidential election. In addition, decentralization with devolution has increased the political presence of the mayor. This is a sign of the political transformation taking place between the local governments and the central government through the growing interest of the residents. Mayors, for example,

9. Interview with Mr. Marc Kpatcha, Secretary of Abomey commune, in charge of decentralized cooperation (March 1, 2017, Cotonou, Benin). According to the national budget of 2017 (2.01 trillion CFA francs) (Benin To Info, January 7, 2017), the local budget might be about 80 billion CFA francs (130 million USD) for all 77 communes.

have been discharged one after another due to political disputes among the councilors of the communes. In Benin, the Commune Councils have dismissed tens of mayors since decentralization was launched (Iwata 2011, 104–05).

3-2. Elections in the decentralization era

Benin stipulated decentralization-related laws to complete the decentralization process. The local government bodies were restructured into 77 communes and 12 *département* (prefectures) through the decentralization process. The *conseillers* (councilors) of the commune, the representatives of local government (Commune Council), are directly elected by the residents of each commune-based constituency. After local elections take place, the elected councilors select their mayor from the Commune Council, although the governor of the prefecture is still appointed by the central government as the supervisor of communes. In terms of political influence, the power of (elected) mayors has become much stronger than it was before decentralization started (Iwata 2012, 148).

As decentralization progressed, the costs for politicians to be (re-)elected increased considerably. Politics of the belly (*la politique du ventre*) became more visible in local politics. The development projects in communes became more politicized. In Benin as well as in other French-speaking African countries, local elections take place in a proportional system, not in a majoritarian system. Local elections have become a battlefield for the short-term economic interests of politicians and residents (Iwata 2012, 152).

Meanwhile, when the “official” electoral campaign is launched, the real “electoral campaign in the night” occurs. This refers to the practice where candidate supporters visit the residents in their constituency at their homes to buy their votes, proposing rice bags or cash (from 1,000 to 5,000 FCFA, which is about US\$2 to US\$10, depending on the status of the targeted person). Such an act is also called “*l’achat de conscience*” (buying the spirit) in Benin. Although violent, deadly clashes between supporter groups still occur, the violence is no longer a decisive factor in current elections in Benin (Iwata 2011, 104).

Moreover, the progress of decentralization has made fund-raising for the local elections more crucial. Hence, even in local elections, the politics of the belly became a more visible phenomenon. During electoral campaigns, expressions such as “buying the spirit” or “a mouth that is eating does not talk” (*La bouche qui mange ne parle pas*) become more widespread in communities (Métodjo 2008, 148).

Furthermore, the local administration has been undertaken in a more politicized manner since decentralization started on a full scale. The politicization of local

elections has made post-electoral local governance more fragile.

4. Development of Local Governments' International Cooperation

4-1. Decentralized cooperation amid globalization

Decentralized cooperation has expanded in African countries as the decentralization process has advanced. One crucial motive of decentralized cooperation is insufficient financial, human, and technical devolution from the central government to local governments (Dangnon 2009, 146–47). Thus, many African local governments seek to supplement these resources through direct cooperation agreements with foreign (local) governments to respond to residents' requests and to promote the interests of the local political leader (Iwata 2012, 153).

According to the French government, decentralized cooperation (*coopération décentralisée*) is the framework of international cooperation for local governments with foreign/domestic local partners in order to carry out common objectives (Foreign Ministry of France 2007).

Coopération décentralisée is the ensemble of actions for international cooperation with an agreement on the objectives of common interest between French and foreign local governments. Coopération décentralisée takes place in diverse forms such as sister-city, development program, and technical exchange. Coopération décentralisée is speculated in the largest framework of local government's foreign action by the circular of Prime Minister, announced on May 26, 1983¹⁰.

The French government has thoroughly promoted decentralized cooperation, encouraging the local governments of France and other European donor countries, such as Germany, Italy, and Switzerland, to participate in cooperation projects with Francophone African local governments¹¹ (Iwata 2016a, 11).

10. French Minister of the Interior, *Decentralized cooperation of French local governments and foreign local governments*, April 20, 2001.

11. France is an aggressive promoter of decentralized cooperation in Africa (principally in Francophone Africa). Decentralized cooperation is not only a cooperation tool but also the "value" for European countries that is based on their experience of reconciliation after World War II. Decentralized cooperation was launched between French and German local governments to establish a multilateral network of two nations for sustainable peace. Furthermore, decentralized cooperation was developed through the integration process of the European Union. Decentralized

The French government is keen to maintain its influence over the former African colonies¹² not only at the (inter-)national level but also at the local level. Decentralized cooperation might be a local version of *Françafrique*¹³. Burkina Faso is geopolitically important for France because of its location at the center of French-speaking West African countries. Therefore, France is eager to bolster Burkina Faso as the model of decentralized cooperation in Africa.

(Politically) ambitious mayors are keen to promote their political influence through decentralized cooperation. After decentralization started, the mayors of big local governments began to travel abroad more frequently. However, decentralized cooperation unsurprisingly expanded the gap in terms of international cooperation between big urban local governments and small rural ones, because the urban local governments are more likely to attract foreign partners' attention (Iwata 2012, 154). In addition, decentralized cooperation makes local residents more conscious of the political situation on their country through direct communication in comparison to foreign local partners.

Africité (Africities) is the largest pan-African summit of local governments. Africité is authorized by the *United Cities and Local Government (UCLG)* and its African headquarters. The first Africité was held in 1998 in Abidjan. The fifth conference was held in Marrakesh in 2009¹⁴. This summit received 3,600 participants from 72 countries. Africité has become an important arena for diplomacy among African local governments.

cooperation is literally cooperation among local governments and is not limited to cultural exchange within the sister-city framework. Decentralized cooperation was stimulated and expanded through the decentralization process, which enabled local governments to pursue more direct and international cooperation with foreign local governments in pursuit of promoting local interests.

12. *Cités Unies France* is the coordinating organization for the decentralized cooperation between the French and foreign local governments (Foreign Ministry of France 2012). The French Foreign Ministry provides financial support to the French local governments cooperating with local governments in Africa. In total, the French Foreign Ministry funds 50% of the total amount for a project undertaken by a French local government (Foreign Ministry of France 2012). This is called "co-finance" (*co-financement*) (Iwata 2016a, 16–17).

13. See Verschave (2000).

14. At the Marrakesh summit, it is noteworthy that the declaration on triangle local cooperation among Chinese–French–African local governments was pronounced at the end of this summit in the presence of Mr. Chen Haosu, President of Chinese–African People's Friendship Association (CAPFA) with *Cités Unies France (CUF)*. It seemed to commence a new phase in decentralized cooperation in Africa. It is a significant landscape change in international cooperation among local governments despite technical difficulties and cultural differences. CUF is the counterpart organization of the Chinese–African People's Friendship Association. This tri-party local cooperation surprised the world, but it was not an accident for China and France, as CAPFA and CUF had already struck an agreement on Africa's development in 2007.

4-2. Politicization of decentralized cooperation

Indeed, decentralization has had a political impact in African countries and societies with the revival of traditional authorities in this modernized local governance. Decentralization made local governance more politicized and globalized through decentralized cooperation in the midst of competition for accessing additional resources. We can acknowledge the case of Abomey (Benin) as one of the most symbolic cases to describe the political impact of decentralization on African local governance.

The commune of Abomey is located 160 km north of Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin, and was the heart of the Dahomey Kingdom before French colonial rule started. The Dahomey Kingdom expanded its territory through wars against neighboring kingdoms or communities while the slave trade flourished, and strongly resisted the French invasion through armed struggles in the late nineteenth century. Abomey is not only important for its historical legacy but also for tourism, as its imperial palaces were declared UNESCO world cultural heritage sites.

As previously mentioned, it is indispensable to be a prominent local personality or to receive support from such an individual in order to become leader of the local government. In city established by a precolonial kingdom, such as Abomey, such individuals are definitely indispensable. As his family name indicates, Mr. Blaise Glele-Ahanhanzo, Mayor of Abomey, is a descendant of King Glele, who ruled Dahomey in the mid-nineteenth century (1858–89), the most prosperous era in the

Figure 2: Interview with the Mayor of Abomey



Source: Author (October 2005, Cotonou, Benin)

kingdom's history. Thus, he symbolizes the decentralization of Benin and has profited remarkably from the decentralized cooperation while increasing his "political capital" in Bourdieu's sense (Iwata 2012, 155). He has been energetically involved in local diplomacy while seeking to attract foreign local partners and foreign aid agencies by emphasizing Abomey's historical legacy.

He was not satisfied with the traditional French and other European local partners such as the commune of Albi (a small local government in southern France), and tried to expand Abomey's international cooperation. He also established individual contacts with aid agencies, such as DANIDA (The Danish International Development Agency) and JICA (The Japan International Cooperation Agency), and concluded a cooperation agreement with Asian local governments, such as Gwangju (South Korea) in 2010 and Zibo (China) in 2017. This was the second case of a Beninese local government establishing direct cooperation with a Chinese local government after the agreement was reached between Cotonou and Ningbo (China) and the first case of establishing one with a Korean local government. The Mayor of Abomey is one of few mayors in Benin who could meet the U.S. and Chinese ambassadors to Benin. His historical and royal family legacy significantly helped his prominent local diplomacy.

Decentralized cooperation is not only a tool for supplementing financial resources but also for promoting the mayor's political legitimacy and influence in the local community and the national political arena. As devolution progressed through decentralization, mayors increased their political influence even in national elections (legislative and presidential). The political influence of the mayor might have helped his promotion in his political party, *Renaissance du Bénin*, the dominant party during the Soglo administration (1991–96). Glele-Ahanhanzo ascended to his current status in his party, being appointed as the fourth vice president from his former post as the director of the youth section. He was also the president of the national mayors' association, the ANCB. He was later appointed as the Minister of Environment under the second (final) administration of President Yayi. We can perceive that the case of Glele-Ahanhanzo is one of the most outstanding cases in terms of the political impact of decentralization in Africa (Iwata 2012, 156–57).

5. Political Turbulence in Decentralizing Local Governance

5-1. Politicizing local governance

While African countries began to tackle decentralization because of the (*de facto*)

conditionality for receiving foreign aid, Western donor countries naïvely expected that decentralization would foster “local” democracy in Africa. Rather, decentralization made local governance more politicized instead of straightforwardly bringing about socio-economic development and local democracy in the short term, especially in politically liberalizing countries, such as Benin since the beginning of the 1990s and Burkina Faso after the Compaore regime ended in 2014.

Following the Beninese cases, we can see similar ongoing phenomena in local politics in Burkina Faso after the regime turnover in 2014. It might be an important lesson for reflecting on the relationship between decentralization and local democracy. Contrary to the naïve idea in earlier years that decentralization brings about local democracy, it significantly stimulates local politics in a nonlinear way with the progress of democratization.

In addition to the over-politicization of local governance, decentralization obviously expanded the gap between urban and rural local governments through the acceleration of international cooperation among local governments (Iwata 2012, 158).

It seems that rapid urbanization accelerated the politicization of local governance. As the city became bigger, the requests from the population to local government and its leaders were amplified and increasingly diversified. Local politicians themselves work in their own interests in local politics. In the Beninese local government system, councilors of the commune have a “voluntary” status, receiving no regular salary for their services, although this does not mean that they cannot access certain financial remunerations or budget for the commune’s management. This scenario made it more likely that local councilors would seek personal and political goals using their political status and influence. Urbanization increasingly made local politics more dynamic in African countries in light of increasing populations, mandates, and budgets of local governments and their leaders.

Therefore, the selection of mayor and appointments to other important posts after a municipal election would likely heat up the Commune Council (Congress) politically. When the Commune Council becomes a battlefield among personal interests for political parties’ power struggles, making it easy to forget the promises made during an electoral campaign, local government becomes unmanageable and cannot make any decisions regarding the development projects of the commune unless a certain political party occupies the majority of the Commune Council. Consequently, local residents lose their confidence and criticize their local representatives.

After the first municipal election in 2003, Benin held two more local elections

in 2008 and 2015. After each election, the political instability and over-politicization brought about serious stagnations in commune governance. The most remarkable case is the motion of discharge against the mayor brought by councilors in the Commune Council mobilizing a vote of nonconfidence (*défiance*). A storm of discharge of mayors came again in Benin within one year after the latest municipal election.

Even after the first and second local elections, the Commune Council continued to be a political battlefield in the rivalry between political parties and local politicians (Dangnon 2009, 95). Local governance was politicized for political, personal, and financial interests (Dangnon 2009, 89, 101) while services for the development and management of the local community were neglected. Thus, the situation dissatisfied local residents and voters, who perceived the local politicians as immersing themselves in political games for their own ends (Dangnon 2009, 103). The moment of the selection of mayor made local governance exciting and highly politicized. The political battle for ruling the commune divided the political parties represented in the Commune Council (Dangnon 2009, 92). When the Commune Council is not comfortably dominated by a certain party, commune management is unlikely to run smoothly. In the worst case, the mayor can be discharged by his/her own council through nonconfidence voting.

Finally, to tranquilize the over-politicization of commune governance, the Commission for Decentralization, the supervising organization of decentralization, warned the communes that the Commune Council is not a battlefield for seeking individual political interests (Dangnon 2009, 89). Despite repeated calls and interventions of the Commission for Decentralization, political disputes and storms of discharge trials against mayors continued (Dangnon 2009, 90–91). However, discharging a mayor did not necessarily make commune governance peaceful; in fact, such actions often invited second discharge motions.

The discharge of mayors has not only been caused by the struggles among local political actors but also brought about due to political battles at the national level especially between the president (and his leading party) and the opposition (Dangnon 2009, 95). Under the current rule, the mayor can be discharged relatively easily by collecting two-thirds of commune councilors' nonconfidence votes. This system might be reconsidered in order to make local governance more stable and functional (Dangnon 2009, 150).

In addition to the politicization of local governance, local governments face serious challenges of administrative incapacity (Dangnon 2009, 152–53). In the decentralization process, the devolution of human resources is stipulated by the

central government to the communes. However, the devolution of human resources has not occurred in a comparable manner to that of financial resources. This administrative incapacity has allowed local politicians to exhibit more politicized behaviors.

5-2. Storms of discharge of mayors after local elections

The councilors of the commune are directly elected by voters in their local constituency in a proportional electoral system according to the list of candidates submitted by political parties or groups. Then the elected councilors of commune elect the mayor (serving currently as the chairman of the Commune Council)¹⁵.

In Benin and Burkina Faso, the Commune Council (assembly) is able to discharge its mayor relatively easily by collecting two-thirds of the nonconfidence vote among the commune councilors, according to the decentralization-related law (Iwata 2012, 152)¹⁶. Under the current system, it is possible for the discharge of mayor to occur after the regime change of the central government directly affects the political power balance in the Commune Council. For local residents, it is not possible to intervene in such political disputes among politicians after a local election is held (Hassani 2016).

When the mayoral race is launched, local politicians inevitably begin to immerse themselves in the political game while pursuing their personal and political interests instead of seriously working for the development of the commune. Thus, local residents will be dissatisfied with the performances of the mayor and Commune Council.

This part generally examines cases in Benin because Burkina Faso has not sufficiently experienced local governance and decentralization yet under the democratic political circumstance for reflecting on the political impact of decentralization. In general, the political impact of decentralization should be bigger in more democratizing regimes rather than in authoritarian regimes. Benin began confronting the challenge of democratization in 1990. On the contrary, Burkina Faso only started the democratization process in 2014, after former President Compaore was ousted by the insurgency.

15. Law N° 2013-06 on the Electoral Code in the Republic of Benin, in its article 400 paragraph 2, provides that “the candidate for mayor is proposed by the list obtaining the absolute majority of the commune councilors” (Hassani 2016).

16. Article 53 of Law N° 97-029 of January 15, 1999, on the organization of municipalities in the Republic of Benin and its implementing Decree N° 2005-376 of June 23, 2005, fixing the terms of dismissal of the Mayor (Hassani 2016). Art 275 of Law N° 055-2004 / AN on the general code of the local governments in Burkina Faso.

5-2-1. Cases in Benin

The third municipal elections in Benin took place in 2015 (Boko 2015, Le blog de la presse béninoise 2015). Municipal elections should be held every five years according to the decentralization-related law. The second election had to take place in 2013. It was delayed by two years due to political, technical, and financial reasons.

In the election of 2015, the President Yayi-supporting party *Forces Cauris pour un Benin Emergent* (FCBE, Cowrie Forces for an Emerging Benin) could not sustain a dominant force in the Commune Council, although it retained a minimal influence in the northern regions (Boko 2015).

One year after the last municipal election, mayors were once again discharged, causing political turbulence and confusion in the Beninese communes. After the election of President Talon in March 2016, at least seven mayors (including major communes, such as Parakou and Djougou) were discharged by the Commune Council in the second half of 2016. In addition, many cases of discharge are still in progress in Commune Councils (Hassani 2016).

It was not the first political storm involving the discharge of mayors during the last two decades of decentralization and democratization in Benin. Such an incident had already happened after the first and second municipal elections held in 2003 and 2008, respectively. We can recognize this situation as an institutional problem of local governance in Benin. Publicly, the reason for the discharge of mayors was announced by Commune Councils as the “bad (too arbitrary) management” of the mayor (Africa No.1 2016).

However, these incidents, in addition to political disputes in local governments, also seem to have been politically orchestrated by the state authority. This storm of discharges started again after the latest presidential election took place in 2016. The election of President Patrice Talon, a millionaire-businessman, who unexpectedly defeated the “promised” candidate Lionel Zinsou, son of former President of the Republic and back by almost all “established” political leaders and their political parties, surprised Benin and the world.

The latest municipal elections took place in June 2015, the final year of the Yayi administration. President Yayi was elected in 2006 for the first time and re-elected in 2011, and would end his final (second) five-year presidential term (stipulated by the Constitution of Benin) in 2016. The discharged mayors belong to the supporting party for the former president (FCBE). They were elected by the majority of the Commune Councils thanks to the influence of then President Yayi.

After President Yayi left the presidential office in April 2016, some mayors lost their strong political backing to continue behaving as the local “big man” and were recognized as political opponents by the newly elected President Talon (SIm 2016, Bénin Web TV 2016). Seemingly, the regime change in national politics significantly affected local politics.

In reality, the Support Fund for the Development of Communes (*Fonds d'appui au développement des communes*, FADEC)¹⁷ expressed its concern about the severe, irregular acts and breaches in 30 communes among the 77 communes in Benin, for which there were no punishments. In addition, FADEC also revealed the absence of a financial report related to international cooperation with foreign partners (Hassani 2016).

In October 2016, the ANCB urgently called for the councilors of communes to end their political disputes and requested the discharge of the mayor whom they had elected to normalize local politics in Benin (Africa No.1 2016, Benin Medias 2016).

Despite the wave of discharges, some mayors were able to retain their position, such as Severin Adjovi, the Mayor of Ouidah, the heart of tourism and vodun (traditional religious practices, also known as voodoo) in Benin. He was accused of arbitrary commune management, and the commune councilors requested a special meeting on his discharge. Finally, the nonconfidence vote was held in February 2017, collecting 12 votes for discharge among 19 councilors (only one vote below the required number to discharge the mayor). According to the “two-thirds rule,” mayor Adjovi barely escaped discharge by just one vote. However, his political influence was definitely damaged in his commune, as the majority of councilors had attempted to oust him (Meton, February 14, 2017).

The storm of discharge of mayors finally reached the commune of Abomey. As mentioned earlier, Abomey is governed by Mayor Glele-Ahanhanzo, one of the most prominent political actors in the decentralization process of Benin, which revived tradition in its modern political system. However, he was not safe from this politicized storm. He also faced a discharge motion attempt from the group of councilors of Abomey commune because of his arbitrary nomination of vice mayors and suspicious management of the public market (Gbaguidi 2016). The issue of public market management has always brought about the biggest disputes between the central government and local governments in the decentralization process in Benin

17. This is a governmental organization established in 2008 under the Ministry of Decentralization and Local Governance to support the financial devolution from the central government to local governments (communes).

because it is a question related to financial resources, which directly affects political interests.

This storm of discharges of mayors seems to have expanded after the regime change brought by Mr. Talon's election as President of the Republic. Mayors who were discharged or are in the process of being discharged generally belong to the political parties that supported Zinsou in the presidential election held in March 2016. After the last presidential election, dominant parties in the Yayi administration became the opposition against the new president. President Talon was a businessman and participated in the election as an independent (anti-establishment) candidate. Whether the president's will influences or not, the political storm in local governments is significantly intertwined with the national politics. For President Talon, the determined reformer, it was favorable to reduce the opposition's influence in local government in order to carry out his draconian policy throughout the country.

However, there was predictable political pressure because Mayor Glele-Ahanhanzo supported Zinsou, the candidate opposing the "establishment" camp, and thus the current President Talon, during the presidential election campaign according to the decision of his party, *Renaissance du Benin* (Benin Web TV September 2016). Although Glele-Ahanhanzo does not belong to FCBE, the party that supported former President Yayi, he has a greater reason to be personally targeted by President Talon, as he was the Minister of Environment in the former Yayi administration.

Seemingly, President Talon tried to discharge Glele-Ahanhanzo because he (his party) had supported Zinsou in the last presidential election while accusing Glele-Ahanhanzo of bad usage of commune resources (e.g., purchase of vehicles, foreign trips). However, this time, the opponent councilors of the Abomey Commune Council could not carry out nonconfidence voting. His prestigious origin, deriving from the former Dahomey Kingdom, might have saved him from discharge. The serious division among councilors in the Commune Council of Abomey remains since the unsuccessful trial for discharge. Thus, Mr. Glele-Ahanhanzo has had to behave more carefully in conducting his policies since this incidence. Although President Talon could not remove Glele-Ahanhanzo, he could significantly have damaged his influence on local politics in Abomey.

This tug-of-war between the president and opposition mayors finally reached Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin. Since the beginning of the decentralization process, Cotonou has been governed by the Soglo family. The first mayor after decentralization started, Nicephore Soglo, was the former president of the Republic of

Benin (1991–96). President Soglo’s party, *Renaissance du Benin*, has led Benin as the ruling party or has been the influential opposition party since democratization started in Benin in 1990. After a decade of his governance of Cotonou, his son, Lehady Soglo, was elected Mayor of Cotonou in 2015. As in the case of Abomey, *Renaissance du Benin* is one of the biggest opponents of the current President Talon, which strongly supported Zinsou in the last presidential election of 2016.

The Talon administration increased its pressure on the Cotonou commune’s governance, ordering the governor of Littoral prefecture (the supervising administrative body over Cotonou commune) to deploy radical measures for local management, such as clean-up campaigns in public spaces of the city aimed at removing informal small businesses from the roadside, which often create heavy traffic jams, and arresting traders of fake medicine. Such draconian measures have been considered “necessary” and appropriate for economic development and the health of the elites, but dangerous for the mayor and “establishment” politicians with regard to their popularity and re-election.

In July 2017, the central government finally dismissed Mayor of Cotonou, Lehady Soglo, due to “heavy errors” and bad management (e.g., arbitrary sale of national assets, violations of administrative ethics, and arbitrary financial measures for giving himself a bonus). The Minister of Decentralization signed this order. When a mayor is suspended, the first vice mayor temporarily succeeds in this function (Ague, July 28, 2017).

5-2-2. Cases in Burkina Faso

Compared to Benin, Burkina Faso is still less experienced in terms of democratically organized elections, although local elections were repeatedly held under the authoritarian regime, before President Compaore resigned in 2014. Time is required to sufficiently examine how decentralization affects the local politics in Burkina Faso. However, there have been some signs of the change in local governance in Burkina Faso since this regime turnover occurred.

Under the 27 years of Compaore’s authoritarian rule, Burkina Faso was known as the model of decentralization. The dominant party, *le Congrès pour la démocratie et le progrès* (CDP, the Congress for Democracy and Progress), founded to support President Compaore, dominated all political institutions including the local government under his regime. Accordingly, there were a few places where local politics heated up under the Compaore administration. Therefore, the municipal elections held in 2016—three decades after the revolutionary and authoritarian regimes established in the 1980s—were the first democratically organized local

elections for the Burkinabe people.

After the organization of local elections, the same kind of political confusion that existed in Benin was present in the Burkinabe local governments. The selection of mayor and other important posts in the communes created a serious stagnation of local governance, as the paralyzed Commune Councils, which lack dominant political forces, could not make decisions.

Figure 3: A satirical illustration on the municipal election of 2016 in Burkina Faso



Source: Journal du Jeudi (No. 1289, June 2–8, 2016)

In the local election held in May 2016, the new dominant party, *le Mouvement pour le peuple et progrès* (MPP, the Movement for People and Progress)¹⁸, could not win local elections to ensure its comfortable situation in local politics compared to the presidential and legislative elections that took place in November 2015.

In December 2016, Mayor Mahamadi Zongo (Boulmiougou ward in Ouagadougou) was discharged by the Commune Council for his arbitrary management, collecting 10 nonconfidence votes among 13 councilors¹⁹. After this decision,

18. The most important aides, such as Salifou Diallo, Roch Christian Kabore, and Simon Compaore, left CDP and then established their new opposition party (*le Mouvement du peuple pour le progrès*, MPP) in January 2014 against President Compaore. During the last presidential election of 2010, Compaore promised them that he would not remain in power after his “last” term. However, he tried to modify the constitution to secure himself as “president for life.” These close collaborators were disappointed by Compaore’s violation of his promise and abandoned him (Interview with MPP member, August 20, 2014, Ouagadougou).

19. Art 275 of Law N° 055-2004 / AN on the general code of the local governments in Burkina Faso.

his furious supporters burned down and destroyed the ward-city hall (Nobole, December 7, December 10, 2016). Since the first local election took place after Compaore stepped down, local governance in Burkina Faso has been involved in a political storm as the baptism of democratization.

In the Sapone Commune Council, councilors were bitterly divided into two groups at the moment of the selection of mayor. The commune councilors were barely able to select an MPP candidate. However, the mayor was unable to even call the commune council because of the opposition's boycott.

In the Banfora Commune Council, the worst situation occurred. Although the new dominant party, MPP, ensured a comfortable number of seats in the Commune Council after the local election, the party was divided because it had two different candidates. After repeated disputes and negotiations, the mayor was selected from the minor party. Finally, the central government announced the cancellation of the election and re-election for 19 communes in May 2017 to restart the local governance (Burkina 24, March 1, May 29, May 31, 2017).

In Benin, the selection of mayor and other important posts in a Commune Council has occasionally led to serious disputes as well as stagnation in local governance in certain communes that are not comfortably composed of members of the dominant party. However, the situation is more complex in Burkina Faso because it has been simultaneously tackling both the big political reforms of democratization and decentralization at the same time. This is a significant difference from Benin, which initiated democratization before decentralization.

6. Conclusion

This paper tackled the question of the political impact of decentralization in urbanizing African countries. First, the paper revisited the history of decentralization in Africa. Then it examined the effects of decentralization on African politics and international relations through case studies of Benin and Burkina Faso, such as local elections, decentralized cooperation, and post-electoral political disputes in local governments.

On the one hand, decentralization has been gradually but steadily changing the political landscape from the local to national levels in Africa, although it was not a panacea-like institutional reform as the Western donor countries and international organizations had expected. On the other hand, decentralization obviously reduced the distance between African local governments and the globalizing world (Iwata 2012, 159).

Decentralization significantly diversified and transformed the world of the “political imaginary” (Benegas 2003, 153), which has created political momentum in African countries. Insofar as decentralization keeps progressing, local politics will more directly affect the politics in the national arena, such as questions about democratization. Local political actors, such as mayors and commune councilors, need more attention in the study of African politics. Local governments significantly entered into the arena of international cooperation and diplomacy through decentralized cooperation in an extraversive approach. It is no longer sufficient to examine the political process conducted only in capital cities to understand the political transformation in African countries that have experienced full-scale decentralization (Iwata 2012, 160).

The progress of democratization also enhances the political impact of decentralization. The simultaneous operation of democratization and decentralization might bring about more complicated challenges in African politics. It is not easy to examine the correlation between democratization and decentralization in African countries using a simplistic framework. However, it might be favorable to begin the process of decentralization after consolidating the democratization process for African countries to mitigate political shock, confusion, and violence in the process of enacting political and administrative reforms (Iwata 2011, 109).

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