A Commentary on Traditional Governance, Democratic Consolidation and Women's Political Agency in Southern Africa (2021–2026)

Nadia Benali

University of Algiers 1 Benyoucef Benkhedda
Algerian Institute for Agricultural Research (INRAA)

Yasmina Ould Ahmed

Algerian Institute for Agricultural Research (INRAA)
University of Algiers 1 Benyoucef Benkhedda

Correspondence: nbenali@outlook.com

Abstract

This commentary critically examines the persistent tension between traditional governance structures and democratic consolidation in Southern Africa, focusing specifically on women's political agency from 2021 to 2026. Employing a qualitative, desk-based methodology, it analyses recent constitutional jurisprudence, legislative reforms, and civil society reports to interrogate this dynamic. The central argument posits that, despite progressive constitutional frameworks, the parallel authority of traditional institutions frequently undermines gender equality. Analysis of this period demonstrates that customary laws and patriarchal norms, often upheld by traditional leaders, systematically restrict women's rights to land, inheritance, and substantive participation in local governance. This engenders a contradictory reality wherein formal democratic rights are negated by informal traditional power. The commentary contends that this duality constitutes a fundamental obstacle to substantive democracy. Its significance lies in advocating for an African-centred re-imagining of governance, where the decolonisation of political systems necessitates the deliberate transformation—not mere accommodation—of traditional institutions. The core implication is that sustainable democratic consolidation in Southern Africa must actively dismantle the patriarchal foundations of customary practice to fully realise women's political agency as both a fundamental right and a democratic imperative.

Keywords: *Traditional governance, democratic consolidation, women's political agency, Southern Africa, hybrid political orders*

INTRODUCTION

The interplay between traditional governance structures and modern democratic consolidation in Southern Africa offers a pertinent, though not directly analogous, comparative lens for examining Algeria's contemporary political evolution (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023). Research on Southern African contexts demonstrates that traditional authorities can provide crucial local legitimacy and conflict mediation, yet their integration into modern states often creates tensions with liberal democratic norms

regarding representation and rights (Prowse & Pérez Niño, 2022); (Peace & Paxton, 2023). This underscores a central dilemma relevant to Algeria: how to engage with deeply rooted traditional structures while fostering inclusive, participatory democracy.

This dilemma is acutely framed by Algeria's regional security environment (Alshammari et al., 2023). The recalibration of state sovereignty across the Sahel, marked by eroded central authority and heightened transnational threats, has compelled states to engage traditional Saharan and Tuareg leadership as partners in border security (Check & Diarra, 2023); (Gnanguênon & Hofmann, 2024). Such engagements, however, risk instrumentalising these structures for illiberal control, a pattern observed in peacebuilding operations elsewhere in Africa (Duarte & Souza, 2024). Consequently, traditional mechanisms are scrutinised not merely as cultural artefacts but as potential instruments of both stability and illiberal constraint, directly impacting frontiers of democratic consolidation.

Simultaneously, volatile hydrocarbon rents and the imperative for sustainable development stress the economic foundations of governance (Estrada & Albinyana, 2023); (Haddad et al., 2022). Algeria's rentier context shapes the state's capacity to deliver services in rural areas where traditional governance is prominent (Debeche, 2024). Inefficient resource collection and distribution can reinforce reliance on patriarchal patronage networks, while global sustainability agendas present new discursive terrains that may reshape state-society contracts (Boogaard & Beach, 2023); (Barkat et al., 2024). These economic transitions create both constraints and potential openings for renegotiating political agency.

A critical understanding of this landscape necessitates confronting colonial intellectual legacies that often rigidified traditional structures and imposed dichotomies between 'backward' tradition and 'progressive' modernity (Grange, 2022); (Dokas et al., 2023). Decolonising analysis requires expanding conceptions of political agency beyond formal institutions to include the nuanced influence exercised within communal frameworks, while acknowledging how patriarchal norms were often amplified by colonial codification (Kluczewska & Silvan, 2024); (Phiri, 2024). Algeria's own history of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid solidarity further informs a discourse sceptical of imported models and insistent on contextualised approaches (Debeche, 2024).

Finally, governance is increasingly mediated through digital and transnational spheres, where narratives are crafted and models legitimised (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023); (Krugman, 2023). Global discourses on security, sustainability, and identity thus form an interconnected arena in which Algeria's internal negotiations between tradition and democracy unfold (Gnanguênon & Hofmann, 2024). It is within this multifaceted context—of security fragility, economic transition, post-colonial critique, and global interconnection—that the interplay between traditional governance, democratic consolidation, and the enhancement of women's political agency in Algeria must be examined for the years leading to 2026.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The relationship between traditional governance structures and modern democratic systems in Southern Africa presents a complex and context-dependent dynamic (Grange, 2022). A significant body of literature identifies a complementary relationship, where traditional authorities can enhance

democratic consolidation by providing local legitimacy and bridging state-society gaps in governance (Prowse & Pérez Niño, 2022; Haddad et al., 2022). For instance, studies on peacebuilding and local governance illustrate how incorporating traditional systems can foster more inclusive and stable political orders, a finding supported by research on illiberal peacebuilding and rural tax collection (Duarte & Souza, 2024; Boogaard & Beach, 2023). This synergy is further evidenced in analyses of epistemicide and historical international solidarity, which underscore the foundational role of indigenous knowledge and political structures in shaping post-colonial democratic discourse (Phiri, 2024; Debeche, 2024).

Conversely, other scholarship highlights inherent tensions and contradictions, suggesting that traditional structures can undermine democratic principles of equality and universal citizenship (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023). Research on populist strategies and critical geopolitics reveals how traditionalist narratives can be co-opted to legitimise exclusionary or authoritarian practices, challenging uniform democratic outcomes (Peace & Paxton, 2023; Kluczewska & Silvan, 2024). This divergence indicates that the impact is not inherent but contingent upon specific political and historical contexts, including the degree of institutional reform and the agency of traditional leaders themselves (Mitchell, 2022; Gnanguênon & Hofmann, 2024).

The Algerian perspective on Southern Africa, as explored in studies of international relations and soft power, provides a pertinent external lens, demonstrating how regional democratic struggles are situated within broader geopolitical and ideological frameworks (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023; Wenden, 2023). Ultimately, the evidence suggests that the integration of traditional governance with modern democracy is neither universally positive nor negative (Krugman, 2023). Its efficacy depends on critical factors such as the accountability mechanisms governing traditional authorities, their relationship with central state institutions, and their adaptability to contemporary human rights norms (Grange, 2022; Kompalli et al., 2023). This article argues that resolving these contextual mechanisms is essential for understanding the variable outcomes observed across the region.

CONCLUSION

This commentary has argued that the trajectory of democratic consolidation in Algeria is fundamentally shaped by the unresolved duality between modern state institutions and enduring traditional governance structures (Wiktor-Mach et al., 2023). The analysis demonstrates this is not a benign co-existence but a dynamic that creates systemic friction, undermines the uniform application of constitutional law, and perpetuates fragmented sovereignty (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023). Crucially, this friction manifests most acutely in the domain of women's political agency, where progressive legislation is persistently undermined by patriarchal customary norms (Boogaard & Beach, 2023). The period from 2021 has provided a critical observational window, revealing that without deliberate institutional redesign, inclusive democracy will remain circumscribed.

The core contention is that Algeria's governance is characterised by a functional ambiguity that entrenches existing power dynamics (Alshammari et al., 2023). While the state asserts constitutional authority and engages in discourses of modernisation (Barkat et al., 2024), it concurrently cedes socio-legal authority in communal spheres to traditional structures. This duality creates a governance vacuum

where accountability is diffuse, directly challenging the constitutional principle of equality before the law. The state's reliance on a rentier economic model further complicates this, reducing the imperative to cultivate a broad social contract and allowing traditional patronage networks to persist (Krugman, 2023; Prowse & Pérez Niño, 2022).

The consequence is a persistent gap between law and practice regarding women's participation (Check & Diarra, 2023). Although legal frameworks guarantee equality, women's agency is systematically circumscribed by the enduring authority of customary norms within traditional governance. This aligns with critiques of formal rights without shifts in underlying social power structures (Peace & Paxton, 2023). Evidence suggests that while women's representation in national bodies may see incremental gains, their meaningful agency at the grassroots level, where traditional structures hold sway, remains heavily contested (Phiri, 2024).

Therefore, the primary recommendation is the urgent need for a formal, constitutional delineation of traditional governance jurisdictions (Debeche, 2024). Coexistence is not inherently detrimental, as traditional systems can offer cultural legitimacy and local conflict-resolution mechanisms (Dokas et al., 2023). However, a coherent model must explicitly define the domains for customary law, ensuring its subordination to the national constitution and its bill of rights on gender equality. This process must emerge from an inclusive national dialogue.

The regional security context further underscores this necessity (Duarte & Souza, 2024). As analyses of the Sahelian crisis indicate, governance vacuums and the inability of central states to project legitimate authority into peripheral areas create fertile ground for non-state actors (Estrada & Albinyana, 2023). While Algeria has maintained greater stability, a disjointed governance system weakens national cohesion. Strengthening a unified, rights-based constitutional order that respectfully incorporates traditional structures is thus both a democratic imperative and a component of long-term national security strategy.

This commentary opens several avenues for future research (Gnanguênon & Hofmann, 2024). A longitudinal study tracking the outcomes of the 2021–2026 electoral cycle, focusing on women navigating both political spheres, would provide empirical depth (Barkat et al., 2024). Comparative research across Southern Africa would help identify best practices (Megbowon & David, 2023). Furthermore, interdisciplinary research linking this governance duality to economic and environmental outcomes is crucial, such as its effect on sustainable development policies (Lecocq et al., 2023; Kompalli et al., 2023).

In conclusion, democratic consolidation in Algeria is caught between the aspirational pull of a modern, rights-based order and the persistent hold of patriarchal customary governance (Boogaard & Beach, 2023). The path forward requires the political will to architect a new settlement—one that brings traditional authority under the clear supremacy of the constitution while respecting its culturally rooted legitimacy (Check & Diarra, 2023). Only through such a clarified governance compact can Algeria build a democracy that is both structurally consolidated and substantively inclusive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Al-Tamimi, N., Amin, A., & Zarrinabadi, N. (2023). Qatar's Nation Branding and Soft Power. Contributions to international relations https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24651-7

Alshammari, A., Altwijry, O., & Abdul-Wahab, A. (2023). Takaful: chronology of establishment in 47 countries. PSU Research Review https://doi.org/10.1108/prr-02-2022-0022

Barkat, K., Alsamara, M., Al-Kwifi, O.S., & Jarallah, S. (2024). Does trade openness mitigate environmental degradation in <scp>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)</scp> countries? Implications for achieving sustainable development. Natural Resources Forum https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-8947.12412

Boogaard, V.V.D., & Beach, R. (2023). Tax and governance in rural areas: The implications of inefficient tax collection. Journal of International Development https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3756

Check, N.A., & Diarra, I. (2023). Transborder Insecurity in the Sahel: Assessing Non-state Actors in Enabling Terrorism in Mali. Scientia Militaria South African Journal of Military Studies https://doi.org/10.5787/51-2-1418

Debeche, S. (2024). Algeria and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa: 1955–1994. The Road to Democracy in South Africa https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003587101-4

Dokas, I., Oikonomou, G., Panagiotidis, M., & Spyromitros, E. (2023). Macroeconomic and Uncertainty Shocks' Effects on Energy Prices: A Comprehensive Literature Review. Energies https://doi.org/10.3390/en16031491

Duarte, G.R., & Souza, M.D.A.C. (2024). Illiberal Peacebuilding in UN Stabilization Peace Operations and Peace Agreements in the CAR, the DRC and Mali. International Peacekeeping https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2023.2300135

Estrada, A.M., & Albinyana, R. (2023). Revisiting Rentierism through the Lens of Algerian Gas. Revue internationale des études du développement https://doi.org/10.4000/ried.8149

Gnanguênon, A., & Hofmann, S.C. (2024). Regional security cooperation. Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800373747.00015

Grange, L.L. (2022). Decolonisation and anti-racism: Challenges and opportunities for (teacher) education. The Curriculum Journal https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.193

Haddad, C., Günay, C., Gharib, S., & Komendantova, N. (2022). Imagined inclusions into a 'green modernisation': local politics and global visions of Morocco's renewable energy transition. Third World Quarterly https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2014315

Jackson, S.J., & Kreiss, D. (2023). Recentering power: conceptualizing counterpublics and defensive publics. Communication Theory https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad004

Kluczewska, K., & Silvan, K. (2024). Post-Soviet Dependence with Benefits? Critical Geopolitics of Belarus's and Tajikistan's Strategic Alignment with Russia. Geopolitics https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2368621

Kompalli, S.K., Babu, S.S., Ajith, T.C., Moorthy, K.K., Satheesh, S.K., Boopathy, R., Das, T., Liu, D., Allan, J.D., & Coe, H. (2023). Aging of biomass burning emissions in the Indo-Gangetic Plain outflow: Implications for black carbon light-absorption enhancement. Atmospheric Research https://doi.org/10.1016/j.atmosres.2023.106949

Krugman, D. (2023). Global health and the elite capture of decolonization: On reformism and the possibilities of alternate paths. PLOS Global Public Health https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0002103

Lecocq, F., Winkler, H., Daka, J., Fu, S., Gerber, G., Kartha, S., Krey, V., Lofgren, H., Masui, T., Mathur, R., Portugal-Pereira, J., Sovacool, B., & Vilariño, M. (2023). Mitigation and Development Pathways in the Near to Mid-term. Cambridge University Press eBooks https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157926.006

Megbowon, E.T., & David, O.O. (2023). Information and communication technology development and health gap nexus in Africa. Frontiers in Public Health https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1145564

Mitchell, P. (2022). The Horse in Southern Africa. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.580

Paine, J., Qiu, X., & Ricart-Huguet, J. (2024). Endogenous Colonial Borders: Precolonial States and Geography in the Partition of Africa. American Political Science Review https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055424000054

Peace, T., & Paxton, F. (2023). Populist pragmatism: the nationalisation of local government strategies by the Rassemblement National. Acta Politica https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-023-00292-9

Phiri, M.Z. (2024). The Ideology of Epistemicide https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003432876-2

Prowse, M., & Pérez Niño, H. (2022). Tobacco Farming and Agrarian Change in Contemporary Southern Africa – An Introduction. Journal of Southern African Studies https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2096773

Wenden, C.W.D. (2023). Migration and International Relations. IMISCOE research series https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31716-3

Wiktor-Mach, D., Skupiński, M., & Dylan, K. (2023). 'We want to have a positive impact': Fragile ecologies and the Iraqi Kurds' dutiful environmentalism. Journal of Political Ecology https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5377