African citizens' message to traditional leaders: Stay in development, stay out of politics

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 443 | Carolyn Logan and Luyando Mutale Katenda

Summary

The proper role for unelected "traditional leaders" or "chiefs" in modern African societies has been debated for decades. Once written off as anachronistic, irrelevant, and anti-democratic, especially after the democratic openings that swept across the continent in the 1990s, chiefs have been resurgent in recent years, establishing themselves as an integral part of the fabric of local governance in many countries. The unelected chieftaincy has not just coexisted but thrived alongside the practice of democracy, elections, and multiparty competition. In many places chiefs work in tandem with local councillors to allocate land, resolve conflicts, and govern communities. Most recently, chiefs have been called on to reinforce national battles against the COVID-19 pandemic (Sanny & Asiamah, 2020).

New survey findings from Afrobarometer confirm that the position of traditional authorities is still strong, or even strengthening. Chiefs get consistently higher citizen ratings for trust and performance, and are seen as markedly less corrupt, when compared to elected leaders and government officials, and the gaps are widening. Chiefs find support not only among elderly rural men, but also among women, urban residents, youth, and the most educated.

They wield significant influence in their communities, especially when it comes to governance, conflict resolution, and land allocation. Moreover, people generally think they have the interests of their communities at heart and are effective in cooperating with local councillors to promote local development. In fact, by a 5-to-1 margin, Africans would prefer to see their influence increase.

Africans want their chiefs to work with elected leaders to bring development to their communities, and they even believe that the engagement of traditional leaders helps to strengthen rather than to weaken democracy. But one area where chiefs' influence is not welcome is electoral politics. Although much has been made of the potential role of chiefs as "vote brokers" who deliver the votes of their community members to whichever political candidate or party wins their favour (Holzinger, Kern, & Kromrey, 2016), only one in five Africans say chiefs have a lot of influence on people's votes. They have a clear message for their chiefs: Stay out of politics.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) have been completed in 25 countries so far (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200-2,400, which yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This dispatch is based on Round 8 findings from 22 countries with traditional leaders or authorities. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

How chiefs stack up against other leaders:

- Across 22 countries, traditional leaders consistently receive significantly more positive ratings – on trust, performance, listening, and lack of corruption – than their elected counterparts (presidents, members of Parliament, and local government councillors).

  o While high trust extends across many countries, there are outliers, such as Liberia, Angola, and Gabon, where trust ratings are much less positive.

  o Trust in traditional leaders increases with respondents' age and decreases with education, but majorities across all key demographic groups express trust.

  o Men and women express nearly equal levels of trust, despite the patriarchal nature of most traditional leadership institutions.

- Across 16 countries tracked since 2008/2009, trust in traditional leaders has held steady while trust in elected leaders has dropped substantially, leading to a widening trust gap between chiefs and other leaders.

The role traditional authorities play in community development:

- Citizens see their chiefs' most significant role as solving local disputes (71% say they have "some" or "a lot" of influence), but majorities also say they are influential in local governance (61%) and in land allocation (54%). Far fewer say they influence how people vote (38%).

- A solid majority (60%) believe that traditional leaders mostly serve the people in their communities, rather than their own interests (21%) or the interests of politicians or government officials (14%). But Angolans, Ghanaians, Malawians, and Namibians are much less confident that chiefs are committed to looking out for their communities.

- The public is also confident that chiefs are doing an effective job of cooperating with elected leaders to get things done, rather than competing with them for resources and power.

Chiefs, politics, and democracy:

- Most people say chiefs don't influence their vote – and shouldn't try. More than two-thirds (69%) say traditional leaders should stay out of politics and let people make their own voting decisions.

- Nearly half (49%) of respondents say chiefs strengthen democracy, and another 33% say they don't affect it; only 12% think the presence and influence of these unelected leaders undermine democracy.

In sum:

- Even as African societies continue to urbanize, modernize, and entrench the conduct of regular elections, people want to see more of their traditional chiefs, not less. Fully 56% want the role of chiefs in governing their communities to increase, compared to just one in 10 (11%) who say they should play a lesser role.

Whom do you trust?

Afrobarometer findings have long established that Africans hold traditional leaders in higher regard than elected leaders (Logan, 2009, 2013), and that continues to be true. Even compared to presidents – who tend to be the most popular among elected leaders – traditional leaders are more trusted by 15 percentage points, seen as less corrupt by 19 percentage points, and assessed as performing better by 12 percentage points, on average across 22 countries (Figure 1).

The margins are also wide – 21, 13, and 18 points, respectively – when traditional leaders are compared to local government councillors, their closest counterparts in government. And while only 44% think that traditional leaders do a good job of listening to ordinary people (vs. 52% who disagree), this is more than double the number who say the same about local government councillors, and four times as many as those who rate members of Parliament as good listeners.

Figure 1: Qualities of a leader | 22 countries | 2019/2021
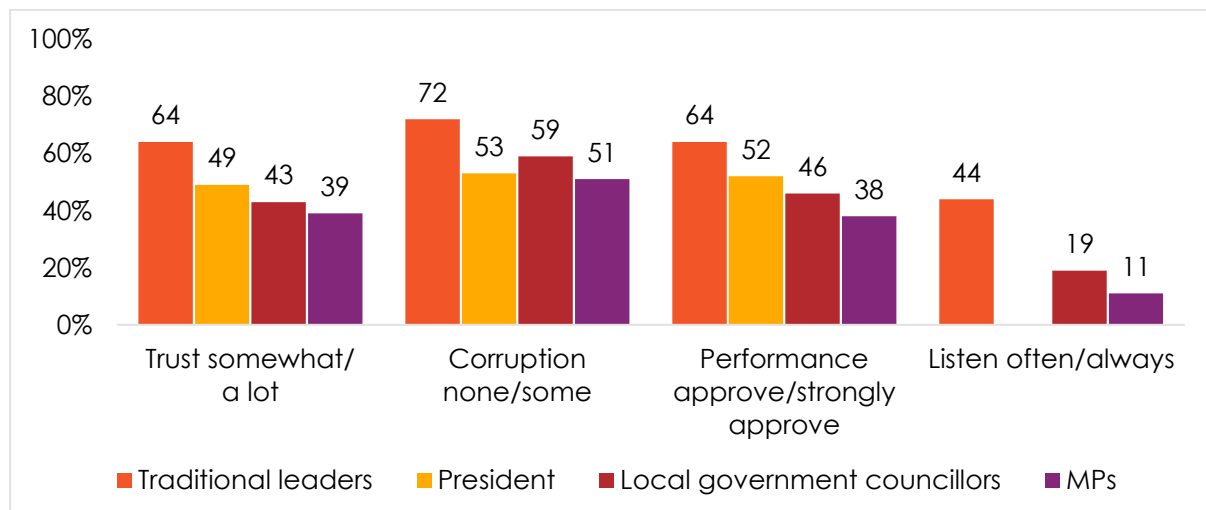
Respondents were asked:

> *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: The president? Parliament? Your local government council? Traditional leaders? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")*

> *How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough to say: The president and officials in his/her office? Members of Parliament? Members of your local government council? Traditional leaders? ("none" or "some of them")*

> *Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President [name]? Your member of Parliament? Your elected local government councillor? Your traditional leader? (% "approve" or "strongly approve")*

> *How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament? Members of your local government council? Traditional leaders? (% "often" or "always")*

(Note: The questions on local government councillors were not asked in Angola. In addition, the question on local government councillors' job performance was not asked in Liberia.)

And the margins are increasing over time, in some cases very substantially. Across 14 countries where trust in all four institutions has been tracked since Afrobarometer Round 4 (2008/2009), trust in traditional leaders has remained fairly steady at around 65% (Figure 2). But trust in elected leaders has declined markedly over the same period.

While traditional leaders were only modestly more trusted than presidents in 2008/2009 (by 4 percentage points), the gap has now quadrupled to 16 points because of a 13-point drop in presidential trust. Trust in MPs is also down 13 points, so a 14-point gap in 2008/2009 has nearly doubled to 26 points. Local government councillors have not lost quite as much ground, with trust declining 5 percentage points since 2008, but an already large gap of 18 points has widened to 22 points.
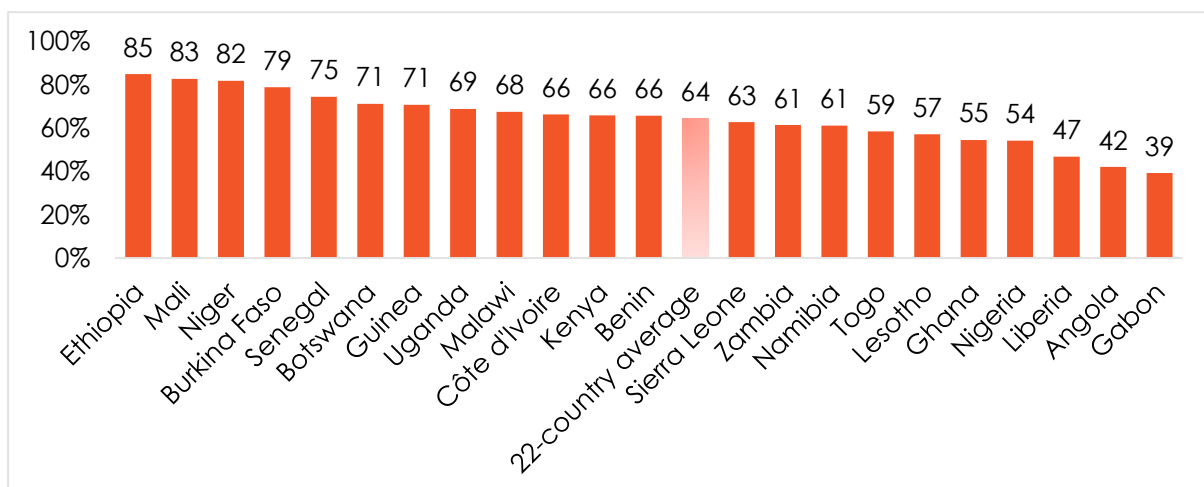
Figure 2: Changes in institutional trust | 14 countries | 2008-2021
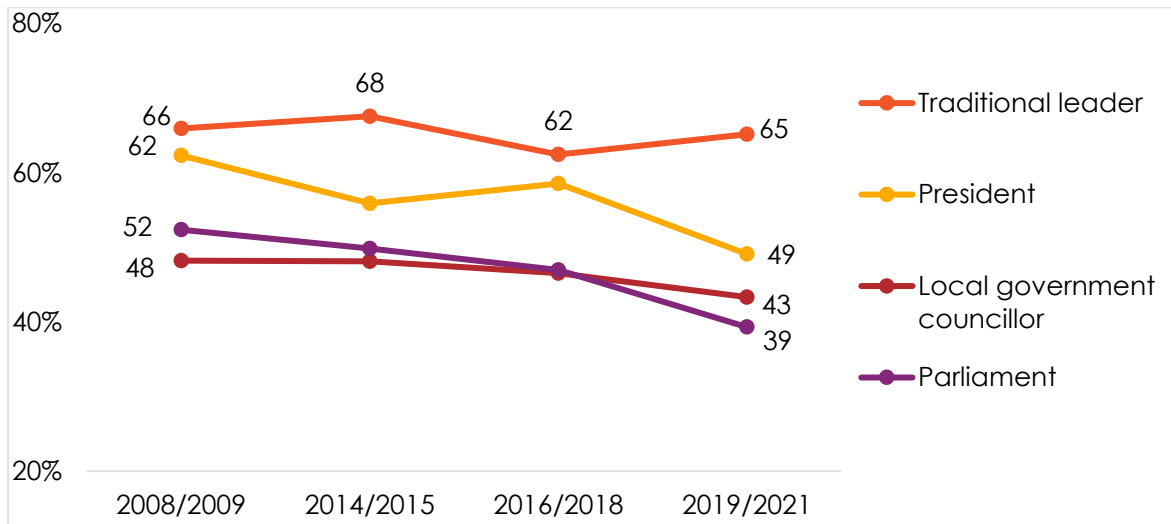
Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: The president? Parliament? Your local government council? Traditional leaders? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")*

We should not, however, overlook the wide cross-country variation in perceptions of traditional leaders. While 85% express moderate to high levels of trust in Ethiopia, for example, fewer than half as many (39%) say the same in Gabon (Figure 3). Nonetheless, majorities express trust in 19 of the 22 countries covered here – Liberia (47%), Angola (42%), and Gabon are the only exceptions.

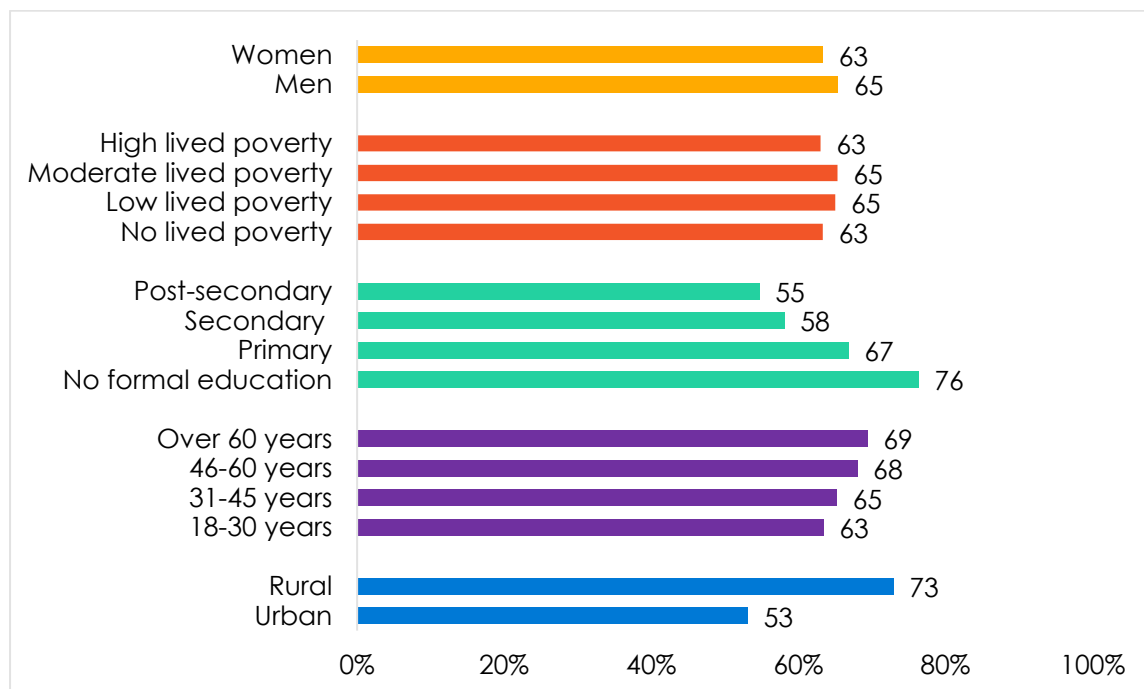**Figure 3: Trust in traditional leaders** | 22 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: Traditional leaders? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")*

It is generally assumed that traditional leaders matter far more – and will be held in higher regard – among older, less educated, and rural citizens who live in the communities that the chiefs govern directly. Institutions of traditional authority are also widely assumed to act more favorably toward men than toward women. In fact, a core critique of institutions of traditional authority is that they are patriarchal gerontocracies that exclude or discriminate against youth and women (Beall, Mkhize, & Vawda, 2005; Molutsi, 2004).

To some degree we do observe these expected patterns. Traditional leaders earn higher levels of trust among rural residents, older citizens, and less educated respondents, and the gaps are sometimes sizeable: 21 percentage points separate trust levels among those with no formal education (76%) from trust among those with post-secondary education (55%) (Figure 4). But majorities express trust in traditional leaders within every key demographic group, including urban residents (53%) and youth (63% of 18- to 30-year-olds).

Gender, however, is an exception. The difference of only 2 percentage points between trust in chiefs among men (65%) and women (63%) is not statistically significant. In general, women do not appear to believe that traditional leaders are working against their interests.

Figure 4: Trust in traditional leaders | by demographic groups | 22 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: Traditional leaders? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")

What role?

Data from Afrobarometer Round 4 (2008/2009) compared the role of traditional leaders to those played by local and central government and found that the level of responsibility attributed to traditional authorities varies widely across sectors. Chiefs play only a marginal role in managing schools or health clinics, keeping the community clean, and collecting taxes, but when it comes to allocating land and especially to solving local disputes, they were seen as equal to or more important than other government officials (Logan, 2013).

The current data confirm this pattern. Overall, 61% of respondents say that traditional leaders have "some" or "a lot" of influence in governing their local communities (Figure 5). This rises

to 71% in the case of solving local disputes, and a slimmer majority (54%) also note their importance in allocating land.

Equally significant, though, is what most people say their chiefs don't do: influence their votes. Some analysts and democracy watchers have argued that chiefs act as "vote brokers," delivering the votes of their community members to the party or politician of their choice, and thus interfere with direct links of accountability between voters and candidates, and undermine democracy (see Baldwin, 2014; Holzinger, Kern, & Kromrey, 2016).

But only 19% say chiefs have "a lot" of influence on how people vote, while nearly twice as many (35%) say they have none. In short, while traditional leaders may act as if they influence votes, making public displays of meeting with or endorsing candidates (Baldwin, 2020), people know their votes are secret (M'Cormack-Hale & Dome, 2021), and cast them as they choose (Bratton & Bhoojedhur, 2019).

Figure 5: Influence of traditional leaders | 22 countries | 2019/2021
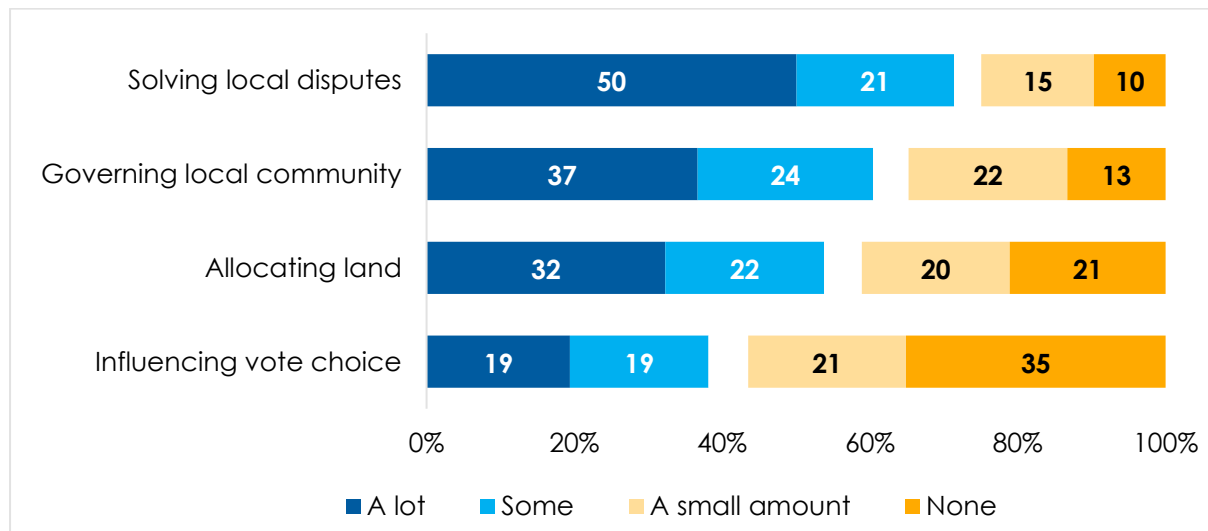
Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Governing your local community? Allocating land? Influencing how people in their communities vote? Solving local disputes? (% "some" or "a lot")

The distribution of roles and responsibilities of traditional authorities is determined by national and local laws and customary practices as well as many other factors that have shaped the evolution of these institutions over time. They can thus vary widely across both countries and localities.

We see, however, that a prominent role in dispute resolution is widespread. In 16 of 22 countries, two-thirds or more say their chiefs are influential in conflict management (Table 1). Only in Gabon and Angola do fewer than half of citizens agree.

In contrast, there is much more variation across countries with regard to the role chiefs play in land allocation. In Ghana, fully 81% say traditional authorities are influential in allocating land, as do 76% in Zambia. In contrast, just 25% say the same in Botswana, even though chiefs there play a prominent role in many other aspects of local and national governance.

In all but a handful of countries, fewer than half of citizens believe chiefs are influential in vote choice. Exceptions include Nigeria (60%), Liberia (60%), and Mali (51%), where chiefs may indeed be acting as effective vote brokers. A number of countries – most notably Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Malawi – report quite high levels of influence in governing, dispute resolution, and land alongside very low levels of influence on votes.

Table 1: Influence of traditional leaders, by country | 22 countries| 2019/2021

	Solving disputes	Governing community	Land allocation	Vote choice
Lesotho	86%	76%	51%	20%
Sierra Leone	85%	79%	60%	16%
Mali	84%	73%	68%	51%
Nigeria	84%	77%	63%	60%
Ghana	80%	69%	81%	32%
Kenya	80%	67%	53%	44%
Niger	79%	61%	60%	48%
Ethiopia	79%	60%	42%	36%
Zambia	79%	69%	76%	49%
Malawi	79%	71%	51%	31%
Botswana	77%	65%	25%	21%
Liberia	74%	67%	66%	60%
Côte d'Ivoire	73%	50%	57%	34%
Burkina Faso	72%	63%	57%	44%
Benin	67%	48%	54%	38%
Togo	66%	57%	53%	46%
Senegal	64%	47%	38%	37%
Uganda	63%	58%	56%	37%
Guinea	59%	43%	39%	34%
Namibia	51%	50%	50%	33%
Gabon	47%	31%	39%	29%
Angola	44%	50%	45%	43%
22-country average	71%	61%	54%	38%
	>80%	70-79%	60-69%	50-59%
	40-49%	30-39%	<30%	

Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Governing your local community? Allocating land? Influencing how people in their communities vote? Solving local disputes? (% "some" or "a lot")

Serving whose interests?

Critics of chieftaincy have also argued that chiefs are instruments of the state, serving the interests of national political masters rather than those of their local communities (Mamdani, 1996; Ntsebeza, 2005). But ordinary Africans don't agree. A solid majority (60%) believe that traditional leaders "mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities,"

including majorities in 18 of the 22 surveyed countries (Figure 6). More than seven in 10 feel this way in Ethiopia (78%), Guinea (76%), Botswana (76%), and Mali (71%).

But there are notable exceptions. In Namibia, while a plurality (44%) believe chiefs look out primarily for community interests, about the same proportion believe they serve either their own interests (21%) or those of politicians and parties (21%). In Ghana, 44% think they serve the community, but nearly as many (40%) say they mainly serve themselves, and a combined 49% think they serve interests other than those of community members. The pattern is similar in Malawi. Angolans are less certain about whose interests traditional leaders represent, dividing among the community (33%), themselves (18%), and politicians (25%), with another 23% unable to say.

Figure 6: Whom do traditional leaders serve? | 22 countries | 2019/2021
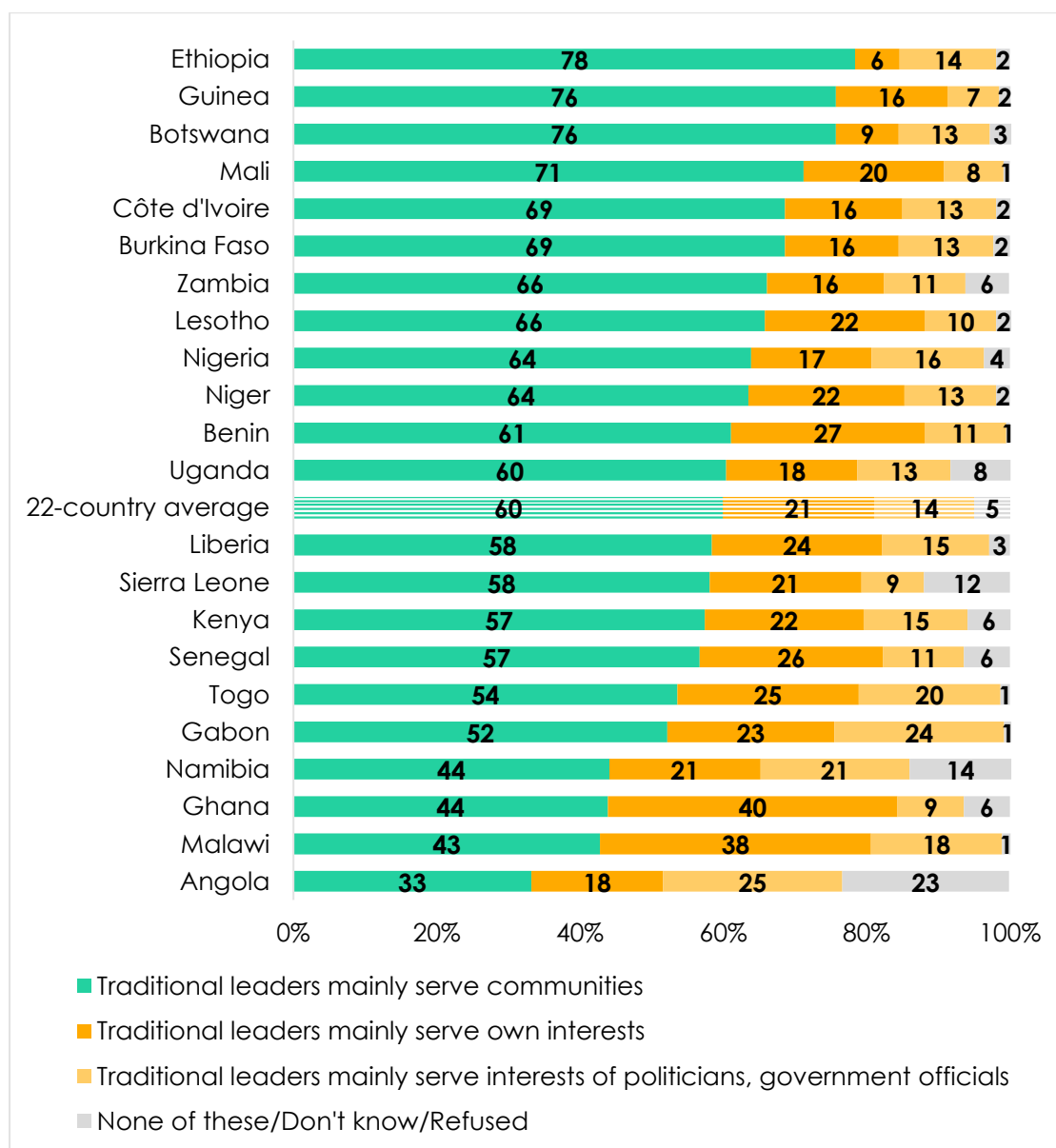
Respondents were asked: *Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?*
Statement 1: Traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities.
Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials.
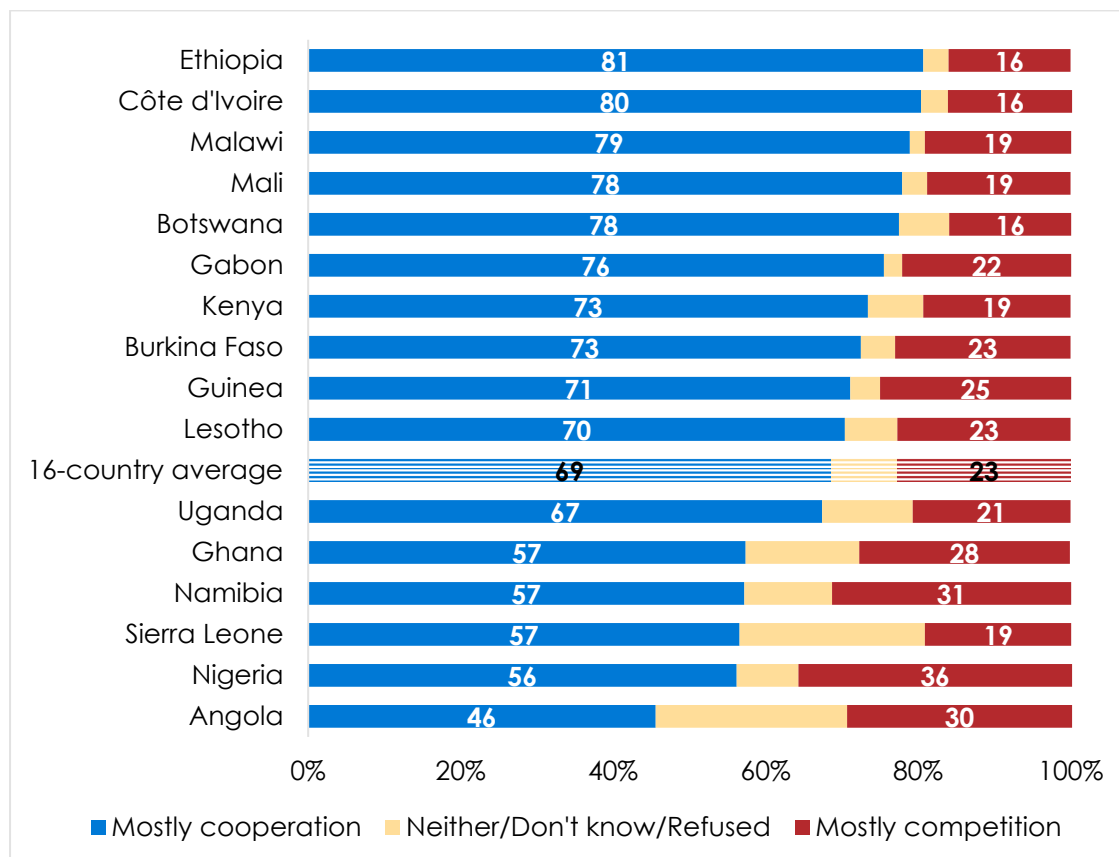*Statement 3: Traditional leaders mostly look out for their own personal interests.*

Competition or cooperation?

Another question about the role played by traditional leaders is whether they compete – for power, resources, or influence – with elected officials or whether they serve as "development brokers" whose efforts complement and enhance those of local government (Baldwin, 2015).

Our respondents overwhelmingly view the interaction between chiefs and elected local authorities as complementary rather than competitive. Across 16 countries,[1] nearly seven in 10 (69%) report that traditional leaders mainly "work in cooperation with elected leaders to get things done," rather than competing with them "for resources, power, and influence" (Figure 7). Even in Malawi, where people voice skepticism about whose interests chiefs serve (as shown in Figure 6), 79% see chiefs as cooperating rather than competing. Angola is the only country where this view is shared by a plurality (46%) rather than a majority.

Figure 7: Traditional leaders' relationship with local government | 16 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
Statement 1: Traditional leaders are mostly in competition with elected leaders for resources, power, and influence.
Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly work in cooperation with elected leaders to get things done.
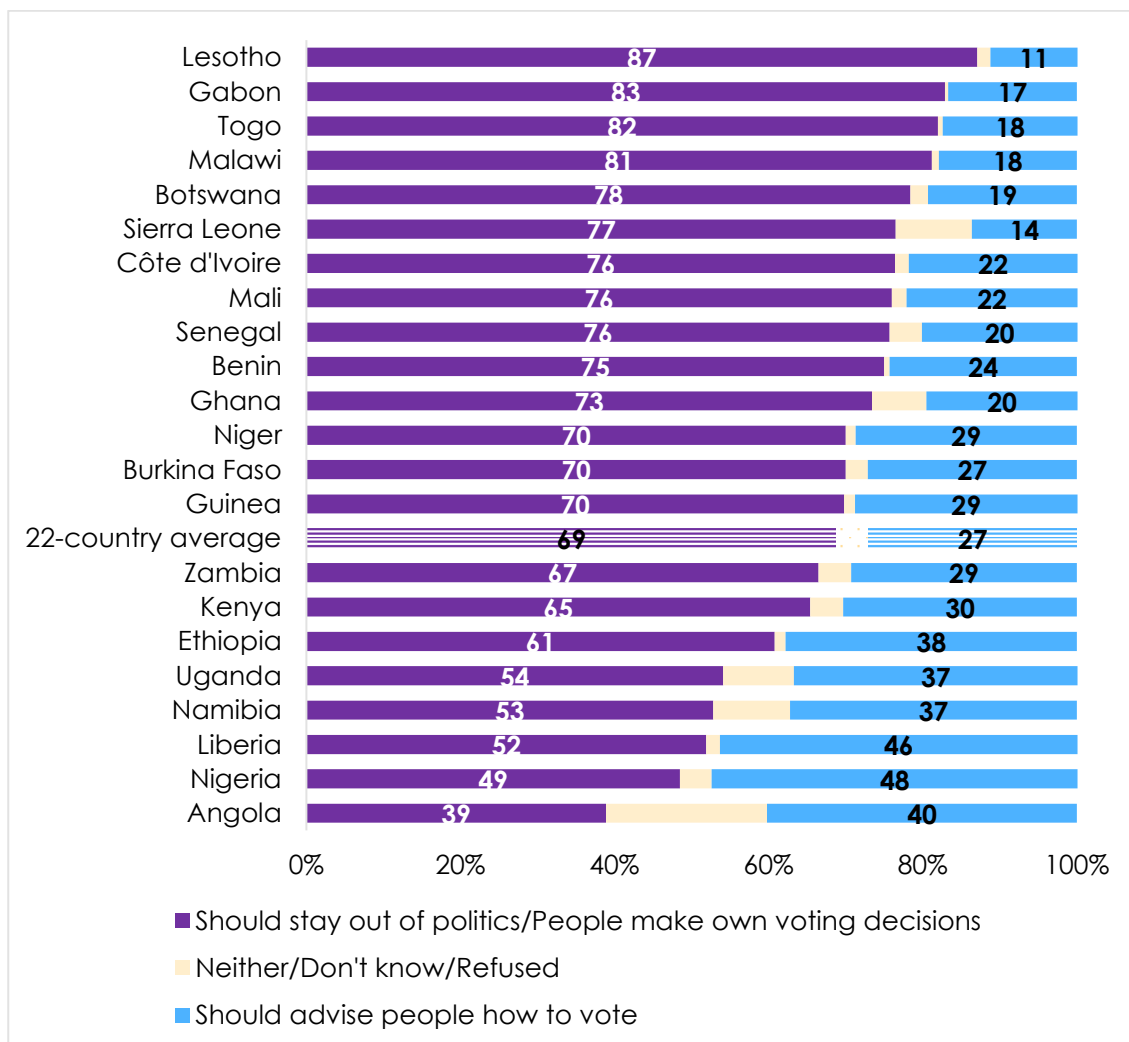*(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)*

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[1] This question was only asked in countries included in Round 8/Part 1, i.e. surveys conducted before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the suspension of fieldwork in April 2020. Round 8 fieldwork resumed in October 2020, but the Round 8/Part 2 questionnaire was modified slightly to accommodate the addition of questions on the impacts of the pandemic. This question was dropped from Round 8/Part 2.

Traditional leaders and democracy

We have already seen that most people do not believe that chiefs play a dominant role in influencing vote choice in their communities. But should they? The answer is a resounding "no." Nearly seven in 10 respondents (69%) reject the idea that "traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people" and should therefore advise people on how to vote, saying instead that chiefs should "stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote."

More than eight in 10 respondents take this position in Lesotho (87%), Gabon (83%), Togo (82%), and Malawi (81%) (Figure 8). The only countries where this is not a majority view are Nigeria (49%) and Angola (39%), where people are evenly divided on the issue.

**Figure 8: Traditional leaders' role in vote choice** | 22 countries | 2019/2021

Country	Should stay out of politics	Should advise people how to vote
Lesotho	87	11
Gabon	83	17
Togo	82	18
Malawi	81	18
Botswana	78	19
Sierra Leone	77	14
Côte d'Ivoire	76	22
Mali	76	22
Senegal	76	20
Benin	75	24
Ghana	73	20
Niger	70	29
Burkina Faso	70	27
Guinea	70	29
22-country average	69	27
Zambia	67	29
Kenya	65	30
Ethiopia	61	38
Uganda	54	37
Namibia	53	37
Liberia	52	46
Nigeria	49	48
Angola	39	40

■ Should stay out of politics/People make own voting decisions
■ Neither/Don't know/Refused
■ Should advise people how to vote

Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
Statement 1: Traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people; they should give their people advice about how to vote.
Statement 2: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote.
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

But even if chiefs aren't influencing most voters, they are still almost always unelected. Given that elections are such a core feature of democracy, does the influential role of traditional leaders in community governance stand at odds with democracy, perhaps even posing a threat to it? Or can chiefs work with elected leaders to make democracy work better?

When asked whether chiefs strengthen or weaken democracy, nearly half (49%) of respondents say they strengthen it, compared to a mere 12% who think they weaken it (Figure 9). Another one in three (33%) say that their involvement in governance doesn't make a difference when it comes to strengthening or weakening democracy.

Even in countries where few people see traditional leaders as strengthening democracy, such as Gabon (28%), Lesotho (31%), and Angola (32%), far fewer see them undermining it.

Figure 9: Traditional leaders and democracy | 22 countries| 2019/2021
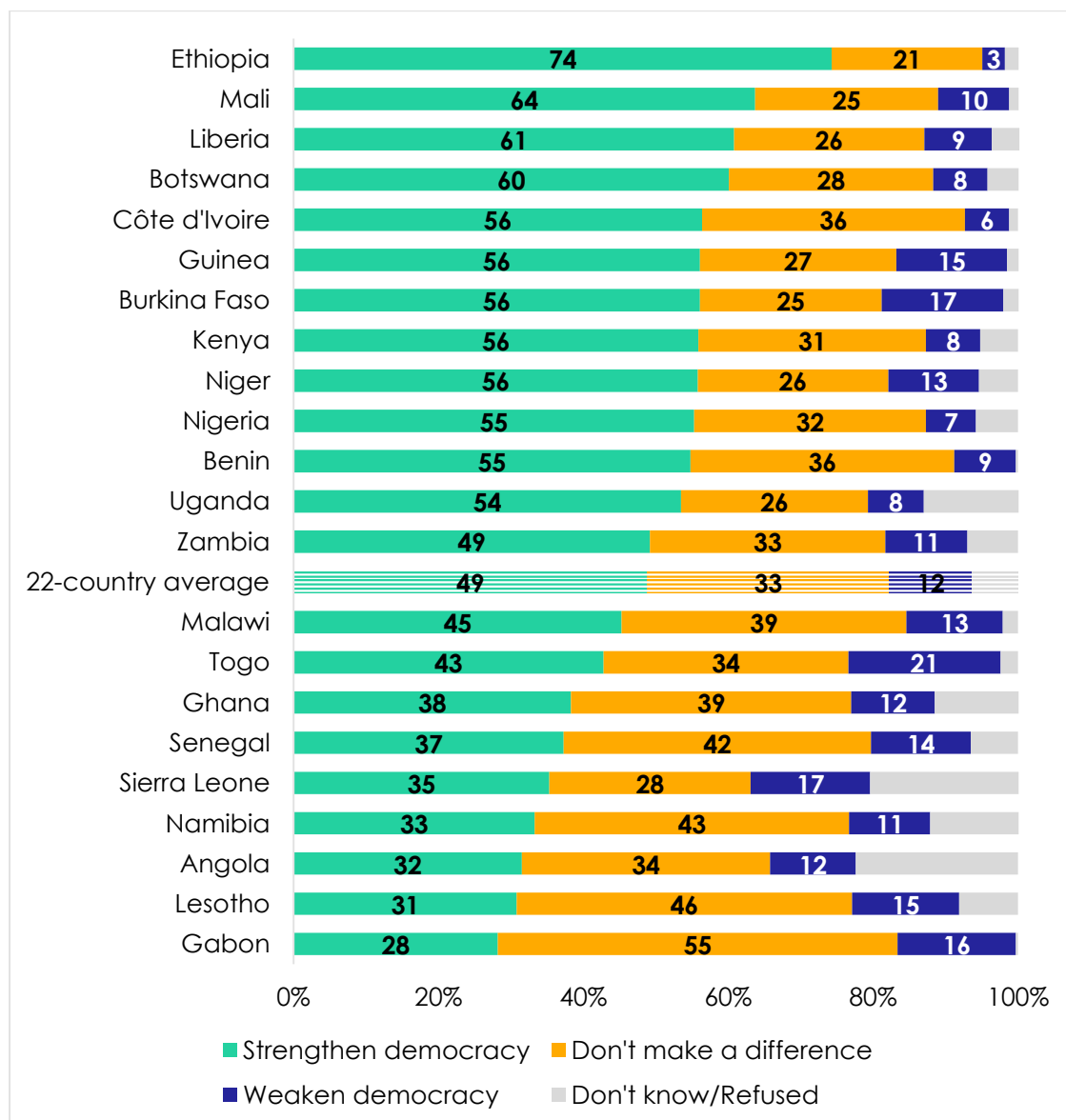
Respondents were asked: Some people think that because traditional leaders are not elected, they are bad for democracy, but other people think that traditional leaders can work together with elected leaders to make democracy work better. What about you? Do you think that traditional leaders strengthen democracy, weaken democracy, or don't make a difference?

More or less power to the chiefs?

The public's overall assessment of traditional leaders – including how trustworthy they are and whether they play a positive or negative role in governing – is probably best captured in one additional question: Should the amount of influence that chiefs have in governing local communities increase, stay the same, or decrease?

Large majorities across every surveyed country either want the already substantial influence of chiefs to stay the same (28% on average) or to increase (56%) (Figure 10). Fully four out of five Ethiopians (81%) and Malians (79%) want to see a larger role for traditional leaders in governing their communities, and majorities agree in every country except Zambia (48%), Ghana (46%), Angola (45%), and Sierra Leone (32%). Sierra Leone is the only country where "increase" does not rate at least a plurality.

On average across the 22 countries, just one in 10 citizens (11%) think the influence of traditional leaders should decrease, led by Angola (20%) and Burkina Faso (17%).

Figure 10: Chiefs in demand | 22 countries | 2019/2021
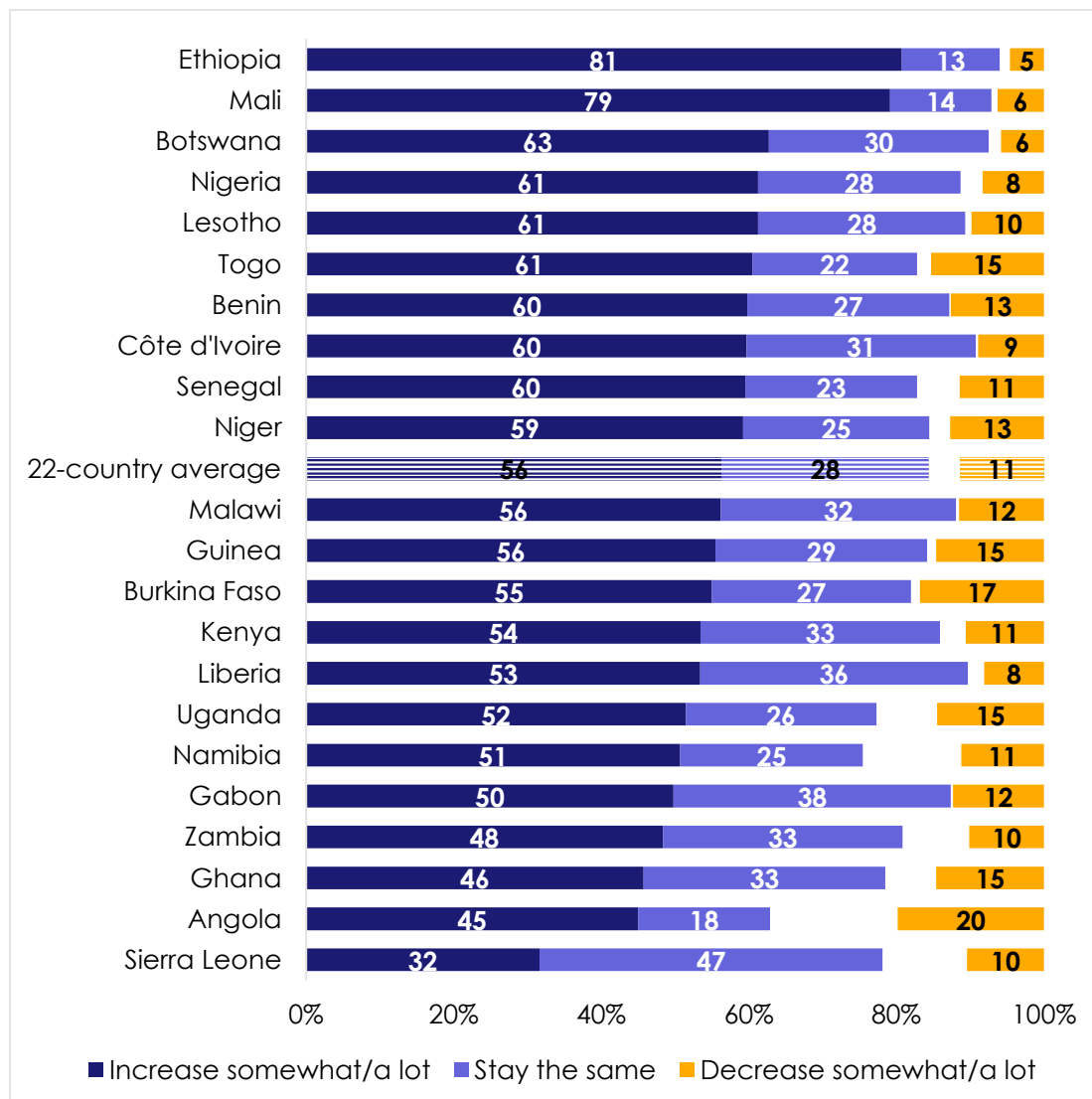
Respondents were asked: *Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase, stay the same, or decrease?*

Conclusion

In most of the 22 countries covered here, citizens regard traditional leaders in a largely positive light, especially for their roles in conflict resolution, governance, and development. They see their chiefs as collaborating rather than competing with elected leaders and as focused on advancing the interests of their communities rather than their personal ambitions. Perhaps the most telling finding is that there is substantial demand for chiefs to play a larger role in governing communities across the continent.

Most ordinary Africans do not agree with critics who say that an unelected chieftaincy is anti-democratic. In fact, people generally believe that chiefs strengthen democracy, perhaps because of their effectiveness in working with local governments and communities to get things done. But there are also clear limits to what people want from their traditional authorities: They value chiefs' engagement in community governance but reject their engagement in electoral politics.

Do these largely positive reviews mean there are no problems with the chieftaincy, no need for change? Clearly not. While traditional leaders are rated more highly than their elected counterparts, more than half of citizens (52%) say chiefs don't listen well to ordinary people – hardly a resounding endorsement. And as with elected leaders, stories of corruption, abuse of power, sexism, and discrimination are not difficult to find.

But if the continuing importance of traditional authority teaches us anything, it is that these institutions are resilient and adaptable. So alongside stories of discriminatory or self-serving behavior among chiefs we can also find examples of chiefs acting as forces for progressive change, advocating education for girls, combating child marriage, or promoting public health measures in the face of a pandemic (African Union, 2019; GhanaWeb, 2021; Xinhuanet, 2021; Haro & Gosmane, 2020). Given their ability to understand and connect with their communities, their potentially positive role in tackling critical challenges should not be undervalued.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Months when Round 8 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov-Dec 2019	N/A
Benin	Nov-Dec 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Ethiopia	Dec 2019-Jan 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb 2020	2015, 2017
Ghana	Sept-Oct 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov-Dec 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	Aug-Sept 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	Oct-Dec 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Nov-Dec 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Namibia	Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	Oct-Nov 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	Jan-Feb 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec 2020-Jan 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Togo	Dec 2020-Jan 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	Feb-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept-Oct 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	Nov-Dec 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017

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