2 Conceptual Problems of Party Research in Africa

2.1 Introduction

Research on political parties in Africa draws on two sources:

- the classical field of (mostly Western) party research, which is an important and well-developed sub-discipline of political science that has produced a large body of literature;
- debates on democratisation and the state in Africa, which are more or less restricted to area specialists.

In these two fields of study, academic debates on theory and methodology have largely unfolded independently from each other and may even seem incompatible at a first glance. At least this was the outcome of some recent studies on political parties in Africa: party research appeared to have a methodological bias towards Western Europe, and parties on the African continent did not easily fit into the established paradigms and assumptions. Naturally, this raised concerns about ‘universal’ or ‘Africa-specific’ criteria for further research – an issue which is already a perennial one in the Area Studies (for more on this see Chabal 2005a). While area specialists are certainly more sensitive to this problem it has only recently started to enter into the main field of contemporary party research. The advent of the ‘Third Wave of democratization’ in the developing countries has increasingly drawn the attention to political parties in non-Western societies. What actually binds both research fields together is the fact that party research cannot be disconnected from the broader issues of statehood and democracy. In this context it is quite obvious that the Third Wave has posed a number of challenges to conventional notions of what democracy is and how it functions. Imperfect neo-democracies – sometimes called hybrid regimes – in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe defy some of the established assumptions. Here, Africa is no exception, it rather seems that
what is often thought of as an uneasy, precarious middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the developing world and the postcommunist world. (...) the disappointment over falling short of democracy should be replaced with realistic expectations about the likely patterns of political life in these countries (Carothers 2002: 18).

Consequently, this will have wider implications for political parties as actors in the realm of state and society. In the following section, we will discuss some of the findings and problems of party research in Africa and relate them to the latest developments in the field of general party research as well as that of democracy studies.

2.2 Party Research in Africa: Findings and Problems

Following independence most African countries had multiparty systems which stimulated a first body of literature on political parties (see for example Hodgkin 1961; Morgenthau 1964; Coleman/Rosberg 1964 and others). From the 1960s onwards, single-party states and authoritarian rule spread over the continent and scholarly interest in political parties declined. In the 1990s, multipartyism reappeared in Africa, but it took until the turn of the century before the research on African political parties was revitalised.

As a consequence of the multidimensionality of political parties as objects of research, the first studies took up a large variety of different problems, such as typologies of parties and party systems (Erdmann 2002a), functions of political parties for democratisation and consolidation (Randall/Svåsand 2002; Emminghaus 2002), electoral systems and party systems (Boogards 2000; Basedau 2002), clientelism and presidentialism (van de Walle 2003) or the representation of group interests in parties (Randall 2007; Widner 1997).

Since multiparty systems on the continent are of a relatively recent origin, only little field research has been carried out so far and there is a clear lack of empirical evidence. Research on party systems made faster progress because it allows working with aggregate data (election results, numbers of parties and seat shares in parliament) while studies on individual parties usually require extensive field research.

Nevertheless, most scholars agreed that political parties in Africa were organisationally and programmatically weak (see for example (Tetzlaff 2002); Randall/Svåsand 2001). Most parties were said to lack a stable and functioning party apparatus and active membership (Erdmann 2002: 268). In a study for the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Nordlund/Salih (2007: 81) observed that 75% of the 200 West-African parties under