Deserting Democracy: Authoritarianism and Geo-strategic Politics in Djibouti

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Abstract

When Ismael Omar Guelleh became President of Djibouti in 1999, there were strong indications that the country was headed in a more democratic direction. Despite these indications, the period since has seen the Guelleh regime use heavy-handed tactics to repress dissent. Based on an examination of democratic contestation in the electoral arena, legislature, judiciary, media and civil society, this article argues that the regime is now fully authoritarian, yet draws little censure from the West. The US in particular has been willing to overlook the regime’s democratic shortcomings due to the security-based geo-strategic importance attached to Djibouti, which hosts several foreign military bases. This case also points to a shift in the way the US engages with African regimes. While policy discourse continues to emphasize democratization, since 2001 Washington has become increasingly willing to overlook authoritarian drift and violations of human rights where security and counter-terrorist activities are concerned.
Introduction

In 1999, President Ismael Omar Guelleh indicated that the small east African country of Djibouti was moving in a democratic direction. Democratic institutions were reinforced through the appointment of an ombudsman, and public discussions of education and economic reforms (Schermerhorn 2005). Less than six months later, the main opposition candidate and 19 of his relatives and supporters were arrested, detained, and fined for ‘spreading false news’ (Amnesty International 1999). The period since has seen the government increasingly crack down on any form of dissent: responding to criticism with detention and torture (Amnesty International 2010; Reporters Without Borders 2012).

Based on a review of the electoral arena, legislature, judiciary, media and civil society, this paper argues that the Guelleh regime was competitive authoritarian from 1999 to 2006 when it began to shift in a more authoritarian direction; by 2011 the regime was fully authoritarian. This shift has drawn little, if any, censure from the West despite the fact that Djibouti is the largest per capita recipient of US and French foreign aid in Africa (Brass 2008). This raises a number of questions. What evidence is there for this shift? Why is the regime seemingly immune to Western censure? What effect is this likely to have on the future of the country? In answering these questions, this paper draws attention to the geo-strategic importance attached to Western investments, particularly military bases, in Djibouti.

This case draws attention to a shift in the way the US and other Western governments engage with African regimes. For much of the Cold War, developing countries served as an arena where highly securitized power politics between the East and West were played out with little regard for
the democratic credentials of regimes. This began to change in the late 1980s as Western
governments increasingly worked to promote democracy in Africa including through aid
conditionalities. While the US policy discourse continues to emphasize democratization, since
the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 the US is willing to overlook authoritarian drift and
violations of human rights where security and counter-terrorist activities are concerned. The
Guelleh regime has responded to these changing priorities by shifting the focus from the
implementation of democratic reforms to leveraging the country’s geo-strategic position to its
advantage.

This paper is organized into three sections. The first section establishes the historical and
geographical context, and outlines the theoretical framework based on a review of the
democratization literature. The second section analyses evidence of democratic contestation in
the electoral arena, legislature, judiciary, media and civil society, which subsequently is used to
evaluate and classify the regime. The third section examines the factors that facilitate the
authoritarian drift of the Guelleh regime with a particular focus on geo-strategic investments.

Section 1: The Context

Unlike its neighbors in the Horn of Africa – Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea – Djibouti does not
attract much political attention. The country is situated in the Horn of Africa and is roughly the
size of Belgium. According to 2009 census data, it has a population of 818,000 people, 60 per
cent of whom live in the capital, Djibouti City.¹
Djibouti is known for its inhospitable environment. The average daily temperature is approximately 34°C (93°F) and has been known to rise as high as 55°C (131°F). The country lacks significant arable land, and has little in the way of fresh water or natural resources. Not surprisingly the country experiences extended periods of severe drought and famine.²

The Issa and the Afar make up the two major ethnic groups in Djibouti. The Issa clan constitutes 50 to 60 per cent of the population and is based largely in the capital. The Afar, who are related to groups in Eritrea and Ethiopia, represent 35 to 40 per cent of the population and are based in the north.³ Tensions between the Issa and the Afar date back to the late colonial period (1967 to 1975) when the French administration favored the Afar in the allocation of government positions. In the period since independence, the Afar have been marginalized by the Issa-dominated government while the regions they inhabit have received little in the way of development.⁴

Djibouti is one of the least developed countries in the world, ranking 164 out of 187 countries according to the Humanitarian Development Index.⁵ In the period from 1996 to 2002, relative poverty rose from 65 per cent to 74 per cent while extreme poverty rose from 35 per cent to 42 per cent.⁶ While Djibouti often is labeled a middle-income country owing to its relatively high GDP per capita (US $890 in 2004), this figure is deceptive; once purchasing power is taken into account, real GDP per capita stands at a mere $450 per month.⁷

Section 2: Theoretical Framework
During the Cold War, Africa was considered to be an important theatre for containing the Soviet influence. The US supported African leaders and insurgent groups in countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, South Africa and Zaire\(^1\) with little regard for their democratic credentials. As Thomson writes, ‘concentrating on their Cold War priorities, neither Washington nor Moscow seemed too concerned that these countries were largely autocratic and had poor human rights records.’\(^2\) The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a shift in the way Western countries in general and the US in particular engaged with African regimes. Democratic reform and market liberalization were promoted through various measures including conditions attached to foreign aid. This period saw a sharp rise in the number of regimes adopting democratic reforms including multi-party elections.\(^8\) In many cases these reforms were implemented by ruling elites attempting to access foreign aid while the underlying political culture remained largely unchanged. Unsurprisingly, the period since shows that the most impressive growth is not of democratic regimes but of pseudo-democracies in which elections and democratic institutions mask authoritarian elements.

Many regime sub-types have been developed in an attempt to categorize systems that fall between democracy and authoritarianism. These include illiberal democracy, electoral democracy, semi-democracy, semi-dictatorship, electoral authoritarianism, soft authoritarianism, semi-authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism.\(^9\) A central tenet of all these regime subtypes is that democratic political institutions, such as multiparty elections, obscure authoritarian domination.\(^10\)

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\(^2\) Ibid, p 233-4.
The ‘competitive authoritarian’ sub-type, developed by Levitsky and Way, is one of the few endowed with a clear definition and detailed information about the form of democratic institutions. Competitive authoritarian regimes are defined as ‘civilian regimes in which democratic institutions exist and permit meaningful competition for power, but where the political playing field is so heavily tilted in favor of incumbents that the regime cannot be labeled democratic’.\textsuperscript{11} Levitsky and Way argue that to be considered a modern democracy, the legislature and executive must be chosen through free and fair elections, virtually all adults must have the right to vote, political rights including freedom of the press and freedom to criticize the government without reprisals are protected, and elected leaders have genuine authority to govern. While these criteria may be violated in democratic regimes, these violations should not be broad or systemic enough to undermine democratic competition. By contrast, in competitive authoritarian regimes these criteria are violated with such regularity and to such a degree that the regime cannot be considered a modern democracy.\textsuperscript{12}

The distinction between authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes is reflected in their behavior. In competitive authoritarian regimes, elections are held regularly and generally are free of massive fraud. However, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results. Journalists, opposition politicians, and other government critics may be spied on, threatened, harassed, or arrested and members of the opposition may be jailed, exiled, or – less frequently – assaulted or murdered.\textsuperscript{13}
Competitive authoritarian regimes also fall short of being fully authoritarian. In competitive authoritarian regimes ‘democratic institutions offer an important channel through which the opposition may seek power’ while in authoritarian regimes ‘democratic rules simply serve to legitimate an existing autocratic leadership’.\textsuperscript{14} While democratic institutions – including elections – may exist in authoritarian regimes, they do not yield meaningful contestation for power. By contrast, arenas of democratic institutions in competitive authoritarian regimes are places where the opposition can periodically challenge, weaken, and in some cases overthrow the leadership. Levitsky and Way identify four such arenas: the electoral arena, the legislature, the judiciary and the media. Civil society often plays a similar function and is included as an additional arena for democratic contestation for the purposes of this paper.

In competitive authoritarian regimes the leadership must balance the politically costly repression of democratic contestation arising through these arenas with tolerance that can result in a loss of power. Additionally, competitive authoritarian regimes employ subtle techniques including the use of bribery, compliant judiciaries and other state agencies to ‘legally’ repress dissent. In contrast, authoritarian regimes openly violate democratic institutions through the direct repression of the opposition and the media.\textsuperscript{15}

The competitive authoritarianism sub-type encompasses a vast spectrum of regimes: from relatively competitive and transparent political systems to those in which elections represent a narrow opening for democratic competition. Given this, a regime may shift significantly in either a democratic or authoritarian direction while remaining within the conceptual bounds of
The following section examines the political system in Djibouti since independence through the lens of competitive authoritarianism.

Section 3: Unpacking the Guelleh Regime

Like many African countries, Djibouti saw the domination of a single party in the years following independence. Hassan Gouled Aptidon became the country’s first president in 1982 under a constitution that only permitted the participation of a single party: the Issa-controlled People’s Rally for Progress (RPP). The country remained relatively stable until 1991 when the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD), an Afar-dominated organization, launched an insurgency in northern Djibouti. The FRUD cited years of political marginalization and inequality, as well as the government’s rejection of democratic power sharing as reasons for instigating the rebellion. In 1992, at the height of the civil war, a new constitution was approved establishing Djibouti as a multi-party system and permitting the registration of four political parties. Aptidon stepped down from power in 1999 and was succeeded by his nephew, Ismael Omar Guelleh.

Upon taking power, Guelleh indicated that he would move Djibouti in a democratic direction. He vowed to run ‘an American-style campaign’ with public debates between presidential candidates and he granted coverage to the opposition through the state-run media. He also established institutions that bore the signs of transparency and increasing democratization. However, the period since has seen the government increasingly crackdown on expressions of dissent, responding to criticism with detention and torture.
The following section examines how the domains of democratic contestation – the electoral, legislative, and judicial arenas as well as the media and civil society – have fared in Djibouti since the 1992 reforms. This analysis will be used to classify and evaluate the democratic performance of the Guelleh regime.

*The Electoral Arena*

Under the 1992 constitution, the president is elected for a six-year term through universal suffrage, with each candidate limited to two terms (Article 23). If no candidate wins an outright majority, the two with the most votes proceed to a second-round run-off. Meanwhile, the system for electing the parliament is based on a first-past-the-post model in which the 65 seats of the National Assembly are divided between five constituencies. When a party wins the majority of votes in a constituency, it gains all associated seats. The constituency covering the capital – Djibouti City – is allocated 37 seats; in itself this represents a parliamentary majority. Under this system, a party can win up to 45 per cent of the national vote without winning a single seat in parliament. Furthermore, public financing for election campaigning is available only to parties represented in the National Assembly, while the nomination of a presidential candidate is provided solely to parties with at least 25 seats. Meanwhile, all presidential and parliamentary candidates are required to pay a deposit of five million Djiboutian francs – approximately $28,500, a prohibitive sum for a population, almost half of which lives in extreme poverty.

The six-member Constitutional Council – appointed by the president, the head of the National Assembly and the Judicial Superior Council – has legal oversight of election proceedings. Meanwhile, the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) is responsible for
developing the electoral list, distributing voter identity cards, and overseeing polling day procedures.²⁶ The CENI has been criticized for irregularities in the preparation and administration of elections including double voting and inaccurate election registers. Observers have noted the over-involvement of the Interior Ministry in voter registration and electoral training as well.²⁷

Elections

For several years following Guelleh’s rise to power, the electoral arena represented a forum through which some level of democratic contestation was expressed. The April 1999 presidential elections – which Guelleh won with 74.1 per cent of the vote – were declared generally free and fair by international observers.²⁸ Three years later, the limits on the number of political parties were lifted, opening the way for unrestricted multi-party elections. The RPP formed the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) together with a faction of the FRUD.²⁹ The UMP was opposed in the 2003 parliamentary election by the Union for Democratic Change (UAD) coalition. According to data from the Ministry of Interior, the UAD was merely 3,000 votes short of winning the 37-seat block of Djibouti city and taking the corresponding parliamentary majority.³⁰ However, due to the unorthodox electoral system, this did not translate into any seats in parliament.

In recent years, there has been a clear shift away from free and fair elections with the opposition increasingly questioning electoral process. The opposition boycotted the 2005 presidential election due to concerns over the lack of an independent electoral commission, the lack of revision of electoral lists and the absence of free and equal access to the media.³¹ The opposition
also boycotted the parliamentary election three years later, describing it as a ‘farce’.\textsuperscript{32} In 2008, Guelleh issued a presidential decree dissolving the Movement for Democratic Renewal and Development (MDRD) party, which campaigned against government corruption and human rights abuses.\textsuperscript{33} While the opposition participated in the 2013 parliamentary election, they claimed the election was ‘rigged’ with incidences of ‘ballot-stuffing and double voting’.\textsuperscript{34}

Guelleh demonstrated an increasing grip on power in the year leading up to the 2011 presidential election. In April 2010, the National Assembly – which the President effectively controls – amended the constitution to abolish term limits for the executive, shortened the presidential term from six to five years, and set a 75-year age limit for presidential candidates. These amendments allowed Guelleh to stand for a third term.\textsuperscript{35} In response and inspired by events in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, public demonstrations broke out in February 2011. Initially limited to students protesting university policy, the demonstrations escalated into a general contestation of government policy with up to 2,000 protestors demanding Guelleh’s resignation. Demonstrators threw stones at police and burned vehicles while the government fired tear gas into the crowds and arrested over 100 people.\textsuperscript{36} In response, the government banned all opposition meetings and demonstrations in contravention to Article 15 of the Constitution.\textsuperscript{37} Guelleh went on to win the 2011 presidential election with 80.6 per cent of the vote amid allegations of voter intimidation and rigging.\textsuperscript{38} This election spurred a change in Freedom House’s classification of Djibouti from ‘partially free’ to ‘not free’.\textsuperscript{39}
Legislature

Djibouti’s legislature, known as the Assemblee Nationale or Chambres des Deputes, sits for one month, twice a year. The RPP (later the UMP coalition) has won every seat in the 65-member National Assembly since the 1992 reforms; the opposition has never been represented in the parliament. Despite the parliamentarian representation of the two major ethnic groups, the Issa dominate this body. Furthermore, the legislature cannot question the national budget, nor can it dispute presidential appointments; the legislature effectively acts as a rubber stamp for the President.

Judiciary

The legal system in Djibouti is based on a combination of the French civil legal system, traditional practices and Islamic law. There is a relatively strong constitutional basis for both the independence of the judiciary and judicial oversight of the executive. Furthermore, the government passed a law in 2000 that provides for the separation of the court system from the Ministry of Justice, though to date this law has not been enforced. The Ministries of Justice and Finance control the appointment, promotion and income of judges, leaving them susceptible to bribery and corruption. Reports on the human rights situation in Djibouti claim that the judiciary routinely ignores the provisions and rights outlined in the constitution such as the constitutional provision that arrests occur only with a judicial warrant. According to one report, this provision is ‘habitually flouted by state security forces, as they detain people without warrants, often detaining them beyond the legal limit for detention without charge’. 
While Article 15 of the constitution provides for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, neither is a reality in Djibouti. The government owns the main media outlets – the newspaper *La Nation de Djibouti* and the radio/television broadcaster *Radiodiffusion Television de Djibouti* – of which the staff is employed directly by the government. The reporting of certain types of events, including corruption and crimes by government officials, often results in the imprisonment, exile and/or fining of the responsible editor and/or reporter. Combined with laws against slander and the dissemination of false information, this contributes to an atmosphere in which journalists and reporters exercise self-censorship. Poor pay further erodes the independence of the media, making reporters susceptible to taking bribes for writing stories favorable to the government. Subsequently, the official media largely ignores messages from opposition parties and generally lacks diverse political participation.

Before its closure in 2007, the newspaper *Le Renouveau* represented one of the only venues for expressing political dissent. The editor and publisher of the newspaper, Daher Ahmed Farad, was regularly harassed and arrested for publishing articles critical of the government. The newspaper was closed following the publication of an article accusing a government official of corruption. There has been no independent media in Djibouti since. Even journalists and stringers for foreign-based media outlets have been harassed by the government and held without trial. Finally, the prohibitively high cost of Internet access (approximately $200 per month), combined with limited service and government censorship, limits the ability of citizens to access online news sources. While government censorship of the Internet is a concern, organizations are adopting increasingly sophisticated techniques, such as mirror websites, to circumvent this.
Civil society

Like many African countries that adopted democratic reforms in the early 1990s, Djibouti has witnessed a boom in grassroots associations. Despite having considerable experience at their disposal, these organizations are constrained by a lack of structure, weak technical and institutional capacity, and limited financial means.\(^{55}\) These factors contribute to a situation in which civil society organizations play little role in the development of public policy or in holding the government to account.\(^{56}\)

Of the hundreds of civil society organizations operating in Djibouti, only a handful – most notably trade unions and human rights organizations – can be considered truly independent of the government.\(^{57}\) The government has used a variety of methods to intimidate and suppress these organizations including a wave of trade union leader arrests in April 2006. The government has also systematically targeted the Djiboutian League of Human Rights (LDDH) with grenade attacks on and arrests of its president, his family and supporters.\(^{58}\)

The expulsion of the USAID-contracted NGO, Democracy International, provides further evidence of the government’s intolerance of democracy promotion. The US-based organization was under contract to provide consultant services on democracy and governance for the 2011 presidential elections.\(^{59}\) In March, one month prior to the elections, the Djiboutian government accused the organization assisting opposition parties and forced the group to leave the country.\(^{60}\)
Classifying the Guelleh Regime

The nature of electoral competition in Djibouti has changed dramatically since 1999. Elections in 1999 and 2003 were both judged to be largely free and fair by international observers. That the opposition came within 3,000 votes of winning the 2003 elections and, in turn, forming government highlights how the electoral arena represented an arena through which the leadership could be challenged and potentially overturned at this point. Subsequent elections saw electoral competition increasingly undermined to the point that in 2011 the electoral arena no longer represented a forum for democratic contestation. This shift is evidenced in several key events including: the dissolution of an opposition party by parliamentary decree in 2008; the amendment of the constitution in 2010 to enable Guelleh to stand for a third term; and the violent suppression and subsequent ban of protests in February 2011. Despite the legalization of multi-party politics, Guelleh continues to foster one-party domination, undermining political competition and participation.

Guelleh and the RPP/UMP have used a variety of techniques to tip the electoral balance in their favor. Opposition candidates and their supporters are regularly harassed, arrested and exiled. The restrictions on which parties can access state financing and nominate presidential candidates as well as the large deposit candidates must pay represent significant barriers to participation. Meanwhile, the system by which members of the Constitutional Council are nominated infringes on the independence and impartiality of elections. Guelleh and the UMP are further advantaged by their monopoly on access to the national media.
Since Guelleh came to power, the legislature has played little role in Djiboutian politics. The design of the electoral system, based on a small number of winner-takes-all constituency blocks, has played a large role in limiting oppositional representation. The absence of the latter undermines the ability of the legislature to foster contestation, which is further restricted by the domination of the executive and the cabinet as well as the limited number of days the parliament is in session and the narrow range of topics discussed.

The judiciary also fails to foster democratic contestation. This institution is almost entirely dependent on the government, undermining the separation of powers and the rule of law. In the few cases when the judiciary ruled against the interests of the government, the judges were replaced with those who were more compliant. This is indicative of the larger problem of the over involvement of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice in the judicial system.

In the past, the media represented a forum through which dissent could be expressed. In recent years, these opportunities have been severely restricted with the official media rarely criticizing the government. This is unsurprising given the poor training and salaries of employees, the fact that staff members are considered civil servants, and the severe slander laws and punishment of criticism. Despite intimidation and harassment, the independent media represented a forum through which the government position could be challenged. However, since the closure of Le Renouveau in 2007, the media has not represented an arena where democratic contestation can be expressed.
Finally, civil society finds limited space for the expression of democratic contestation. Most civil society organizations are connected to the government and subsequently their capacity to criticize is restricted by their weak and fragmented nature. The few organizations that do challenge the government – trade unions and human rights organizations – are routinely intimidated. The 2011 ousting of Democracy International highlights the increasing intolerance of criticism from international civil society. While civil society continues to represent an arena through which limited criticism of the regime is voiced, the government has suppressed this with increasing severity.

From 1999 to 2006 several democratic elements were present in Djibouti including multiple political parties, an active civil society, and a diverse media. The presence of democratic contestation emerging through these institutions indicates that the regime was competitive authoritarian in this period. The period since has seen the regime clearly shift in an authoritarian direction evident in the crackdown and subsequent closure of the independent media, the increasingly non-competitive nature of elections and the targeting of trade unions, and civil society organizations. By 2011, the few arenas that had fostered democratic contestation had been suppressed by what had become a fully authoritarian regime. While the legal underpinnings of these institutions remain largely unchanged since 1999, their ability to foster democratic contestation in practice has become increasingly circumscribed.

Section 4: Explaining the Authoritarian Shift

By populating high-level government positions with members of the ruling UMP coalition and his own sub-clan, the President has maintained a firm grip on information and daily decision-
making and thus on power. Combined with the heavy-handed response of the government to censure, the regime has muted domestic criticism. Short of armed rebellion, it is difficult to see how domestic pressure can be applied to urge the regime in a democratic direction in the foreseeable future.

Despite increasing authoritarianism, the Guelleh regime has not met with the censure that many African nations receive from the West. While the US Department of State (DoS) has drawn attention to the use of excessive force, including torture by security forces, harsh prison conditions, arbitrary arrest and prolonged pretrial detention, there is no evidence of any DoS official condemning acts of violence against civilians or criticizing the human rights record of the regime. International NGOs operating in Djibouti note that the regime actually counts on the US ‘for backup or to turn a blind eye’ to such abuses. Even the expulsion of US-based NGO Democracy International failed to provoke a strong reaction from Washington.

To understand why the US, while portraying itself as a defender of human rights and a purveyor of democracy, fails to condemn the increasing authoritarianism of the Guelleh regime, it is first necessary to understand how the US is involved in the country. The geographic extremities of continents tend to have immense strategic value, and Djibouti is no exception. The country is located on one of the world’s busiest shipping routes at the southern entrance to the Red Sea. It is also a relatively peaceful country with several unstable neighbors that have become hubs of terrorist activity. With little manufacturing and no natural resource base, the Djiboutian economy is centered on activities linked to its geo-strategic location including the international port, the
railway linking neighboring land-locked Ethiopia to the port, and revenue from several foreign military bases on its soil.

While Djibouti has long been host to the most important French bases in Africa, the number of countries establishing military facilities in the small country has grown rapidly since 2001. These bases represent a key source of revenue for the Djiboutian government. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US established the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) at Camp Lemonnier to counter terrorism in the region. The camp is leased from the Djiboutian government for $38 million per year. The Djiboutian government used this lease agreement to leverage more rent from the French, raising it from $20 million to $34 million per annum.

The US expanded Camp Lemonnier in 2010 after an attempted bombing of two US-bound airlines in Yemen and the consolidation of power in Somalia by Al Shabaab. Since then, the base has operated as a full-time drone launch site to undertake covert missions in the region, becoming the ‘centerpiece of an expanding constellation of half a dozen US drone and surveillance bases in Africa’. Due to space constraints, Camp Lemonnier shares a single runway with Djibouti International Airport and as such is one of the only places in the world where US drones operate from a civilian airstrip. In August 2012, the US DoD presented a plan to the US Congress to expand the camp throughout the next 25 years. The plan includes nearly $1.4 billion in construction projects allowing for a three-fold increase in special operations. The importance of Camp Lemonnier for US interests was underscored by the Pentagon’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for Africa who claimed that ‘[the based] is not an outpost in the middle of
nowhere that is of marginal interest… this is a very important location in terms of US interests, in terms of freedom of navigation, when it comes to power projection’.  

Several other countries have established a military presence in Djibouti, many to support counter-piracy activities in the region. In 2010, Japan opened its first base on foreign soil here; the base is leased from the government for $40 million per year. An agreement was signed between the Italian and Djiboutian governments in 2012, granting Italy permission to establish a military facility. German, Spanish and Dutch soldiers are also stationed in Djibouti while Russian, Chinese, Indian and Iranian warships and reconnaissance aircraft use the country as a base.

In addition to foreign military rents, Djibouti receives high levels of foreign aid from the US, France and other donors. The country is the largest per capita recipient of French foreign spending with approximately $35 million spent on aid and local military assistance in 2008. Contributions from the US are also significant. In 2010, the US contributed $6.6 million in foreign aid; of this, $3.3 million was earmarked for development assistance while $2.5 million went to financing the Djiboutian military. With a small, highly urbanized population, these high levels of aid should have had a visible impact on levels of development. On the contrary, Friends of Djibouti report that US aid has not brought about ‘any improvements for the lives of Djiboutian people’ over 70 per cent of whom ‘continue to live in poverty with very limited access to healthcare, welfare and utilities services’.
There has also been significant non-military foreign investment in recent years, particularly around the port and associated rail facilities. The breakdown of relations between Eritrea and landlocked Ethiopia in the late 1990s led to the re-routing of much of Ethiopia’s trade through the port of Djibouti. In the period since, the port has handled nearly 90 per cent of Ethiopia’s import-export traffic. This drove a massive increase in traffic through the port, rising from 1.7 million tons in 1997 to 4.2 million tons in 2002. Dubai Ports World (DPW) has run the port since 2000 when it signed a 20-year concession with the Djiboutian government. The company has since expanded the facilities and invested $800 million in building the new Doraleh terminal. The primary link between the port and the Ethiopian capital is the dilapidated Djibouti-Ethiopia railway. One third of Djibouti’s economy is based on proceeds from the port.

The port has seen Djibouti become an increasingly important business partner for the Gulf economies in general and Dubai in particular. In 2012, the Government of Djibouti announced that it was in talks with China, the World Bank and the African Development Bank about plans to double the capacity of the Doraleh Terminal by 2015, costing an estimated $300 million. Plans are also underway to build an additional five ports around the country and undertake further repairs of the rail link with Ethiopia. Furthermore, the government has signed investment MOUs with a number of other governments including Iran in 2010 and South Sudan in 2012.

According to data from Djibouti’s Central Bank, commercial investment in the country increased from $38.5 million in 2003 to $234 million in 2008. The leasing of land for the US, French, and Japanese military bases alone provides the Djiboutian government with $112 million per year. This investment is likely to expand in the near future. Nevertheless, the economic benefits
of this boom have not reached most citizens.\textsuperscript{90} Food and water remain in short supply across the country, while unemployment is high at approximately 30 per cent.\textsuperscript{91} Even the service industry around the ports and military bases has been dominated by foreign-owned businesses.\textsuperscript{92} The low levels of government spending on health, education and public investment combined with the high volume of revenue entering the country begs the question: where is the money going?\textsuperscript{93}

The large volume of revenue entering the country and the minimal public spending coupled with the lack of government oversight indicate corruption on a massive scale. A letter written by the Friends of Djibouti to the US Secretary of State in December 2012 draws attention to high levels of fraud by the regime. The letter appeals to the US Government (USG) to take ‘greater responsibility and awareness about where the money the USG gives to Djibouti ends up’ and to help ‘ensure there are systems and institutions in place that allow for accountability and transparent use of funds’.\textsuperscript{94} This corruption is facilitated by the extensive patronage network underpinning the regime evidenced in the stacking of the government apparatus with members of the President’s sub-clan. The above analysis supports the argument that decision-making is driven by the desire to maintain control of the state and the resources that accrue for those in power.\textsuperscript{95}

High levels of corruption and patronage mean there are few incentives for the ruling elite to strengthen democratic institutions or implement democratic reform. Rent-seeking elites tend to work against the formation of strong institutions that might curb or curtail their access to easily corruptible revenue.\textsuperscript{96} These high inflows of corruptible revenue also undermine the establishment of strong democratic institutions by reducing the need for the government to tax
the citizenry. Finally, by depriving the public sector and education system of funds, the ruling elites stymie the development of an educated and empowered populace that would be better positioned to hold them accountable.

Western donors continue to push for democratic reform and improved respect for human rights in many African countries. A brief survey of the language used in DoS Bilateral Relations Fact Sheets for ten countries in East Africa provides insight into US priorities in the region. These fact sheets list some of the main problems faced by each country and how the DoS support them in overcoming these issues. Of the countries reviewed, three made reference to democratic institutions, five referred to the human rights situation, five to governance and four to political and/or constitutional reform. The fact sheet for Djibouti made no mention of human rights, democratic institutions, or political and constitutional reform, and only passing reference to ‘governance challenges’ in relation to hindering economic growth. This underscores the fact that the US draws attention to human rights abuses and poor governance selectively.

In the case of Djibouti, if Western governments were to implement such measures they would risk losing access to geo-strategically important military bases. Knowing the importance attached to these military bases in the current international climate, any threat to withdraw aid or support by the US would not be viewed as credible by the Guelleh regime. Furthermore, by diversifying the range of state actors invested in Djibouti – from a dependence on France in the late 1990s to the current plethora of countries including the US, China, Iran, the Gulf States, Japan, South

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3 Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.
4 Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.
5 Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda.
6 Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda.
7 Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan.
Sudan, Ethiopia and other EU States – the regime has reduced its dependence on a single source of revenue. Even if one investor pulled out in protest of government abuses, the regime would continue to have access to a large pool of revenue. This position weakens the ability of any one state to push for reform in Djibouti.

Villalón and VonDoepp argue that democratization can only be established and endure when the interests and calculations of key players motivate them to work within or comply with the system rather than subvert it. Access to large sums of easily-corruptible revenue entering Djibouti country provide a strong incentive for the ruling elite to remain in power, undermine the general development of the population and push the country in an authoritarian direction. Given the relatively public nature of foreign covert military operations in Djibouti, including the use of a civilian airstrip for the launch of drones, the US and other Western actors appears to prefer working in an environment with an under-educated population and a repressive government that prohibits investigations into or criticism of security facilities.

The Djibouti case also points to a shift in the way the US engages with African regimes. Throughout the 1990s the promotion of democratization and respect for human rights were central to US policy on the continent. However, since the terrorist attacks of September 2001, conditions have been replaced by a focus on counter-terrorist measures. While the rhetoric of democracy remains prominent in the policy discourse, the US increasingly has been willing to overlook authoritarian drift and violations of human rights where security and counter-terrorist activities are concerned. Further research is required to determine the extent to which this is happening in other regimes across Africa.
When combined, these factors lead to a situation in which the Guelleh regime has strong incentives to push in an authoritarian direction. The end result has been the implementation of increasingly authoritarian measures, met with an absence of censure.

Section 5: Conclusion

Despite indications in 1999 that Djibouti was becoming more democratic, the period since has seen the country revert to full-scale authoritarianism. By examining evidence of democratic contestation emerging through the four arenas identified by Levitsky and Way – the electoral arena, legislature, judiciary and media – plus civil society, this article demonstrates that the Guelleh regime was competitive authoritarian from 1999 until approximately 2008. By 2011, the regime had become fully authoritarian. By this time, many opportunities for democratic contestation through the media, civil society and the electoral arena had been suppressed. This shift is most clearly visible in the harassment and subsequent closure of the independent media in 2008, the heavy-handed response of the government to the 2011 protests, as well as the non-competitive nature of elections. Meanwhile the winner-takes-all design of parliament’s electoral system, the subservience of the judiciary, the synchronization of the UMP with positions in the government, and the stacking of the government apparatus with members of the President’s own sub-clan reinforces Guelleh’s grip on power.

At first look, the lack of Western censure of authoritarianism in Djibouti is puzzling. An examination of the US presence in Djibouti helps shed light on the reasons for this silence. Since 2001, with the establishment of the US military base at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti has become
central to US security interests. The US appears unwilling to risk continued access to the base by condemning the heavy-handed tactics of Guelleh’s regime. Instead, the US chooses either to turn a blind eye or support the regime while lining the pockets of the leadership with substantial amounts of foreign aid and military base rents. This lack of Western censure has enabled the Guelleh regime to implement increasingly repressive and authoritarian policies with dire consequences for the people of Djibouti.

The Djiboutian case also has wider significance, pointing to a shift in the way the US engages with African regimes. Once more, the US appears to be content to overlook widespread human rights abuses and authoritarianism where security concerns are at stake. The case lends support to Young’s argument that against a more uncertain and turbulent international arena, Western governments have ‘reverted to attaching a high priority to deepening political engagement with autocratic regimes.’ This sends a clear signal to other regimes that authoritarianism will be tolerated where security concerns are at stake. As the US and other Western governments continue to support authoritarian regimes such Guelleh’s, the persistent democratic rhetoric increasingly rings hollow.

Guelleh’s positioned is further strengthened by the diversification of international investors in the country. In the early 1990s, Djibouti was dependent on France. Today, a large number of countries are invested in the country. By doing so, the Guelleh regime has reduced the risk of being held to the political conditions of any one country. The investment boom has benefited only a small section of the population while the majority continues to live in abject poverty. This situation threatens to aggravate the marginalization of the Afar minority, and, as a result,
jeopardizes the country’s long-term stability. By working with the Guelleh regime regardless of its democratic performance, the US undermines its own long-term security interests in the region.

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1 B Mesfin, ‘Elections, politics and external involvement in Djibouti’, Pretoria, South Africa, Institute for Security Studies, 2011. Those living in rural areas are predominantly pastoralist and maintain a nomadic lifestyle.
4 Mesfin, ‘Elections, politics and external involvement in Djibouti’; Guelleh’s Issa sub-clan, the Mamassan, dominate the civil bureaucracy, the business sector and the security sector.
7 Brass, ‘Djibouti’s unusual resource curse’.
12 Levitsy and Way, ‘Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism’.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, p 54.
15 Ibid.
19 Mesfin, ‘Elections, politics and external involvement in Djibouti’.
23 Schermerhorn, ‘Djibouti: A special role in the war on terrorism’.
29 Mesfin, ‘Elections, politics and external involvement in Djibouti’.
30 Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.
35 Mesfin, ‘Elections, politics and external involvement in Djibouti’.
37 Indian Ocean Newsletter, ‘President IOG finally takes a tough line, update’, Indian Ocean Newsletter, 3 March 2011.
40 Brass, ‘Djibouti’s unusual resource curse’.
41 Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.
43 The court system includes the lower court, a court of appeals, a supreme court, and the Constitutional Council. Djibouti’s Supreme Court can overrule decisions of the lower and appeal courts, while the Constitutional Council has the power to rule on constitutional questions.
44 Democracy Coalition Project, ‘Djibouti’.


Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.

Democracy Coalition Project, ‘Djibouti’.

Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.


Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.


Mesfin, ‘Elections, politics and external involvement in Djibouti’.


Whitlock, ‘Remote US base at core of secret operations’.


Brass, ‘Djibouti’s unusual resource curse’.


Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.

Mesfin, ‘Elections, politics and external involvement in Djibouti’.


Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.


Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.


Sholler, ‘Djibouti country study’.


Friends of Djibouti, ‘Letter to Hilary Clinton’.

Brass, ‘Djibouti’s unusual resource curse’.


L Villalón and P VonDoepp, ‘Elites, institutions, and the varied trajectories of