



**Kenyans and Democracy:
Sustained Support for the
Principle, but Waning Satisfaction
with the Practice**

Three years ago, Kenya held its third multiparty election since 1992. To the delight of many, it finally led to a long awaited political transition, bringing an end to the long reign of Daniel Arap Moi and the even longer rule of his KANU political party. In a first Afrobarometer survey in Kenya, conducted in August-September 2003, just eight months after the new government of Mwai Kibaki and the NARC Rainbow Coalition took office, we found widespread euphoria and high hopes for the country's future. We knew even then that it was unlikely that any government could fulfill all of the hopes and the extremely high expectations of the Kenyan public at that time. But we raised a key question then: How hard would the landing be? Would Kenya follow the "Nigeria model," where similarly glowing post-transition public assessments were soon followed by a crash in public perceptions, or would Kenya's new government be able to produce the results necessary to sustain a sizeable share of the public goodwill that ushered it into office?

A second Afrobarometer survey, conducted in September 2005, gives us a chance to evaluate how the public's views have changed over the last two years. And the news for the Kibaki government is, at best, mixed, as this and other bulletins will show. We focus here on Kenyans' popular support for democracy as their system of government – which has remained very strong – and their evaluations of the quality of their democratic system – that have weakened considerably. Kenyans' perceptions of their political system may not have taken quite the plunge that Nigerians' did several years ago, but they have nonetheless dropped dramatically in several key areas.

The Afrobarometer survey, carried out by the Institute for Development Studies of the University of Nairobi, was conducted between 6th and 28th September 2005. It involved face-to-face interviews with 1278 Kenyan men and women of voting age, selected through a scientific random sampling procedure in accordance with international polling standards. Interviews were conducted in all eight of the country's provinces, and 51 of its 72 districts. Citizens of each province are represented in the weighted sample in proportion to their share in the national population. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3%. This survey follows a similar one carried out by the Afrobarometer in August-September 2003.

What Does "Democracy" Mean to You?

Before considering Kenyans' attitudes toward democracy and their evaluations of the democratic quality of their present system, many ask an obvious question: What does democracy mean to Kenyans? How can we talk about Kenyans' attitudes toward democracy when democracy means so many different things to different people? Isn't it possible that 1278 different Kenyans have 1278 different ideas about what democracy means?

One method of addressing this issue is to ask respondents directly, "What, if anything, does 'democracy' mean to you?"¹ Respondents could give up to three answers. We find that while individuals may indeed emphasize different features of democracy in their responses, a sizeable

¹ Although the questionnaire was translated and administered to respondents in seven local languages (Kalenjin, Kamba, Kikuyu, Kisii, Luo, Luhya, Meru/Embu, Somali) in addition to English and Kiswahili, the word "democracy" was originally stated in English. If the respondent did not understand the question, then the word "democracy" was translated into the closest local equivalent. Interviewers recorded whether the respondent understood the word in English, in the local translation, or not at all.

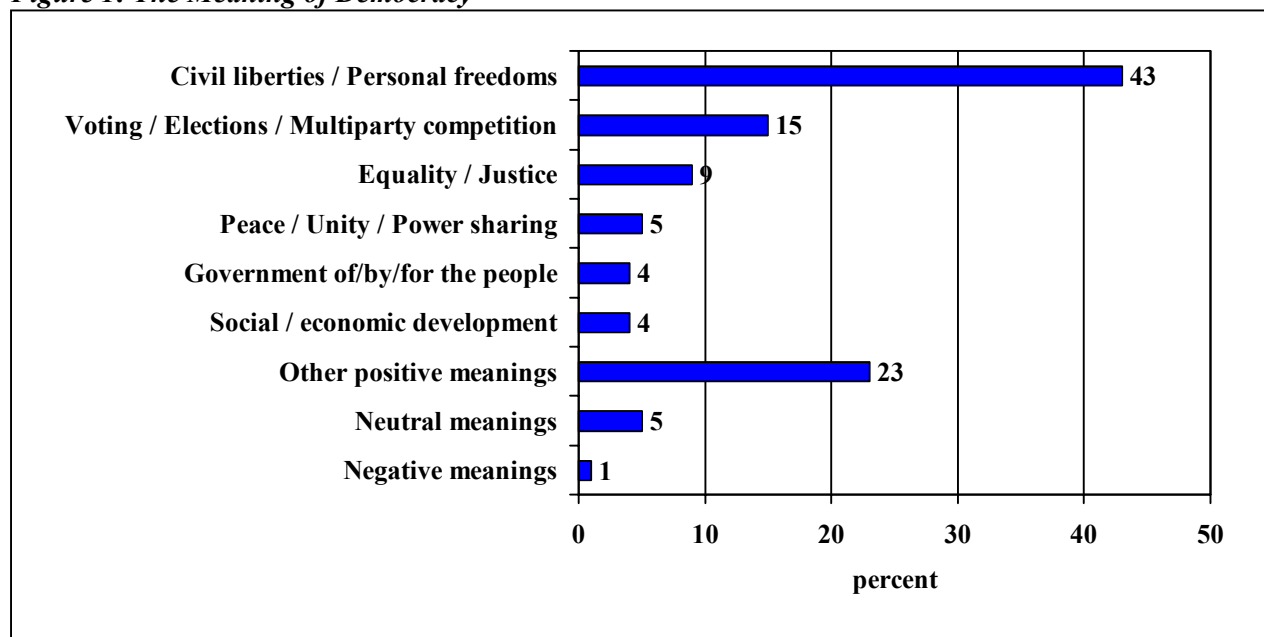
majority focuses on characteristics that are essentially consistent with the conventional notion of liberal democracy.

Fully one-third of Kenyans were not able to offer any meaning for democracy. Either they did not understand the term “democracy” at all, whether stated in English or a local language, or, even if they did understand, they could not offer any definition.

Among those who could answer the question, though, civil liberties and personal freedoms are clearly at the core of Kenyans’ perceptions of democracy. Fully 32% of respondents mentioned civil liberties such as the right to speak openly, or to travel, worship, and associate freely, as their first response to this question. And of a total of 1470 responses given by all respondents, 43% cited some form of liberties or freedoms.

Kenyans next associate democracy with multipartyism, voting and electoral competition. Some 9% gave this as their first response, and 15% of all responses referred to this aspect of democracy. Another 9% of all responses focused on issues of equality and justice, such as “equal and fair treatment of all groups,” “giving equal chances to all people,” “equal application of the law” and “equality in the distribution of resources.” Another 5% cite issues related to peace, unity or power sharing, and 4% each named popular rule (most commonly mentioned as “government of, by and for the people”) and some element of social or economic development. An overwhelming 95% of all responses offered positive meanings for democracy, while another 5% of meanings offered were neutral. Less than 1% of all responses offered negative meanings.

Figure 1: The Meaning of Democracy



What, if anything, does “democracy” mean to you. (% of all valid responses)

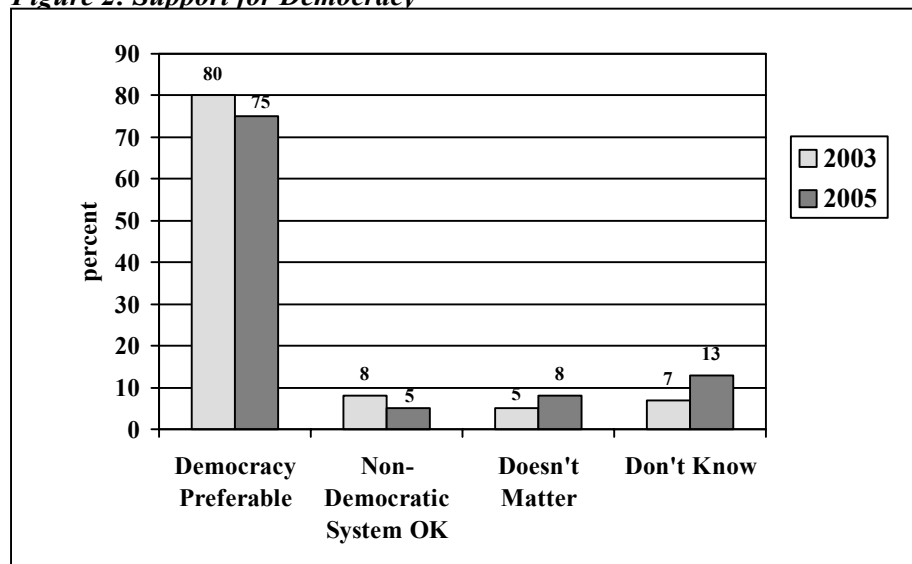
Continuing Strong Demand for Democracy

In the first Afrobarometer survey we found that Kenyans exhibited some of the highest levels of support for democracy as a system of government of any country surveyed. Fully 80% agreed with the statement that, “Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.” This compared quite favorably with other African countries, where Kenyans were second only to Ghanaians in their strong expression of support for democracy (the 15-country Round 2 mean was 64% support).

Two years later, we see that there has been a small decline in the level of support for democracy; in 2005, a slightly smaller 75% agreed that democracy is always preferable. The good news is that the number that are willing to tolerate a non-democratic system has also declined very slightly, dropping

from 8% in 2003 to 5% now. The less good news is that the numbers who adopt an ambivalent position – saying either that the system of government doesn't matter, or that they simply "don't know" – have increased considerably, from a total of 12% in 2003, to 21% in 2005. The decline in outright support for democracy is small, and two measurements are not enough to suggest a trend. But the sizeable increase in the number of respondents who seem unsure of their beliefs on this issue suggests that some may be having second thoughts about the desirability of democracy.

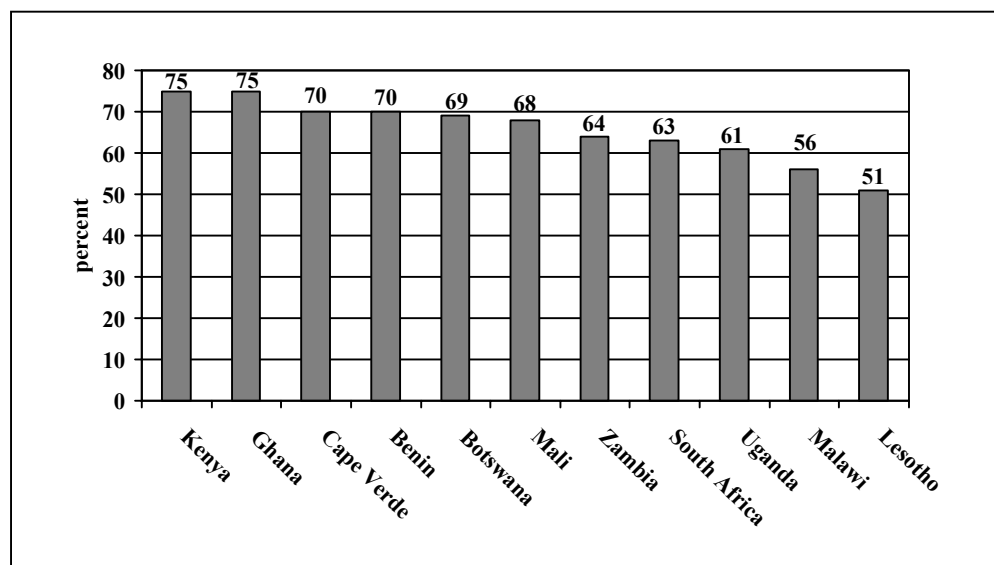
Figure 2: Support for Democracy



Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 In some circumstances a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Moreover, despite this decline, Kenyans still express the strongest support for democracy among 11 countries surveyed so far in Round 3 of the Afrobarometer.

Figure 3: Support for Democracy, across Countries



% democracy preferable

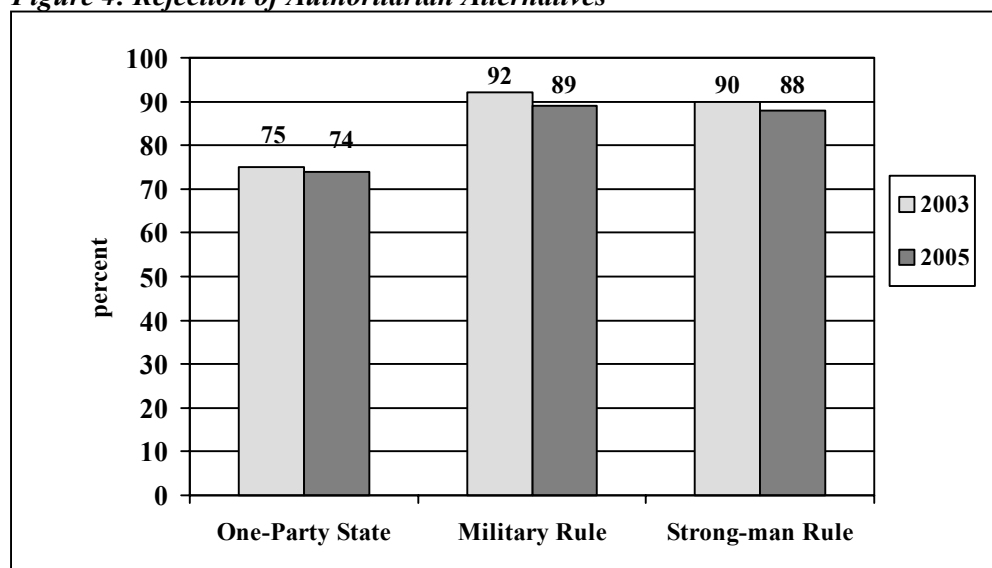
As discussed above, however, not all Kenyans have any understanding of what democracy means, and certainly even among those who do, there is not full agreement. We therefore ask respondents a

number of other questions which do not use the term “democracy” at all, but which evaluate commitment to the basic institutions and principles of democracy. These questions can help us confirm the findings from questions that ask directly about support for democracy.

For example, in addition to asking respondents outright about their support for democracy, we also ask them how willing they are to tolerate other non-democratic systems of government. Do they accept a one-party state, military rule, and strongman presidential rule (where elections and parliament are abolished so the president can decide everything)? Or do respondents reject these alternative forms of government in the same high numbers that claim to support democracy?

In fact, the results show that people do reject non-democratic alternatives in even greater numbers. An astounding 89% reject rule by the military, and a similarly high 88% are opposed to strongman rule. And three out of four (74%) also disapprove of a one-party state, although the fact that 21% actually approve of this alternative (compared to just 6% for military rule and 5% for strongman rule), suggests that there is still some lingering nostalgia for the days before multiparty competition was a core characteristic of the political landscape. We do see that for all three alternatives there has, as with support for democracy, been a slight decline in those adopting the pro-democratic position. But it is only the consistency of the differences, and not their size, that raises concern. In all three cases, the differences between the 2003 and 2005 responses are well within the margin of sampling error across two surveys. Nonetheless, we do detect a small but consistent trend, rather than mere measurement error. But we will have to await the results of another survey before drawing any firm conclusions on this point.

Figure 4: Rejection of Authoritarian Alternatives



There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: (% disapprove/strongly disapprove)

**Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.*

**The army comes in to govern the country.*

**Elections and the parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.*

Attitudes toward the institutions and processes of a democratic system further bolster the evidence of Kenyans’ continued strong support for a democratic system of government. Nearly nine out of ten (88%) agree that “We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections,” compared to just 9% who instead concur that “Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country’s leaders.” This reflects almost no change from 2003 (89 and 10%, respectively).

Likewise, a solid majority expresses a commitment to multipartyism. When asked whether they believe that “Many political parties are needed to ensure that Kenyans have real choices in who

governs them,” or if instead they think that “Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Kenya,” more than two-thirds (70%) prefer multipartyism. This is, however, down slightly from 74% in 2003. And again, the fact that 25% (23% in 2003) believe multiple parties are unnecessary (recall that a similar proportion expressed support for a one-party state) suggests that there is a solid minority that consistently rejects political competition as a necessary feature of an effective political system.

Kenyans also continue to support the central role of Parliament in drafting the country’s laws. Respondents were asked if they agreed most with the statement that “The members of the Parliament represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the President does not agree,” or with the statement that “Since the President represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what the Parliament thinks.” A solid majority of 71% agrees that Parliament’s role in drafting laws should supercede that of the president, down a bit from 76% in 2003.

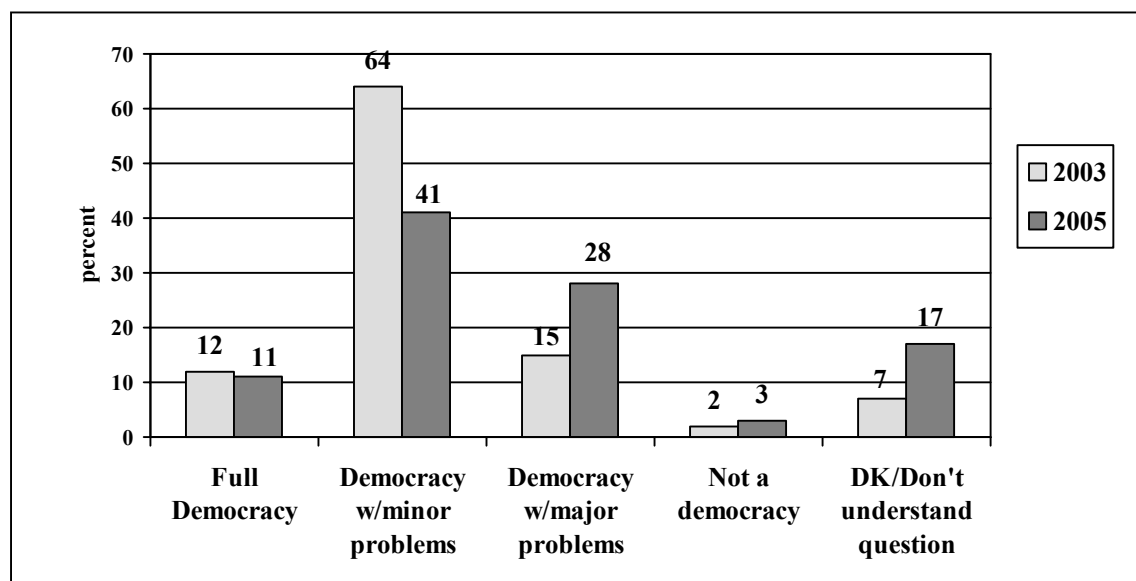
Thus, all in all, we see continuing strong levels of support for democracy and democratic institutions among Kenyans. Although there is a slight decline on a number of indicators, it is in many cases less than the margin of sampling error for survey comparisons.

Disappointment with the Supply of Democracy

This sustained strong support for democracy is not, however, matched by continuing high levels of satisfaction with the supply of democracy. In 2003, Kenya also rated at or near the top among all countries surveyed with respect to the supply of democracy. Kenyans rated their country as the most democratic (along with Ghana) among 15 countries surveyed, and they revealed themselves to be the most satisfied citizenry. In contrast to the stability of the demand side, however, there have been sharp shifts on the supply side.

Consider first the perceived extent of democracy in Kenya. In 2003, 76% of Kenyans rated the country as either a full democracy, or a democracy with only minor problems. This was the highest rating given to any of our survey countries by its citizens during Round 2 of the Afrobarometer (tying with Ghana); the 15-country mean was just 54%. However, just two years later, Kenyans offer a considerably less glowing assessment of the state of their democracy. Now only a slim majority of 53% rate it as fully or mostly democratic, a decline of 23 points, while the number rating it as a democracy with major problems has nearly doubled, from 15 to 28%.

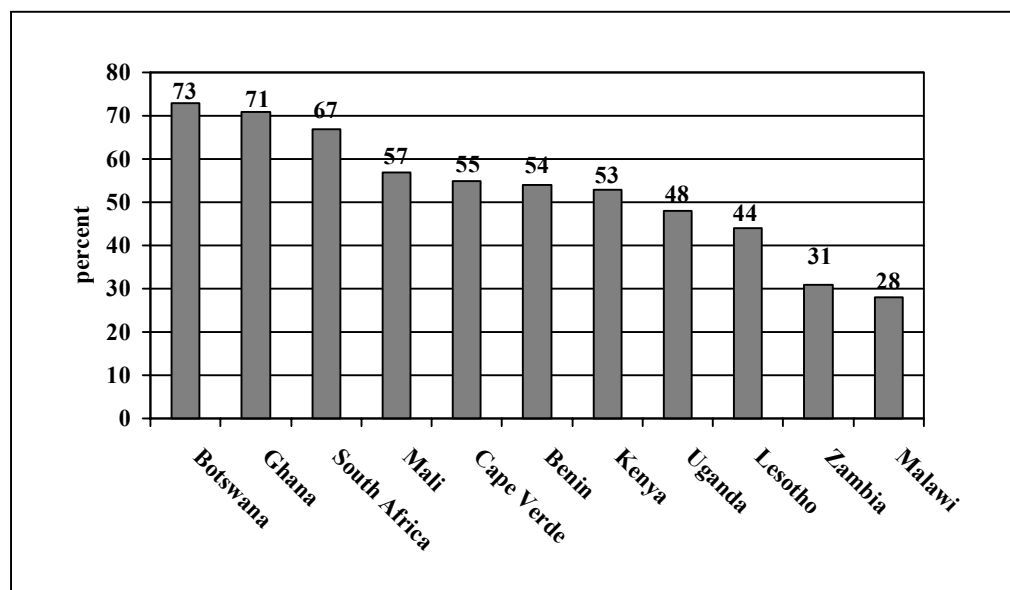
Figure 5: The Extent of Democracy, 2003-2005



In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Kenya today?

When comparing across countries, rather than topping the chart, as in 2003, Kenya now lies near the middle, falling exactly on the mean for the other 10 countries of 53%.

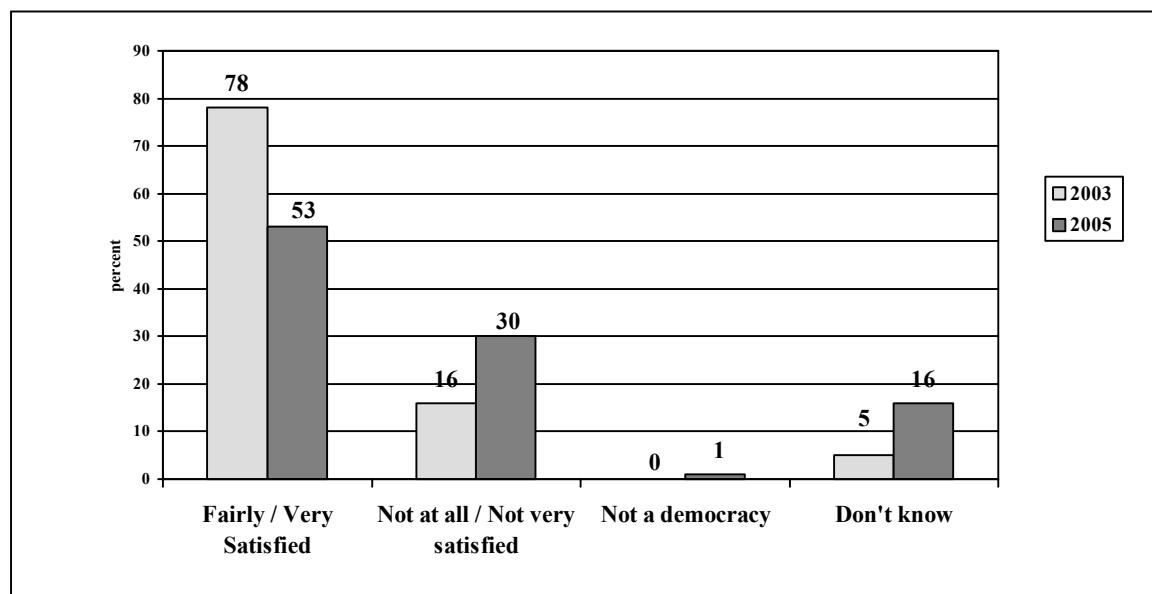
Figure 6: Extent of Democracy, across Countries



% full democracy or democracy with minor problems

A similar pattern is evident when we turn to the question of how satisfied Kenyans are with “the way democracy works in Kenya.” Again, in 2003 Kenyans were by far the most satisfied among all of the Africans we surveyed: 78% were “fairly” or “very satisfied” with the workings of democracy, compared to a 15-country mean of just 54%. But by 2005, satisfaction, too, has dropped sharply, to just 53%, while the number reporting dissatisfaction has again nearly doubled.

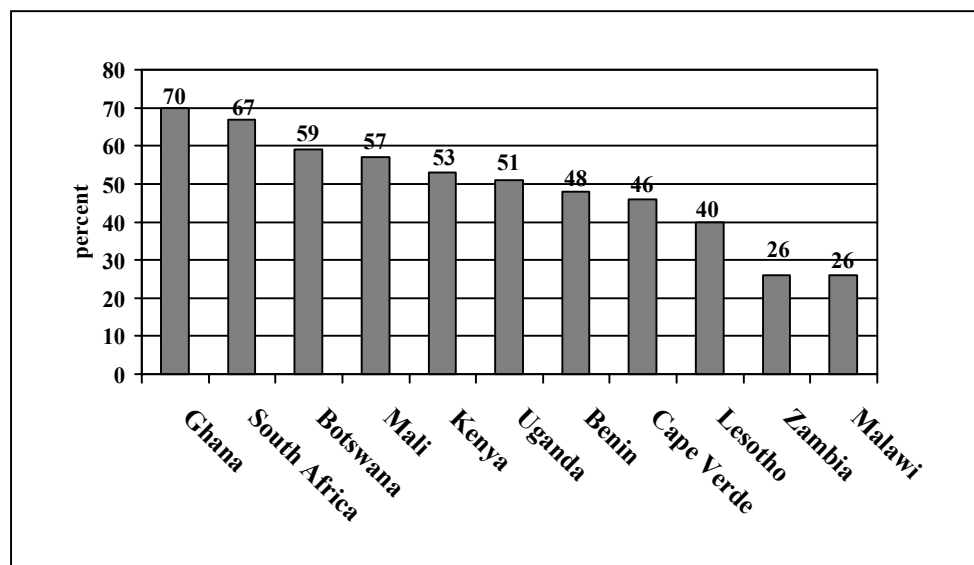
Figure 7: Satisfaction with Democracy



Once again, Kenya has fallen from its position as the leader among the countries surveyed to a position at the mid-point. Botswana, Ghana and South Africa solidly lead the continent (among Afrobarometer countries) in terms of positive perceptions of the state of their democracies. Certainly Kenya has not fallen to the lows realized by Malawi and Zambia, where disenchantment with the

practice of democracy has spread much further. But the sharp decline over the course of just two years certainly suggests sharply reduced public expectations for democracy in Kenya.

Figure 8: Satisfaction with Democracy, across Countries

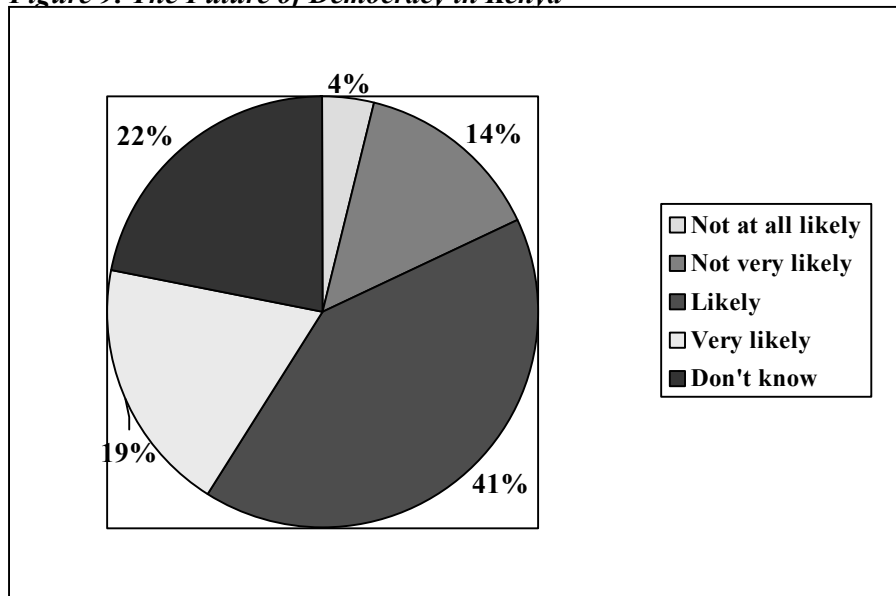


% fairly or very satisfied

Yet another indicator of the popular disappointment since the 2002 transition is a question that measures respondents' patience with democracy. We offered respondents a choice between the following two statements: "Our present system of elected government should be given more time to deal with inherited problems," or "If our present system cannot produce results soon, we should try another form of government." In 2003, 83% expressed a willingness to be patient with democracy and give it time to produce results – once again the highest level seen across 15 countries. But in our recent survey this figure has dropped 26 points, to just 57%. Meanwhile, the number that thinks it may be necessary to try another form of government has more than doubled, from 14 to 37%. A solid majority is still willing to give democracy time to produce results for the populace at large. But the very sizeable shift in attitudes on these questions offers an early warning of the limits of the popular attachment to democracy, and of potential political consequences if the government is not able to produce more satisfactory results soon.

Nonetheless, a majority of Kenyans are confident that their country will continue on the democratic path for the foreseeable future. When asked "In your opinion, how likely is it that Kenya will remain a democratic country?" a solid majority of 60% say they think it is "likely" or "very likely," compared to just 18% who think it is "not very" or "not at all likely." But more than one in five (22%) simply admit they are uncertain what the future holds for Kenyan democracy. Clearly the questions loom larger now than two years ago. Euphoria has given way to the troubling realization that the long awaited change in government has not produced the benefits that the Kenyan people had hoped would finally be theirs.

Figure 9: The Future of Democracy in Kenya



In your opinion, how likely is it that Kenya will remain a democratic country?

The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 18 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Michigan State University. Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity-building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Department for International Development (UK), the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org.