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A democratic façade

ERC Starting Grant awarded to democracy researcher Dr Anja Osei from Konstanz

"Parliaments in autocracies, that is an apparent contradiction in terms", says Dr Anja Osei, democracy researcher at the University of Konstanz. Nevertheless, these "electoral autocracies" exist, and there are many of them: countries that hold elections and have formally introduced democratic structures, but de facto are ruled by an autocrat or a family dynasty. Which political function do these parliaments exercise in autocracies? Are they just a façade or do they indeed possess co-determination rights? Might they even pave the way for real democratisation in the country? To investigate these questions, Dr Anja Osei was awarded the renowned ERC Starting Grant by the European Research Council (ERC). She will evaluate the parliamentary debates in seven African countries – five autocracies and two democracies – in addition to interviewing their members of parliament. Her project "Do Legislatures Enhance Democracy in Africa" will be funded with around 1.5 million euros from the ERC Starting Grant.

"In the nineties, we observed a wave of democratisation in Africa. Many former dictatorships set up, at least formally, a multi-party system" Anja Osei says. "Some became successful democracies; however, a host of countries experienced no real change to their power structures. They have remained rather stable autocracies", says Osei. The resulting question for democracy research is which effect the introduction of a multi-party system, elections and parliaments has on these countries. Does the regime simply aim to win international legitimisation, or might a long-term democratisation be on the horizon?

The status of these parliaments is fairly nebulous: "We simply do not know enough, we do not have any data: Who are the persons who have a seat in these parliaments? How do these members of parliament demographically reflect the general population? What do they discuss, what decisions are they allowed to make? Do the opposition parties have any leeway?", Anja Osei gives a few examples. Her research project aims to gather exactly such data and create a basis for further research on electoral autocracies. Anja Osei's research team will monitor and analyse parliamentary debates in electoral autocracies on the one hand, and conduct interviews with members of parliament on the other hand asking questions such as: How do the opposition parties and the government interact? How do they view their role?

"We will evaluate parliamentary debates in Cameroon, Gabon, Tanzania, Togo and Zimbabwe for a year each and use the democratic states of Botswana and Benin as a benchmark", Anja Osei says. In order to gain access to the parliaments, she will collaborate with scientific and institutional partners in each of these African states. The political researcher from Konstanz can draw on her previous experience: During the project for her post-doctoral qualification (Habilitation) she conducted research on networks of the political elite in Africa.

ERC Starting Grants are a renowned research funding programme run by the European Research Council. ERC Starting Grants are designed to support excellent junior researchers at the career stage in which they are starting their own independent research team or programme (two to seven years after completing their doctorate). Starting Grants can amount to up to 1.5 million euros and be awarded for a period of 5 years.

Facts:

- ERC Starting Grant for Dr Anja Osei
- Project: "Do Legislatures Enhance Democracy in Africa"
- Total funding: 1.5 million euros
- Duration: five years
- Evaluation of parliamentary debates and interviews with members of parliament in electoral autocracies in Africa
- Scope: seven projects in Cameroon, Gabon, Tanzania, Togo and Zimbabwe as well as the two democratic states of Botswana and Benin as benchmark.

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