

# Silence Is Not Consent: Culture, Social Conformity, and Regime Durability in Africa—A Sociological Analysis

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This article examines the relationship among political silence, political legitimacy, and regime durability in Africa through a comparative sociological analysis of power, authority, and state-society relations. It challenges the assumption that limited visible dissent necessarily indicates public consent, political legitimacy, or durable stability. Guided by Spiral of Silence Theory, Political Legitimacy Theory, and authoritarian resilience scholarship, the study uses qualitative comparative analysis of secondary sources to examine two contrasting sets of African political experiences. The first comprises Sudan, The Gambia, Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, and Tunisia, where prolonged political quiet preceded major political change or regime disruption. The second comprises Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, Rwanda, and Togo, where long-standing regimes have endured despite constrained or uneven public expression of dissent. The analysis finds that silence may reflect fear, exclusion, dependency, social conformity, strategic accommodation, political resignation, concealed opposition, genuine acceptance, or combinations of these conditions. Regime durability may likewise rest on institutional control, elite accommodation, patronage, resource distribution, security structures, performance-based support, and the management of political competition. Political silence is therefore an ambiguous form of political behavior rather than a reliable standalone measure of legitimacy or regime security. The article contributes to political sociology by offering a mechanism-based framework for distinguishing public quiet from genuine consent and by demonstrating why political stability and political legitimacy must be analyzed as related but distinct dimensions of political order.

**Keywords:** Culture of silence; political legitimacy; regime durability; authoritarian resilience; state–society relations; African politics.

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## 1.0. Introduction

The sociology of African politics examines how power, authority, institutions, and social relationships shape political life across the continent. It seeks to understand not only how governments gain and maintain power but also how citizens

respond to political systems, including through participation, resistance, acceptance, or silence. In many African societies, periods of political calm are often interpreted as signs of public satisfaction or government legitimacy. However, the absence of open opposition does not necessarily mean that citizens support those in power. Silence may reflect



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approval, but it may also represent fear, frustration, political exclusion, dependence on government resources, or the belief that speaking out will not change existing conditions.

The relationship between silence and political legitimacy is therefore more complicated than it appears. A society in which people rarely criticize government policies may seem politically stable, yet this stability may only represent the absence of visible resistance rather than genuine public confidence. Sociological research has long shown that individuals and groups sometimes remain silent when they perceive that expressing disagreement may result in social, economic, or political consequences (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Scott, 1990; Mamdani, 1996). In such situations, silence becomes a strategy for survival rather than an expression of consent.

This distinction is important in understanding political regimes in Africa. Across the continent, some governments have maintained long periods of political control despite public concerns about corruption, inequality, poor governance, restrictions on civic freedoms, or limited accountability. However, the continuation of a government does not automatically demonstrate that citizens fully support it. Regime survival may depend on several factors, including control over state institutions, economic resources, elite cooperation, security structures, political networks, and the ability of governments to manage opposition (Cheeseman, 2015; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Political stability, therefore, should not be measured only by the absence of protests, political unrest, or public criticism. A government may appear stable because citizens are satisfied, but it may also appear stable because citizens feel powerless, fearful, or disconnected from political processes. Despite the passage of decades, scholarship that resonates with contemporary realities in authoritarian and hybrid political systems emphasizes that governments can maintain control by limiting political competition, controlling information, or creating conditions in which citizens hesitate to challenge authority (Gerschewski, 2013; Svoblik, 2012). These conditions may produce political quiet, but political quiet

should not be confused with political legitimacy. The African political experience provides important examples of this complexity. Some regimes that appeared highly stable for many years later experienced significant political challenges when economic crises, leadership transitions, social movements, or changing political conditions created opportunities for citizens to express previously suppressed grievances. These experiences demonstrate that visible political compliance may hide deeper dissatisfaction. As a result, understanding regime durability requires examining not only whether governments remain in power but also the quality of the relationship between governments and the societies they govern.

The concept of a culture of silence is particularly useful in examining this relationship. A culture of silence refers to social and political environments in which individuals or groups avoid expressing criticism, questioning authority, or challenging dominant narratives. Such silence may develop because of repression, social expectations, political uncertainty, limited access to information, or experiences that discourage public participation. However, the existence of silence does not provide sufficient evidence that a regime enjoys genuine legitimacy or long-term security.

This article does not argue that every regime characterized by a culture of silence will eventually collapse. Such an argument would be deterministic and difficult to support because regimes survive or fail due to many interconnected factors. Instead, this study argues that a culture of silence is an unreliable indicator of genuine political legitimacy and long-term regime durability. Silence may create the appearance of stability while concealing unresolved social tensions, political dissatisfaction, or weakened public trust.

By examining the relationship between silence and regime durability through a sociological perspective, this article contributes to broader discussions about political power, legitimacy, citizenship, and governance in Africa. It challenges the assumption that the absence of resistance represents acceptance and argues that understanding political stability requires closer attention to the voices that are

expressed as well as the voices that remain silent.

The article proceeds in four parts. It first clarifies the culture of silence and develops an integrated framework drawing on Spiral of Silence Theory, Political Legitimacy Theory, and authoritarian resilience scholarship. It then examines the principal mechanisms linking political silence to citizen behavior and regime durability, explains the comparative qualitative methodology, and applies the framework to two contrasting sets of African cases. The final sections synthesize the comparative findings, identify their limitations and implications, and present practical recommendations.

## 2.0. Conceptual Clarification of the Culture of Silence

In political sociology, the culture of silence refers to a social and political condition in which individuals or groups limit, suppress, or avoid expressing their opinions, grievances, or opposition because of fear, domination, exclusion, social pressure, or perceptions of political powerlessness. Silence is not merely the absence of speech; it is a socially produced behavior shaped by relationships between power, institutions, culture, and individual agency. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes silence as a form of political behavior that may reveal underlying social tensions rather than genuine acceptance of existing political arrangements (Couldry, 2019; Nguyen, 2021).

The intellectual origins of the concept are strongly associated with Paulo Freire, who examined how systems of domination influence the consciousness and participation of marginalized populations. Freire (1970) argued that oppressed groups may develop a “culture of silence” when dominant groups control political narratives, social institutions, and opportunities for participation. In such contexts, silence does not represent agreement with domination; rather, it reflects historical experiences of exclusion that limit people’s ability to recognize themselves as active political subjects. Thus, silence becomes a consequence of unequal power relations.

Recent interpretations of Freire’s ideas emphasize that silence can persist even within formally

democratic societies when marginalized communities experience structural exclusion, unequal access to political institutions, or fear of social and political consequences. Contemporary scholars argue that political voice depends not only on legal freedoms but also on social conditions that enable citizens to participate meaningfully in public discourse (Mouffe, 2020; Couldry, 2019).

### 2.1. Silence as a Social Phenomenon

From a sociological perspective, silence is a collective phenomenon shaped by social expectations, institutional arrangements, and cultural norms. Individuals often evaluate whether speaking publicly is safe, acceptable, or worthwhile before expressing political opinions. Consequently, silence may emerge when citizens believe that their views are unpopular, powerless, or dangerous to express.

This argument connects closely with Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory, which explains how individuals may suppress their opinions when they perceive themselves to be part of a minority position. According to Noelle-Neumann (1993), fear of social isolation encourages people to remain silent, allowing dominant opinions to appear stronger than they actually are.

Recent studies demonstrate that the spiral of silence remains relevant in contemporary political communication, particularly within digital environments where individuals assess public opinion through social media platforms. Research shows that people who perceive their opinions as unpopular are less likely to express them publicly, contributing to distorted perceptions of majority agreement. Therefore, silence can create an illusion of political consensus. In authoritarian or fragile democratic contexts, regimes may interpret public silence as legitimacy, even when citizens privately experience dissatisfaction or opposition.

### 2.2. Silence as a Response to Power Relations

Silence is deeply connected to political power because the ability to speak is unevenly distributed within societies. Individuals and groups with limited

political influence may remain silent because they fear retaliation, exclusion, economic consequences, or state repression. In such situations, silence becomes an adaptive response to unequal power structures. James C. Scott expanded this understanding through his concept of hidden transcripts, arguing that subordinate groups often maintain private forms of criticism and resistance while presenting public conformity to powerful actors (Scott, 1990). According to Scott, public silence should not automatically be interpreted as acceptance; it may represent a survival strategy through which marginalized groups avoid punishment while preserving alternative narratives and forms of resistance.

Recent studies of authoritarian politics similarly emphasize that citizens living under restrictive regimes often engage in forms of “preference falsification,” where individuals publicly express loyalty while privately holding different beliefs (Kuran, 2018; Wedeen, 2019). Such environments allow political regimes to appear more stable than they actually are because visible opposition is suppressed or hidden.

### 2.3. Voluntary Silence and Imposed Silence

A critical distinction in understanding political silence is the difference between voluntary silence and imposed silence.

Voluntary silence occurs when individuals consciously choose not to express their views. This may result from strategic calculation, cultural values, personal privacy, or a belief that speaking publicly will not produce meaningful change. In this sense, silence may represent agency rather than helplessness.

Imposed silence, however, occurs when individuals are prevented from expressing themselves because of coercion, censorship, intimidation, discrimination, or institutional exclusion. This form of silence reflects unequal power relations because individuals are not freely choosing silence; rather, social or political structures restrict their ability to participate.

Contemporary communication research suggests that

digital environments have created new forms of both voluntary and imposed silence. While social media platforms have expanded opportunities for political expression, they have also created new pressures involving online harassment, surveillance, misinformation, and social exclusion that may discourage individuals from speaking openly.

### 2.4. Core Argument: Silence Is Not Consent

The central argument of the culture of silence perspective is that silence should not be interpreted as consent. Citizens may remain silent because of fear, political exclusion, strategic calculation, social pressure, or a lack of confidence in institutions. In societies experiencing weak governance, authoritarian tendencies, or unequal political participation, silence may function as evidence of constrained citizenship rather than public approval.

Therefore, political silence may represent accommodation, fear, strategic behavior, resistance, or exclusion. Understanding silence requires examining the power structures that determine who can speak, who is heard, and whose voices are marginalized. A regime’s durability may therefore depend not only on public support but also on its ability to produce conditions where opposition remains invisible.

## 3.0. Theoretical Framework

This paper is primarily anchored in the Spiral of Silence Theory and complemented by Political Legitimacy Theory and Authoritarian Resilience Theory. Let’s examine each of the theories.

### 3.1. Spiral of Silence Theory

This study is primarily guided by the Spiral of Silence Theory, developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993), and is complemented by Mahmood Mamdani’s (1996) analysis of state power, citizenship, and the historical production of political subjecthood in Africa. Although both Noelle-Neumann’s (1993) Spiral of Silence Theory and Mamdani’s (1996) analysis of state power and

citizenship were developed several decades ago and exceed the conventional expectation that scholarly sources should generally fall within the last five years, their continued relevance is demonstrated by their ability to explain enduring patterns of political communication, public opinion formation, state-citizen relations, and citizen behavior under conditions of uncertainty, polarization, political pressure, and institutional inequality. Foundational theories remain analytically valuable because they provide conceptual tools for interpreting contemporary social and political phenomena, particularly where historical structures of power continue to influence present-day political behavior. Foundational theories remain analytically valuable because they provide conceptual frameworks for interpreting evolving social and political realities.

The Spiral of Silence Theory explains how individuals may suppress their opinions when they perceive themselves to be part of a minority position or fear social isolation. Noelle-Neumann (1993) argued that individuals continuously evaluate their social environment to determine whether expressing their views may expose them to criticism, rejection, or other forms of social sanction. Consequently, public opinion may appear more unified than it actually is because individuals holding dissenting perspectives withdraw from public expression. Within political sociology, this framework is particularly useful for explaining why the absence of visible opposition should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of political consensus or popular legitimacy.

However, understanding political silence in African contexts requires attention to broader structural conditions that shape citizens' ability and willingness to express dissent. Mamdani's (1996) analysis of the postcolonial African state provides an important extension of the Spiral of Silence Theory by demonstrating that silence is not produced solely through individual fear of social isolation but may also emerge from historically embedded relationships between state authority and citizenship. Through his concept of the bifurcated state, Mamdani (1996) argues that many African states inherited governing systems that differentiated

between citizens with formal political rights and subjects governed through mechanisms of control and administrative authority. Within such systems, political silence may reflect constrained citizenship, limited avenues for participation, and the internalization of power relations rather than genuine acceptance of state authority.

From this perspective, silence represents a complex sociopolitical phenomenon shaped by both individual perceptions and institutional structures. Citizens may remain silent because they fear political retaliation, lack confidence in state institutions, perceive their voices as ineffective, or have experienced historical patterns of exclusion from meaningful participation. Therefore, the absence of public dissent does not necessarily indicate political stability, legitimacy, or consent; rather, it may represent adaptation to unequal power structures, strategic self-preservation, or a condition in which citizens function more as political subjects than empowered participants (Mamdani, 1996).

The combined insights of Noelle-Neumann (1993) and Mamdani (1996) provide a stronger framework for analyzing regime durability in Africa. While the Spiral of Silence Theory explains the micro-level processes through which individuals suppress political expression, Mamdani's state-centered perspective explains the macro-level conditions that enable regimes to produce and sustain political quietness. Together, these perspectives challenge the assumption that prolonged periods of limited dissent necessarily demonstrate regime legitimacy. Instead, silence may be an outcome of social pressure, institutional constraints, political exclusion, and unequal state-citizen relationships.

Contemporary political developments demonstrate the continued relevance of these theoretical perspectives. For example, in authoritarian contexts such as Russia following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many citizens have reportedly avoided publicly criticizing government policies because of legal restrictions, social consequences, and fear of state retaliation. The limited visibility of dissent does not necessarily reflect widespread agreement; rather, it may reflect the social and political costs associated with expressing opposition. Similarly, studies of

political polarization in democratic societies demonstrate that individuals may self-censor when they believe their opinions conflict with dominant views within their communities or online networks (Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018).

The emergence of social media has further expanded the relevance of Spiral of Silence Theory. Although digital platforms provide opportunities for political expression, they also create new pressures through online harassment, surveillance concerns, reputational risks, and algorithmically reinforced opinion environments. Recent scholarship suggests that individuals may continue to silence themselves online when they perceive their views as socially unacceptable or politically risky (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Hampton et al., 2018). In African political contexts, these digital pressures interact with existing institutional realities, including state control, limited civic space, and unequal citizen-state relationships. Thus, political silence should be understood not merely as the absence of speech but as a sociological outcome shaped by psychological pressures, historical state structures, and the distribution of political power.

### 3.2. Political Legitimacy Theory

While the Spiral of Silence Theory explains why individuals may refrain from expressing opposition, Political Legitimacy Theory provides a framework for distinguishing between political stability, compliance, and genuine public acceptance of authority. Legitimacy remains a central concept in political sociology because it addresses not only how governments maintain power but also why citizens recognize, tolerate, or challenge political authority.

Max Weber's foundational contribution remains essential despite its historical origin because his classification of legitimate authority continues to shape contemporary political analysis. Weber (1978) argued that political systems endure when citizens perceive authority as rightful and acceptable, rather than submitting to power out of fear or coercion. He identified three forms of legitimate domination: traditional authority, charismatic authority, and legal-rational authority. Weber's framework

demonstrates that durable political systems require more than the ability to exercise control; they require some level of social acceptance regarding the legitimacy of political authority.

Similarly, Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) emphasized that legitimacy refers to political institutions' capacity to generate the belief that existing arrangements are appropriate and worthy of support. For Lipset, legitimacy is essential for long-term stability because coercion and administrative control alone cannot sustain political systems indefinitely. A government may maintain order through force, but sustainable political stability requires citizens to perceive institutions as responsive, fair, and appropriate.

Although Weber and Lipset's works exceed the conventional five-year citation expectation, their continued relevance is demonstrated by their enduring ability to explain contemporary patterns of political authority, public acceptance, institutional trust, and citizen behavior under conditions of uncertainty and political pressure. Their theoretical contributions remain foundational because modern political systems continue to face the fundamental question of whether stability reflects genuine legitimacy or merely effective mechanisms of control.

However, African political experiences demonstrate that legitimacy must also be understood within broader historical and institutional contexts. Claude Ake (1996) argues that many African states have experienced legitimacy crises because political authority has often been associated with elite domination, limited participation, and weak accountability. From Ake's perspective, the survival of a regime does not necessarily indicate legitimacy because governments may remain in power while failing to provide meaningful opportunities for citizen participation or social development. Thus, political compliance may reflect political exclusion rather than genuine acceptance.

Mamdani's (1996) analysis of the postcolonial state further expands the understanding of legitimacy by examining the relationship between state power and citizenship. He argues that colonial administrative structures produced systems of governance

characterized by unequal forms of citizenship and institutionalized forms of control. In such contexts, state authority may be maintained through administrative domination and regulated participation rather than through a shared sense of political belonging. Therefore, the absence of resistance may reflect adaptation to unequal political arrangements rather than evidence of legitimacy.

The concept of legitimacy is also complicated by Richard Joseph's (1987) analysis of prebendal politics and Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) examination of neopatrimonial governance. These scholars demonstrate that political systems may maintain stability through networks of patronage, resource distribution, and elite accommodation. In such systems, support for political leaders may be based less on institutional trust or ideological commitment and more on access to state resources and personal benefits. Consequently, visible political support may sometimes represent dependency relationships rather than genuine legitimacy.

Chabal and Daloz (1999) further argue that African political systems often operate through informal relationships, personal networks, and strategies of political management. From this perspective, political stability may emerge from the ability of elites to manage uncertainty and maintain alliances rather than from strong institutional legitimacy. Silence and political compliance may therefore reflect strategic accommodation within a system where open opposition is viewed as costly or ineffective.

Contemporary scholarship by Cheeseman (2015) also highlights the complex relationship between democracy, elections, and legitimacy in Africa. Although many African states have adopted democratic institutions, elections do not always produce genuine political accountability. In some cases, electoral systems may provide a source of formal legitimacy while allowing incumbent leaders to preserve political dominance. This demonstrates that institutional appearance and democratic procedures do not automatically guarantee substantive legitimacy. Gilley (2021) similarly emphasizes that state legitimacy should be assessed through the quality of citizens' beliefs about political

authority rather than inferred solely from institutional continuity or the absence of open resistance.

Although the works of Ake, Mamdani, Joseph, Bratton and van de Walle, Chabal and Daloz, and Cheeseman were developed outside the conventional five-year citation window, their continued scholarly importance is demonstrated by their ability to explain persistent patterns of political authority, state–society relations, institutional trust, and citizen behavior. The political challenges they examined, including exclusion, patronage, weak accountability, informal governance, and contested citizenship, remain visible features of many contemporary political systems. Their perspectives therefore provide essential analytical tools for understanding how governments maintain authority and how citizens respond to political systems characterized by uncertainty, inequality, and constrained participation.

Political order, therefore, should be distinguished from political legitimacy. Political order refers to the ability of a state to maintain stability, control, and predictability. Governments may preserve order through surveillance, censorship, security institutions, patronage networks, or restrictions on political competition. Political legitimacy, however, requires a deeper level of acceptance in which citizens perceive political authority as justified, responsive, and appropriate.

A practical example can be observed in China, where the state has maintained considerable political stability through institutional capacity, economic performance, nationalism, and restrictions on political opposition. These mechanisms demonstrate strong political order; however, debates continue regarding whether such stability reflects broad societal consent, performance-based legitimacy, or managed political participation (Zhao, 2016).

Similarly, Venezuela demonstrates how political authority may persist despite declining public confidence and significant political opposition. The continuation of state control illustrates that regime survival does not necessarily indicate broad-based legitimacy (Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2013). Political systems may endure because of institutional

control, elite support, or coercive capacity even when citizens question the legitimacy of governing authorities.

Therefore, visible stability should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of legitimacy. Silence, compliance, and political inactivity may coexist with dissatisfaction, exclusion, fear, or limited trust in institutions. A regime may appear stable because it enjoys genuine legitimacy, but it may also appear stable because it successfully manages dissent and restricts the expression of opposition. Understanding this distinction is essential for analyzing political silence, regime durability, and the complex relationship between state power and citizen consent.

### 3.3. Authoritarian Resilience Theory

To explain why regimes survive despite challenges to legitimacy, this study incorporates Authoritarian Resilience Theory, which examines how authoritarian systems adapt, reorganize, and develop strategies to maintain political control over time. While authoritarian resilience scholarship has often focused on institutional adaptation, elite management, and coercive capacity, African political experiences demonstrate that regime durability must also be understood through broader questions of legitimacy, citizenship, informal political practices, and state–society relations.

Although the works of Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, and Milan W. Svobik exceed the conventional five-year citation expectation, their continued relevance is evident in their ability to explain enduring patterns of authoritarian adaptation, elite bargaining, political control, and regime survival under domestic uncertainty and external pressure. Similarly, the contributions of Claude Ake, Mahmood Mamdani, Richard Joseph, Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, Nic Cheeseman, Patrick Chabal, and Jean-Pascal Daloz remain analytically valuable because the political dynamics they examined—such as weak democratic institutions, elite domination, patronage networks, restricted citizenship, and informal governance—continue to influence contemporary African political systems.

Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that authoritarian

regimes endure through institutional strength, control over state resources, weakened opposition movements, and the ability to manage domestic and international pressures. Svobik (2012) further explains that authoritarian survival depends heavily on elite cooperation because authoritarian leaders must simultaneously manage threats from citizens and potential rivals within ruling coalitions. These perspectives demonstrate that regime survival is not solely dependent on repression but also on the ability of leaders to maintain elite cohesion and prevent challenges from within the political establishment.

However, African political theorists provide additional explanations for why authoritarian systems may endure even when they face legitimacy challenges. Claude Ake (1996) argues that many African states have experienced a crisis of legitimacy because political systems have frequently prioritized state power, elite interests, and control over meaningful democratic participation and social development. From Ake's perspective, regime survival does not necessarily indicate popular acceptance; rather, governments may remain in power despite limited legitimacy when political institutions fail to provide inclusive participation and accountability.

From Ake's perspective, the endurance of a regime should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of popular acceptance or political legitimacy. Governments may remain in power even when citizens experience exclusion, limited representation, and restricted opportunities to influence public decisions. Therefore, political stability may sometimes reflect institutional control, coercive capacity, or citizen adaptation to constrained political environments rather than genuine societal approval. In this context, silence and compliance should be understood cautiously, as they may represent political marginalization, strategic withdrawal, or uncertainty about the effectiveness of opposition rather than authentic support for governing authorities.

Similarly, Mamdani (1996) emphasizes that the durability of postcolonial African states must be understood through historical patterns of state power and citizenship. He argues that colonial

administrative structures produced forms of governance characterized by differentiated citizenship and control systems that continued after independence. In such contexts, political compliance may result from administrative domination and constrained citizenship rather than voluntary consent. Therefore, authoritarian resilience may reflect the continuation of institutional arrangements that regulate political participation and limit challenges to state authority.

Joseph's (1987) concept of prebendal politics further explains how authoritarian systems maintain stability through personalized distribution of state resources. In prebendal systems, political office becomes a mechanism for accessing and distributing public resources among networks of supporters. Such arrangements create loyalty structures that strengthen elite alliances while weakening demands for institutional accountability. Regime durability, therefore, may be sustained through patronage relationships rather than through broad political legitimacy.

The comparative analysis of African authoritarianism by Bratton and van de Walle (1997) similarly highlights the importance of neopatrimonial governance, where formal state institutions operate alongside informal networks of personal loyalty and resource distribution. They argue that many African regimes have survived by combining elements of modern state structures with personalized political authority. These arrangements enable leaders to maintain control even when formal democratic institutions appear weak or ineffective.

Contemporary scholarship by Cheeseman (2015) further demonstrates that African political systems often exist within a complex relationship between democratic reform and authoritarian persistence. Although many African states have adopted multiparty elections and democratic institutions, elections may sometimes function as mechanisms of regime maintenance rather than genuine competition. Electoral processes can provide international legitimacy while allowing incumbent governments to manage opposition and preserve political dominance.

Chabal and Daloz (1999) extend this argument by

emphasizing the importance of informal political practices and strategic management of uncertainty within African governance. They argue that political stability in many African contexts often depends less on strong formal institutions and more on networks of personal relationships, patronage, and elite accommodation. From this perspective, silence and limited public opposition may emerge because political actors adapt to systems where survival depends on negotiation, dependence, and informal forms of political engagement.

Despite the fact that the works of Mamdani (1996), Ake (1996), Joseph (1987), Bratton and van de Walle (1997), Chabal and Daloz (1999), and Cheeseman (2015) were developed several decades ago and extend beyond the conventional preference for recent scholarly sources, their continued relevance is demonstrated by their enduring ability to explain patterns of state power, citizenship, political authority, elite behavior, institutional trust, and citizen responses under conditions of uncertainty, political pressure, and unequal access to power. These foundational contributions remain analytically valuable because the political dynamics they examined, including legitimacy challenges, patronage systems, restricted participation, informal governance, and state–society tensions, continue to shape contemporary political experiences.

Authoritarian resilience is therefore maintained through multiple interconnected mechanisms:

### 3.3.1. Repression

Governments may employ security institutions, restrictive legislation, surveillance, censorship, or intimidation to discourage dissent and preserve political authority. Repression functions by increasing the perceived costs of opposition, limiting collective action, and encouraging citizens to remain silent due to uncertainty about the consequences of political expression. Within many African political contexts, repression should be understood not only as the direct use of coercive force but also as part of broader systems of political control that regulate participation and shape citizen behavior.

Mamdani (1996) argues that the postcolonial state in

Africa inherited and transformed colonial structures of administrative control that often produced forms of governance based on regulation, surveillance, and unequal citizenship. From this perspective, political silence may emerge when citizens perceive the state as a mechanism of control rather than as an inclusive institution representing collective interests. Similarly, Ake (1996) contends that the concentration of political power and limited democratic accountability in many African states have contributed to legitimacy crises, where governments rely on control mechanisms rather than genuine political inclusion to maintain authority.

Bratton and van de Walle (1997) further explain that authoritarian and neopatrimonial systems often combine formal state institutions with informal mechanisms of control. Security agencies, administrative structures, and legal frameworks may be used selectively to weaken opposition and protect ruling coalitions. Such practices contribute to what this study conceptualizes as the management of political silence, where citizens may avoid dissent not because they support the regime, but because they perceive political expression as costly or ineffective.

Chabal and Daloz (1999) similarly emphasize that political stability in many African contexts often depends on informal strategies of control, negotiation, and elite management rather than solely on institutional effectiveness. Consequently, the absence of visible opposition may reflect adaptation to political environments where resistance carries significant personal and social risks.

### Co-optation

Authoritarian regimes often maintain durability by incorporating potential opponents through political appointments, economic opportunities, access to state resources, and institutional privileges. Co-optation reduces opposition by transforming possible challengers into participants or beneficiaries within the existing political system. Rather than relying exclusively on coercion, authoritarian governments may use inclusion strategically to manage political competition and preserve elite cooperation.

Joseph's (1987) concept of prebendal politics provides an important explanation of how political elites in some African states are incorporated through access to state resources and networks of patronage. In prebendal systems, political positions often serve as avenues for distributing benefits among supporters, creating loyalty relationships that strengthen ruling coalitions while weakening demands for institutional accountability. Thus, political stability may be maintained through negotiated dependence rather than broad public legitimacy.

Bratton and van de Walle (1997) similarly demonstrate that neopatrimonial governance allows political leaders to sustain power through the combination of formal institutions and informal patron-client networks. By distributing political and economic benefits among influential groups, regimes can reduce elite fragmentation and limit challenges from within the ruling structure.

Chabal and Daloz (1999) further argue that African political systems frequently rely on informal political arrangements, personal networks, and strategies of accommodation to manage uncertainty. Through co-optation, governments create relationships of dependence that encourage political actors to cooperate with existing authorities rather than challenge them.

Cheeseman (2015) extends this analysis by showing that contemporary African regimes may combine democratic institutions with authoritarian practices. Political appointments, electoral alliances, and institutional privileges may be used to incorporate opposition figures while maintaining incumbent dominance. In such cases, political inclusion may serve less as evidence of democratic consolidation and more as a strategy for managing competition and preserving regime continuity.

Therefore, co-optation should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of political consensus or legitimacy. Instead, it may represent a mechanism through which regimes convert potential resistance into accommodation. When combined with repression, patronage, and institutional control, co-optation can create an appearance of stability while concealing underlying grievances and limitations on

genuine political participation.

### 3.3.2. Patronage and Prebendal Networks

Following Joseph (1987) and Bratton and van de Walle (1997), regimes may distribute state resources through informal networks of loyalty and dependency. These arrangements create political obligations that discourage resistance while reinforcing elite cooperation.

### Elite Alliances

As emphasized by Svobik (2012), authoritarian leaders must maintain cooperation among military officials, political elites, bureaucratic actors, and economic interests. Elite cohesion strengthens regime survival, while elite fragmentation can create opportunities for political transformation.

### Institutional and Electoral Control

Authoritarian governments may maintain control over electoral systems, courts, media institutions, and administrative structures while preserving the appearance of institutional normalcy. As Cheeseman (2015) notes, democratic institutions can sometimes coexist with authoritarian practices when they are used primarily to manage competition rather than facilitate genuine political accountability.

### 3.3.3. Management of Political Silence

Beyond coercion and institutional control, authoritarian resilience also involves managing public expression. Drawing from Ake, Mamdani, Chabal, and Daloz, silence may represent adaptation to unequal political structures, restricted citizenship, patronage dependence, or perceptions that political participation is ineffective. Therefore, the absence of visible opposition should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of legitimacy or stability.

A contemporary example is Russia, where regime durability has been associated with elite management, media control, security institutions, and restrictions on opposition organizations. The

continuation of political order illustrates how authoritarian resilience mechanisms can sustain regimes despite domestic dissatisfaction and international pressure (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). Similarly, African cases mentioned in subsequent subsections in this paper demonstrate that authoritarian durability may persist through a combination of coercion, patronage, institutional manipulation, and the management of citizen expectations.

Thus, authoritarian resilience theory contributes to this study by demonstrating that regime survival is a complex process involving not only repression and institutional control but also legitimacy management, citizenship structures, informal political networks, and the strategic regulation of political silence.

### 3.4. Integrative Application of the Framework

The combination of Spiral of Silence Theory, Political Legitimacy Theory, and Authoritarian Resilience Theory provides a comprehensive explanation of how political systems maintain stability despite limited public expression of dissent.

The Spiral of Silence Theory explains why citizens may remain publicly quiet; Political Legitimacy Theory distinguishes stability from genuine acceptance; and Authoritarian Resilience Theory explains how regimes develop mechanisms to preserve power despite legitimacy challenges.

Together, these theories support the central argument of this study: Silence should not be interpreted as consent. A society may appear politically stable because citizens are fearful, strategically silent, socially excluded, or constrained by institutional arrangements. Political order may therefore exist without deep political legitimacy.

### Literature Review: Silence, Legitimacy, and Regime Durability in Africa

The relationship between political silence and regime durability is further illuminated by cases in which prolonged periods of apparent public

compliance were followed by unexpected political transformation. These cases demonstrate that silence should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence of political legitimacy, social acceptance, or state stability. Rather, silence may reflect deeper structural conditions of power, exclusion, fear, and constrained political participation. Consistent with the spiral of silence theory, citizens may suppress political expression when they perceive dissent as dangerous, socially isolating, or incapable of producing meaningful political change (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Similarly, Scott's (1990) concept of hidden transcripts highlights how subordinate groups may outwardly demonstrate conformity while privately sustaining grievances, resistance narratives, and alternative visions of political order.

This interpretation is consistent with Mamdani's (1996) analysis of postcolonial African states, where political compliance often emerges not from genuine consent but from institutional arrangements that reproduce forms of control, exclusion, and indirect rule. For Mamdani, the apparent stability of many African regimes may reflect the persistence of authoritarian structures that regulate citizenship and political participation rather than the existence of broad-based legitimacy. Likewise, Claude Ake's (1996) critique of African political development emphasizes that many states have experienced a crisis of legitimacy because political systems have frequently prioritized elite accumulation, coercive control, and state power over democratic inclusion and social welfare. From this perspective, public silence may represent political marginalization or strategic withdrawal rather than approval of governing authorities.

Therefore, prolonged silence can conceal unresolved tensions within state-society relations. The experiences of several African regimes demonstrate that the absence of visible dissent may indicate suppressed opposition, weakened civic space, or accumulated grievances that remain beneath the surface until political opportunities emerge. Silence, therefore, should be understood not as a reliable indicator of regime legitimacy or durability, but as a complex social and political phenomenon shaped by power relations, historical conditions, and citizens'

perceptions of the risks and possibilities of collective action.

### 3.5. Political Silence and Citizen Behavior

Political silence is a complex social phenomenon shaped by citizens' perceptions of power, risk, and political opportunity. In many African political contexts, silence has often been interpreted as political passivity or acceptance. However, sociological and political research demonstrates that silence may represent a calculated response to political environments where expressing opposition carries significant personal or collective costs.

#### 3.5.1. Fear of Repression

A significant body of literature identifies repression as one of the primary causes of political silence. Citizens living under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian systems may avoid political expression because of fear of arrest, surveillance, violence, loss of employment, or social consequences.

The work of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) demonstrates that many contemporary authoritarian regimes maintain control not only through overt violence but also through institutional mechanisms that discourage opposition. Similarly, Milan W. Svobik (2012) argues that authoritarian leaders survive by managing threats from both citizens and political elites.

Recent studies of authoritarian politics emphasize that repression does not always need to be constantly visible to be effective. The possibility of punishment can generate self-censorship because individuals anticipate consequences before expressing dissent (Guriev & Treisman, 2022).

A practical example can be observed in Zimbabwe, where periods of political contestation have frequently been accompanied by concerns regarding intimidation, state security involvement, and restrictions on opposition activities. In such contexts, limited public criticism cannot automatically be interpreted as popular support for governing authorities; it may reflect the perceived risks

associated with political participation. Therefore, silence may function as a rational response to political insecurity rather than evidence of legitimacy.

### 3.5.2. Political Apathy and Strategic Political Silence

Political apathy provides a distinct explanation for political silence. Norris (2011) argues that citizens may become increasingly critical of political institutions while simultaneously reducing their willingness to participate when they perceive those institutions as ineffective, unresponsive, or incapable of producing meaningful change. Under such circumstances, political silence may reflect resignation, disengagement, or declining political efficacy rather than either fear or approval. This distinction is important because nonparticipation does not necessarily indicate acceptance of the political order; individuals may withdraw because they perceive political engagement as unlikely to alter existing conditions.

Contemporary evidence from Africa illustrates this relationship between institutional dissatisfaction and reduced political engagement. Afrobarometer's surveys across 39 African countries found that fewer than half of citizens expressed trust in their president, Parliament, courts, or police, with trust in major political institutions declining over the preceding decade. Among young Africans, approximately 60% reported dissatisfaction with the way democracy was functioning, while younger citizens were less likely than older citizens to vote or participate in several other forms of political engagement. These findings suggest that political disengagement can emerge alongside democratic aspirations and dissatisfaction with institutional performance. In such contexts, withdrawal from political participation may represent skepticism about the effectiveness of available political channels rather than support for the status quo.

The pattern is not uniform across African societies. More recent Afrobarometer evidence indicates that most Africans continue to participate in political or civic activities: approximately 72% reported voting

in their country's most recent national election, while substantial proportions reported discussing politics, attending community meetings, joining others to raise issues, contacting public officials, or participating in protests. Nevertheless, youth and women generally participate at lower rates than older citizens and men. This variation cautions against treating political silence as a single phenomenon. Silence may reflect apathy in one context, fear or repression in another, and strategic accommodation or temporary withdrawal in yet another.

Country-level experiences further illustrate this variation. In South Africa, for example, declining satisfaction with democracy has occurred alongside declining support for democracy over the past decade, indicating growing dissatisfaction with political performance rather than straightforward rejection of democratic government. Afrobarometer reports that satisfaction with democracy in South Africa declined substantially over the period examined. In Tunisia, meanwhile, political engagement has been comparatively limited in some forms; Afrobarometer's 2025 analysis reported that only 11% of respondents had attended a community meeting during the preceding year. Such evidence does not, by itself, establish political apathy as the sole explanation. Rather, it demonstrates the importance of examining whether low participation results from institutional distrust, political resignation, perceived ineffectiveness, socioeconomic constraints, or other contextual factors.

### 3.5.3. Survival Strategies and Strategic Accommodation

Political silence may also represent a survival strategy rather than political apathy. In settings where political competition is connected to employment, access to state resources, physical security, or social opportunities, individuals may deliberately avoid confrontation with authorities. Scott's (1990) concept of hidden transcripts is useful in explaining this phenomenon: subordinate groups may privately criticize or resist dominant actors while publicly displaying compliance. Public silence can therefore coexist with private disagreement and

even forms of concealed resistance.

This dynamic is particularly relevant where citizens depend upon government-controlled resources or politically connected networks. Individuals may publicly express loyalty to governing authorities while privately holding very different political preferences. Such behavior should not automatically be interpreted as ideological agreement. Instead, it may represent rational adaptation to unequal power relations and the perceived costs of political expression.

Kuran's (2018) concept of preference falsification provides a complementary explanation. Individuals may conceal their genuine political preferences when expressing them publicly is perceived as costly. Consequently, observable public opinion may differ substantially from privately held preferences. In authoritarian or highly polarized political environments, widespread preference falsification can produce an appearance of political consensus even when substantial dissatisfaction exists beneath the surface.

The distinction between apathy, fear, and strategic accommodation is therefore analytically important. Political apathy involves withdrawal because political participation is perceived as ineffective or meaningless; fear-based silence involves avoidance because political expression is perceived as dangerous; and strategic accommodation involves calculated public compliance intended to protect one's interests or security. These forms of silence may appear similar externally but reflect different motivations and have different implications for regime durability.

Accordingly, the absence of visible opposition should not automatically be treated as evidence of political legitimacy or genuine public acceptance. A regime may appear stable because citizens support it, because they have become politically resigned, because they fear the consequences of opposition, or because they have strategically adapted to prevailing power relations. Distinguishing these mechanisms is essential to understanding the sociological meaning of political silence and its relationship to regime durability.

#### 3.5.4. Social Conformity

Political silence is also shaped by social conformity and the perceived expectations of one's social environment. Individuals consider not only the potential consequences imposed by the state but also how family members, friends, community members, political allies, and other significant social groups may respond to their opinions. Noelle-Neumann's (1993) Spiral of Silence Theory provides a useful framework for understanding this process. The theory proposes that individuals may suppress opinions they perceive to be unpopular because of a desire to avoid social isolation. When individuals repeatedly observe a particular position being presented as dominant, they may become increasingly reluctant to express opposing views publicly. Consequently, the apparent dominance of one political position may partly reflect the unwillingness of others to express disagreement rather than the absence of disagreement itself.

Contemporary evidence from Africa demonstrates that political expression is embedded in broader social relationships. Afrobarometer's 2025 analysis of 39 African countries found that more than six in ten respondents (62%) reported that they occasionally or frequently discuss politics with family or friends, while 42% reported joining with others to raise an issue during the preceding year. These findings demonstrate that political attitudes and participation are frequently mediated through interpersonal and community networks rather than occurring exclusively through formal political institutions. At the same time, the extent to which individuals feel able to express themselves varies considerably across countries. (Afrobarometer, 2025).

The relationship between social environment and political expression is particularly important where political identities become strongly polarized. Research conducted across African countries has found that political polarization can affect attitudes toward civic freedoms: supporters of governing parties may exhibit greater willingness to restrict civic space when they distrust opposing political groups. Such findings suggest that social conformity is not necessarily produced by government coercion

alone; perceptions of political in-groups and out-groups can also shape what individuals regard as acceptable political expression. In these circumstances, individuals may moderate or suppress their views to maintain relationships, avoid conflict, or remain within the perceived boundaries of their political community. (Afrobarometer, 2025)

Social pressures can be particularly significant where interpersonal trust and community relationships are important sources of social support. Recent Afrobarometer evidence from 38 African countries indicates that interpersonal trust is strongest within families and declines as social distance increases: 81% of respondents reported trusting relatives, compared with 58% for neighbours and approximately half for people of a different ethnicity or religion. The same study found that informal solidarity remains strongest within families, while collective action directed toward government is considerably less common. These patterns do not demonstrate political conformity by themselves, but they illustrate the dense social networks within which political attitudes and expressions are formed and communicated. (Afrobarometer, 2025)

The influence of social expectations is not confined to Africa. In highly polarized political environments, individuals may also avoid expressing minority political opinions because of anticipated social consequences, including criticism, exclusion, reputational damage, or conflict with members of their social networks. This extends the logic of the Spiral of Silence beyond formal repression: the perceived social cost of disagreement can itself discourage public expression.

The distinction is therefore important between state-imposed silence and socially produced silence. State-imposed silence may result from censorship, surveillance, intimidation, or punishment, whereas socially produced silence may arise from the expectation of disapproval, social isolation, damaged relationships, or reputational costs. In practice, these mechanisms can overlap. Individuals living under politically restrictive governments may remain silent because of both fear of official sanctions and concern about the reactions of family, community members, or political networks.

Political silence should consequently be understood as a product of both state power and social processes. A person who remains publicly silent may disagree privately but choose not to disclose that disagreement because the perceived social costs are too high. Conversely, public conformity may sometimes reflect genuine agreement rather than suppression. The analytical task is therefore not simply to identify whether individuals speak or remain silent, but to examine the social context in which silence occurs, the perceived consequences of political expression, and whether public behavior corresponds with privately held political preferences

#### 4.0. Regime Durability and Political Stability

The literature on African politics has extensively examined why some regimes survive despite economic challenges, democratic pressures, and legitimacy concerns. Scholars generally identify several mechanisms that contribute to regime durability, including state capacity, security institutions, resource distribution, and elite bargains.

##### 4.1. State Capacity

State capacity refers to the ability of governments to implement decisions, maintain authority, provide services, and regulate social and political life. Strong state institutions often increase regime survival because they provide governments with administrative control and organizational resources.

Although earlier modernization perspectives assumed that weak institutions would eventually produce political instability, recent scholarship demonstrates that some regimes survive by developing selective institutional strength, particularly in areas related to political control and resource management (Slater, 2010).

##### 4.2. Security Institutions

Security institutions remain among the most important tools of regime survival. Military forces, police agencies, and intelligence organizations often serve not only national security functions but also

political purposes. Research on authoritarian durability demonstrates that regimes frequently invest in security institutions to monitor opposition, manage protests, and prevent elite challenges (Svolik, 2012). The effectiveness of these institutions may allow governments to maintain order even when public legitimacy is contested. However, excessive reliance on coercion may produce stability without genuine legitimacy. The experience of contemporary China illustrates this dynamic. The Chinese Communist Party has deliberately strengthened the cohesion and reach of the police, including through increased resources and the incorporation of police leadership into local decision-making structures. Research suggests that this enhanced coercive capacity has contributed to the durability of the Chinese authoritarian state by increasing the state's ability to monitor and control potential sources of opposition (Hendrickson & Pierskalla, 2017). More recent research similarly indicates that China's extensive surveillance infrastructure can encourage routine compliance by increasing citizens' perceptions of the risks associated with political nonconformity, although such effects may weaken over time (Chen et al., 2026).

Iran provides another illustration of how specialized security institutions can contribute to regime resilience. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), together with the Basij and other security organizations, has played a central role in protecting the Islamic Republic against domestic political challenges. The IRGC was established to protect the revolutionary political order and has since responded to coups, mass uprisings, and other perceived threats to the regime (Golkar, 2023). During the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom protests, Iranian security institutions were again deployed extensively to suppress demonstrations, illustrating how coercive capacity can restrict the ability of opposition movements to translate public dissatisfaction into sustained political challenge.

These cases demonstrate that the political significance of security institutions extends beyond their conventional law-enforcement or national-defense functions. Their capacity to monitor citizens,

suppress collective action, and deter elite or popular challenges can enable governments to maintain political order even when public legitimacy is contested. However, such stability should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of genuine political acceptance. Where regime stability depends heavily on surveillance, coercion, and repression, the absence of open opposition may reflect fear, strategic accommodation, or constrained political participation rather than consent. Thus, security institutions can produce order and regime durability without necessarily producing legitimacy.

### 4.3. Resource Distribution

Resource distribution is another important mechanism through which governments may consolidate political support and sustain governing coalitions. Patronage can take the form of public employment, contracts, land, infrastructure, or targeted services, creating relationships of material dependence between political leaders, elites, and citizens (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Contemporary research, however, suggests that resource allocation should not automatically be equated with patronage; governments may combine clientelistic distribution with broader policy-oriented programs depending on political competition and institutional conditions (Dyzenhaus, 2021).

Empirical research illustrates this variation. In Kenya, for example, the allocation of land has at different periods reflected both patronage and programmatic policy, with the political use of resources influenced by regime type, electoral competition, and the government's ability to control distribution (Dyzenhaus, 2021). Similarly, research on Benin and Ghana demonstrates how state employment can function as a political resource through which governing elites build and maintain networks of political support (Sigman, 2022). Such practices can create material incentives for political loyalty and discourage beneficiaries from challenging established political arrangements.

Resource distribution, therefore, may contribute to regime durability not simply by generating direct support but by creating networks of dependency and

political accommodation. However, the relationship is conditional: the distribution of public resources may also serve legitimate developmental objectives and should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of clientelism. The analytical issue is whether resources are distributed according to universalistic policy criteria or selectively in ways that reinforce political alliances and dependence.

#### 4.4. Elite Bargains

Elite bargains refer to agreements and power-sharing arrangements among influential political actors that help maintain cooperation and prevent divisions within ruling coalitions. Svolik (2012) argues that authoritarian survival depends substantially on managing relations among political elites and preventing intra-elite conflict. Similarly, Clapham (1996) emphasized the importance of political networks and elite relationships in understanding African state power.

Recent comparative research reinforces this argument. An analysis of 39 African autocracies found that authoritarian leaders frequently reconfigured their elite coalitions in response to political pressures, including by incorporating opposition actors into government positions. Such adjustments enabled regimes to accommodate competing interests while preserving political continuity (Cheeseman et al., 2024). Elite bargains may therefore involve not only maintaining existing alliances but also renegotiating access to political office, state resources, and decision-making power when existing arrangements become unstable. Where influential elites perceive their interests as better protected within the existing political order, they have stronger incentives to support regime continuity even when broader public legitimacy is weak.

#### 4.5. The Missing Link: Silence as a Measure of Political Stability

While existing scholarship provides important explanations of regime durability, a significant analytical gap remains regarding the political

meaning of silence itself. Much of the literature on authoritarian persistence emphasizes institutional factors such as coercive capacity, resource distribution, elite alliances, and state control. However, fewer studies examine how the absence of visible dissent shapes perceptions of regime legitimacy and political stability. This study argues that political silence is an ambiguous sociological phenomenon that may create misleading interpretations of regime durability.

From Ake's (1996) perspective, the endurance of many African political systems cannot be understood solely through institutional strength or popular consent. Ake argues that the crisis of African governance is rooted in limited political inclusion, weak democratic accountability, and the prioritization of state power over social development. Within such contexts, silence may reflect political exclusion, alienation, or the perception that citizens lack meaningful avenues for participation rather than genuine acceptance of governing authorities. Similarly, Mamdani's (1996) analysis of the postcolonial state highlights how inherited structures of domination and differentiated forms of citizenship have often produced systems in which compliance is maintained through administrative control rather than voluntary political consent. Therefore, the absence of open resistance may represent adaptation to structures of power rather than evidence of legitimacy.

The perspectives of Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz further complicate conventional interpretations of political stability in Africa. Chabal and Daloz (1999) argue that many African political systems operate through informal networks, personalized authority, and strategies of political management rather than solely through effective formal institutions. From this perspective, apparent stability may result from the ability of political elites to manage uncertainty, distribute patronage, and regulate political competition. Silence, therefore, may emerge not because citizens are satisfied with the political order, but because political participation is shaped by accommodation, dependency, or calculated survival strategies.

Although the analyses of Ake, Mamdani, Chabal,

and Daloz were developed several decades ago and extend beyond the conventional expectation that scholarly sources should generally emphasize recent publications, their continued relevance is demonstrated by their ability to explain enduring patterns of political communication, public opinion formation, state–citizen relations, and citizen behavior under conditions of uncertainty, polarization, political pressure, and institutional inequality. Their theoretical contributions remain valuable because the structural challenges they examined, such as exclusionary governance, uneven citizenship, elite dominance, and limited political participation, continue to influence contemporary political experiences in many African states. Rather than representing outdated perspectives, these works provide foundational analytical tools for understanding how historical and institutional conditions shape present-day expressions of political silence and public compliance.

Accordingly, a regime may appear stable because citizens fear repression, opposition movements are restricted, alternative voices are marginalized, or individuals conclude that resistance is unlikely to produce meaningful change. Political silence may also function as a survival mechanism in environments where expressing dissent carries social, economic, or security risks. As a result, the absence of protest or criticism should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of legitimacy or political consensus. Silence can conceal dissatisfaction, deferred grievances, and unresolved tensions within state–society relations.

The central contribution of this study is the argument that political silence should be treated as a critical sociological variable in evaluating regime durability. Rather than viewing silence as a straightforward indicator of stability, this study examines how regimes may maintain an appearance of order through management, suppression, or invisibility of dissent. While genuine legitimacy may produce political stability, stability achieved through controlled silence may represent only temporary endurance rather than sustainable political consolidation. Understanding this distinction is essential for analyzing contemporary African

political systems, where visible political order may coexist with limited citizen voice, restricted participation, and persistent legitimacy challenges.

## 5.0. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative design to examine how political silence relates to legitimacy and regime durability across contrasting African political contexts. The design is interpretive rather than statistical: it seeks to identify the social, institutional, and political mechanisms that may produce similar outward patterns of limited dissent. Silence is treated as an observable political condition whose meaning must be inferred cautiously from contextual evidence rather than assumed in advance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023; Maxwell, 2021).

Cases were selected purposively to provide variation in political outcome while remaining relevant to the article's central question. Sudan, The Gambia, Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, and Tunisia represent settings in which extended authoritarian rule or constrained expression was followed by major leadership change or regime disruption. Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, Rwanda, and Togo represent settings in which long-standing regimes have remained durable despite restricted or uneven political expression. Selection was based on three criteria: prolonged incumbent or ruling-party dominance, credible documentary evidence concerning constraints on political expression, and sufficient evidence to assess the mechanisms associated with either political change or continued regime endurance. The cases are illustrative and are not intended to represent all African political systems.

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, academic books, governance and human-rights reports, electoral analyses, policy documents, and credible institutional publications. Sources were examined for evidence relating to repression, political participation, citizen attitudes, patronage, institutional control, state capacity, elite cohesion, resource distribution, opposition organization, and regime performance. The material was analyzed

thematically and comparatively using the following interpretive categories: fear, social conformity, economic or political dependency, strategic accommodation, political resignation, concealed opposition, and genuine or performance-based acceptance (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The design has important limitations. Secondary evidence cannot directly establish citizens' private beliefs, and the quantity and quality of available documentation vary across countries and periods. The analysis therefore does not claim that silence causes either regime durability or political change, nor does it assign a single motivation to entire populations. Instead, it uses triangulated contextual evidence to assess which mechanisms are plausible in each case and to demonstrate why visible political quiet should not be interpreted automatically as consent.

## 6.0. Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it enhances our understanding of the relationship between political silence, legitimacy, and regime durability by challenging the notion that the absence of visible dissent equates to public acceptance of political authority. While existing scholarship has extensively explored regime survival through mechanisms such as repression, state capacity, elite alliances, and resource distribution, there has been less focus on how citizen silence influences perceptions of political stability and legitimacy.

The research contributes to the fields of political sociology and security studies by framing silence as a meaningful form of political behavior rather than merely a lack of participation. By employing the Spiral of Silence Theory, Political Legitimacy Theory, and Authoritarian Resilience Theory, this study illustrates that silence may often stem from fear, political exclusion, social conformity, strategic adaptation, or survival tactics rather than genuine agreement with governing systems. Additionally, the study holds practical significance for understanding governance and democratic development in Africa. It emphasizes the importance for policymakers, civil society organizations, and international actors to

differentiate between political order and political legitimacy. A regime may achieve stability through institutional control and restricted political expression while simultaneously facing fundamental legitimacy challenges. Recognizing this distinction is crucial for evaluating governance quality, citizen trust, and long-term political resilience.

Ultimately, this research offers a novel analytical perspective by proposing silence as a potentially valuable measure of political stability that requires careful interpretation. It contends that sustainable political stability is not solely based on the absence of conflict or dissent but also relies on meaningful citizen participation, institutional accountability, and legitimate authority.

## 7.0. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

This section applies the theoretical framework through a focused comparative set of African cases. The cases are selected purposively to provide variation in regime type, political context, geographic setting, and political outcome. The selection includes cases in which prolonged public quiet was followed by major political change and cases in which limited public dissent coexisted with long-term regime durability. The cases are illustrative rather than exhaustive; they are used to examine how fear, social conformity, economic or political dependency, strategic accommodation, political resignation, concealed opposition, and genuine acceptance can produce similar outward appearances of silence.

### 7.1. Comparative Case Selection and Analytical Framework

The cases are organized around one analytical question: what does political silence represent in context? Each illustration considers (a) the principal conditions associated with limited public expression, (b) the mechanism through which silence may be sustained, and (c) whether subsequent political developments support an interpretation of silence as fear, conformity, dependency, strategic accommodation, resignation, concealed opposition,

or possible acceptance. This approach avoids treating silence as a uniform social response and avoids equating regime longevity with legitimacy.

## 7.2. Cases in Which Political Quiet Preceded Major Political Change

### 7.2.1. Sudan: Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019)

Sudan under Omar al-Bashir provides a useful case for examining how political silence can emerge from the interaction of fear, restricted political opportunity, strategic accommodation, and unresolved grievances. The case is selected because it demonstrates the coexistence of prolonged authoritarian rule, extensive security controls, and a subsequent mass mobilization that culminated in the president's removal in April 2019. Under Bashir, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) played a central role in suppressing political opposition through surveillance, censorship, arbitrary detention, and the intimidation of activists and opponents (Hassan & Kodouda, 2019). Human Rights Watch similarly documented arrests, violence against protesters, media restrictions, and the use of security forces to constrain political organization and public assembly (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

These conditions make it problematic to interpret the relative absence of sustained public opposition during much of Bashir's rule as evidence of genuine political acceptance. The regime combined coercive repression with patronage and institutional controls that increased the costs of political dissent and helped sustain loyalty among important constituencies (International Crisis Group, 2019). Public compliance could therefore reflect fear, political resignation, or strategic accommodation, whereby individuals avoided open confrontation because the perceived costs of dissent outweighed the immediate benefits.

The events of 2018–2019 provide important evidence against interpreting political quiet as consensus. Protests initially emerged in response to economic hardship, including rising prices and shortages, but developed into a broader movement demanding the removal of Bashir. Despite intensified repression, demonstrations expanded

across the country and eventually culminated in a large sit-in outside the military headquarters in Khartoum. Bashir was removed by the military on April 11, 2019, after nearly four months of sustained mobilization (Hassan & Kodouda, 2019; Berridge et al., 2022).

The Sudanese case therefore illustrates an important distinction between observable political compliance and underlying political preferences. The relative quiet maintained under Bashir cannot be interpreted uniformly as either fear or genuine acceptance. For some citizens, silence may have reflected fear of state repression; for others, political resignation or strategic accommodation; while the subsequent mass mobilization demonstrates that substantial opposition could remain latent until political and economic conditions created an opportunity for collective action. The case consequently supports the broader argument that political silence is analytically ambiguous: its meaning must be established through the institutional, social, and political conditions under which it occurs.

### 7.2.2. The Gambia: Yahya Jammeh (1994–2017)

The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh provides a useful illustration of how fear, constrained political opportunity, and strategic accommodation can shape political silence. Jammeh's 22-year rule was characterized by restrictions on political opposition, independent media, and public dissent, reinforced by security agencies and paramilitary groups. Human Rights Watch documented arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and intimidation of political opponents and other perceived critics, contributing to a broader climate of fear (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

These conditions make it difficult to interpret the relative absence of sustained public opposition as evidence of genuine political acceptance. Citizens and political actors could face substantial personal and institutional costs for openly challenging the government, encouraging forms of political restraint and strategic accommodation (Cheeseman, 2015). The experience of the 2016 presidential election further illustrates this constraint: opposition activists

were arrested and prosecuted, while state resources and media were used to provide the incumbent with political advantages (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

At the same time, the eventual defeat of Jammeh demonstrates the analytical limits of equating political calm with political consent. Jammeh lost the December 2016 presidential election to Adama Barrow, although he initially rejected the result and attempted to remain in office. He ultimately left the country in January 2017 following regional diplomatic and military pressure. The case therefore suggests that prolonged political quiet may reflect fear and strategic accommodation rather than genuine acceptance, while changes in political opportunity can make previously constrained opposition more visible. The Gambian experience consequently reinforces the broader argument that observable political silence must be interpreted in relation to the institutional constraints and social costs surrounding political expression.

### 7.2.3. Burkina Faso: Blaise Compaoré (1987–2014)

Blaise Compaoré's prolonged presidency illustrates how political resignation and constrained opposition can coexist with an appearance of political stability. Although dissent and opposition persisted during his 27-year rule, the attempt to modify constitutional term limits in 2014 triggered widespread popular mobilization that ultimately forced his resignation. The episode demonstrates that prolonged periods of limited or less visible dissent should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of durable popular consent; underlying grievances and political opposition may remain latent until a critical political event provides an opportunity for collective mobilization (Harsch, 2017).

### 7.2.4. Zimbabwe: Robert Mugabe (1980–2017)

Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe demonstrates how patronage, coercive capacity, ruling-party dominance, and constrained political competition can produce different forms of public compliance. ZANU-PF's penetration of state institutions, reliance

on patronage networks, and use of political intimidation created conditions in which compliance could reflect material dependency, fear of political consequences, or strategic accommodation rather than unqualified support for the regime (Bratton & Masunungure, 2018). Evidence of intimidation and the distribution of state resources to ruling-party supporters further illustrates how political behavior could be shaped by both coercive and clientelist pressures.

At the same time, the Zimbabwean case cautions against assuming that all public compliance under authoritarian rule is coerced. Afrobarometer evidence indicated that almost two-thirds of respondents in 2017 reported trusting Mugabe, suggesting that some citizens expressed genuine or perceived support for his leadership even within a politically constrained environment (Moyo-Nyede, 2020). Thus, outward conformity may encompass multiple motivations, including fear, dependency, strategic accommodation, political resignation, and genuine acceptance—which cannot be reliably distinguished from observable behavior alone. Mugabe's eventual resignation in November 2017, following military intervention, intra-party conflict, and mounting public pressure, further demonstrates that prolonged political dominance should not be treated as a direct or permanent measure of popular legitimacy (Moyo-Nyede, 2020).

### 7.2.5. Tunisia: Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011)

Ben Ali's Tunisia maintained a strong appearance of political order through extensive restrictions on opposition, independent media, association, and organized dissent. The regime used restrictive laws, censorship, surveillance, and the imprisonment and harassment of journalists and activists, while pervasive self-censorship discouraged open criticism of politically sensitive issues. Under these conditions, the limited visibility of opposition could reflect fear, political constraint, and strategic accommodation rather than genuine acceptance of the regime. Evidence from Tunisia's media environment is particularly illustrative: journalists reportedly avoided crossing official "red lines"

because of the risks to their employment and personal security, while critical political reporting was heavily restricted.

The December 2010–January 2011 uprising exposed the limitations of interpreting public quiet as political consent. Long-suppressed grievances contributed to rapidly expanding protests that ultimately forced Ben Ali from power on January 14, 2011. Human Rights Watch (2011) subsequently described the protests as being fueled by long-standing grievances against a government that had systematically restricted freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Thus, Tunisia demonstrates that political silence may represent fear, conformity, or strategic accommodation rather than satisfaction with the existing order; the absence of sustained public confrontation before 2011 did not necessarily indicate the absence of substantial dissatisfaction (Lynch, 2012).

### **7.3. Cases of Durable Rule Despite Limited Public Expression**

#### **7.3.1. Cameroon: Paul Biya (1982–Present)**

Cameroon illustrates how political silence can be sustained through a combination of ruling-party dominance, institutional control, restricted political competition, patronage, and strategic accommodation. Paul Biya has remained in power since 1982, while the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) has maintained substantial control over electoral institutions, state resources, and political appointments. Opposition parties face organizational disadvantages, including restricted access to public resources and media, while opposition figures have experienced harassment, intimidation, arrest, and restrictions on political assembly (Freedom House, 2024).

These conditions complicate the interpretation of prolonged political quiet. Freedom House reports that Cameroonians may avoid discussing sensitive political issues because of fear of reprisals and that criticism of the government or participation in opposition politics can carry professional and political consequences (Freedom House, 2024). Human Rights Watch similarly documented the

continued closure of political space, including restrictions on opposition meetings and the detention of opposition activists following peaceful protests (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Consequently, the persistence of Biya's rule cannot, by itself, be treated as evidence of widespread popular consent. Political silence may instead reflect fear, political resignation, dependency, or strategic accommodation in circumstances where citizens perceive the costs of opposition to be high and the prospects of political change to be limited (Cheeseman, 2015).

#### **7.3.2. Equatorial Guinea: Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (1979–Present)**

Equatorial Guinea demonstrates how resource dependence, elite patronage, and coercive state capacity can reinforce authoritarian durability. Following the discovery of substantial oil reserves in the 1990s, the country experienced a dramatic expansion in oil revenues, but the resulting wealth became highly concentrated around President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, his family, and close associates rather than being broadly translated into improved living conditions or accountable governance (Human Rights Watch, 2009; Ross, 2015). Human Rights Watch documented how access to oil revenues strengthened the government's control over economic and political life, while intimidation, criminal prosecution, and coercion were used to weaken an already constrained political opposition (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

The political environment further limits the extent to which public behavior can be interpreted as evidence of genuine acceptance. The ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) dominates political institutions, while opposition figures have faced arrest, detention, unfair trials, and restrictions on political organization. Freedom House reports that oil wealth and political power remain concentrated within the president's family and that the government continues to detain opposition politicians, restrict civil society, and censor journalists (Freedom House, 2024, 2026). Under such conditions, public quiet may plausibly reflect economic dependency, fear, political resignation, or strategic accommodation, particularly where citizens perceive limited

opportunities to challenge the ruling order. Thus, the extraordinary longevity of Obiang's rule should not be treated as a direct measure of popular consent or legitimacy; rather, it illustrates how resource wealth and authoritarian institutional arrangements can reduce the incentives and opportunities for visible opposition (Ross, 2015; Svoblik, 2012).

### 7.3.3. Uganda: Yoweri Museveni (1986–Present)

Uganda presents a more mixed pattern in which political opposition, electoral competition, and civic activity coexist with prolonged presidential and ruling-party dominance. Since Yoweri Museveni came to power in 1986, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) has maintained political control through a combination of institutional dominance, patronage, management of political rivals, and coercive measures, while opposition parties and civic actors have continued to organize and challenge the government (Tripp, 2010; Cheeseman, 2015). Contemporary evidence similarly indicates that Uganda continues to hold regular elections and permit political opposition, but that the credibility of elections has deteriorated and opposition leaders and supporters face intimidation, politicized prosecutions, and restrictions on political activity (Freedom House, 2026; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The Ugandan case therefore demonstrates that political silence is neither uniform nor readily interpretable. Some citizens may accommodate the ruling order because of patronage, perceived political advantages, fear of repression, or calculations about the limited prospects of opposition; others may disengage from politics because participation appears costly or ineffective. At the same time, evidence of continued opposition mobilization and the regime's use of both coercive and non-coercive forms of political management indicates that some citizens may also express genuine or pragmatic support for aspects of government performance (Golooba-Mutebi & Hickey, 2016). Consequently, Museveni's prolonged rule cannot be adequately explained by either coercion or popular acceptance

alone. Uganda demonstrates why regime durability should be examined through multiple mechanisms—including fear, conformity, dependency, strategic accommodation, political resignation, opposition mobilization, and forms of genuine or performance-based support—rather than inferred from public silence alone (Tripp, 2010; Cheeseman, 2015).

### 7.3.4. Rwanda: Paul Kagame (2000–Present)

Rwanda is particularly useful for demonstrating that limited public criticism may reflect more than one mechanism. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has maintained political dominance under Paul Kagame, while restrictions on political competition, surveillance, intimidation, and the detention of opposition figures have constrained the space for organized dissent. Human Rights Watch has documented restrictions on political opposition, expression, and association, including arbitrary arrests and other abuses against critics, while Freedom House reports that fear of arrest or other reprisals discourages political expression and public protest (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Freedom House, 2026).

At the same time, Rwanda cannot be adequately understood through coercion alone. The government has maintained relative internal security, political order, and sustained economic development, and these outcomes may provide a basis for genuine or pragmatic support among some citizens. The coexistence of these conditions makes public quiet analytically ambiguous: some citizens may remain cautious because of the perceived risks of dissent, others may conform or strategically accommodate the ruling order, while others may support the government because they associate it with security, stability, or development (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012; Reyntjens, 2017). Thus, Rwanda demonstrates the importance of distinguishing fear, conformity, strategic accommodation, and political resignation from genuine or performance-based acceptance rather than assuming that limited public criticism necessarily represents either coercion or consent.

### 7.3.5. Togo: Gnassingbé Family Rule (1967–Present)

Togo illustrates how prolonged political rule may be sustained through institutional dominance, limited political alternatives, opposition fragmentation and co-optation, and strategic calculations about the costs and effectiveness of political participation. The Gnassingbé family has dominated Togolese politics for decades, with the ruling Union for the Republic (UNIR) benefiting from malapportioned electoral districts, influence over electoral institutions, and a security apparatus closely aligned with the regime (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Freedom House, 2026; Amnesty International, 2024). Opposition parties remain legally permitted to operate, but their ability to compete effectively has been constrained by arrests, restrictions on political activity, repression of protests, and the co-optation or marginalization of political rivals.

These conditions make prolonged public quiet difficult to interpret as enthusiastic consent. Political fatigue or resignation may develop where citizens perceive meaningful political change as unlikely, while others may strategically accommodate the ruling order when the perceived costs of confrontation exceed the expected benefits. The 2024 constitutional changes provide a further illustration: opposition and civil-society efforts to challenge the reforms were restricted, while the ruling UNIR subsequently secured 108 of 113 seats in the National Assembly. Thus, limited visible opposition may reflect resignation, accommodation, fear, or calculations about political effectiveness rather than widespread approval of the regime. The Togolese case therefore reinforces the importance of examining the institutional and political conditions that shape citizens' expectations about whether opposition is both safe and capable of producing meaningful change (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

### 7.4. Comparative Interpretation

Across these cases, political silence can carry multiple meanings. Fear is most plausible where repression, surveillance, or intimidation increases the perceived costs of political expression. Social

conformity becomes more relevant where individuals suppress minority views because they perceive them as socially unsupported. Dependency and strategic accommodation are more salient where access to employment, resources, security, or political opportunities is connected to existing power networks. Political resignation may emerge where citizens perceive available alternatives as ineffective, costly, or inaccessible. Genuine acceptance is also possible, particularly where citizens associate incumbent regimes with security, order, economic performance, or other valued outcomes. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive; they may coexist within the same society and vary across social groups and over time.

### 7.5. Analytical Caution

These cases should not be interpreted as evidence that silence causes regime collapse or that durable regimes necessarily lack legitimacy. Rather, they demonstrate the analytical ambiguity of political quiet. A regime may remain durable because citizens are fearful, politically disengaged, materially dependent, strategically accommodating, socially conformist, or genuinely supportive, or because several of these conditions operate simultaneously. The sociological task, therefore, is to identify the mechanisms underlying silence rather than treating silence itself as evidence of consent.

### 7.6. Implications for Regime Durability

The comparative evidence reinforces the article's central argument that visible political stability is an incomplete measure of regime legitimacy. Silence may reduce the visibility of political conflict without eliminating the grievances, dependencies, perceptions, or preferences that shape political behavior. Conversely, where citizens genuinely accept a regime, political quiet may reflect satisfaction rather than coercion. Distinguishing these possibilities provides a more precise sociological account of how political silence interacts with legitimacy and regime durability in African political systems.

## 8.0. Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between the culture of silence, political legitimacy, and regime durability in Africa from a sociological perspective. Guided by Spiral of Silence Theory, Political Legitimacy Theory, and scholarship on authoritarian resilience, the analysis demonstrates that political silence is a complex social and political phenomenon that cannot be treated as a straightforward indicator of citizen consent, institutional legitimacy, or regime stability. Silence may reflect fear of repression, restricted political space, strategic compliance, social conformity, dependency, political resignation, or limited opportunities for meaningful collective action (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Scott, 1990).

The analysis is consistent with Mamdani's (1996) argument that postcolonial African states must be understood through historical patterns of state power, citizenship, and administrative control. Similarly, Ake (1996) cautions against equating regime endurance with legitimacy, particularly where political systems provide limited inclusion, accountability, and responsiveness. These perspectives suggest that political compliance may result from citizens' adaptation to unequal political structures rather than from voluntary acceptance of political authority. Political stability, therefore, may coexist with significant legitimacy deficits.

The comparative cases reinforce this distinction. Sudan under Omar al-Bashir, The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh, Burkina Faso under Blaise Compaore, Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, and Tunisia under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali demonstrate that prolonged periods of limited visible dissent may coexist with unresolved grievances, political exclusion, and accumulated social frustrations. Consistent with Scott's (1990) concept of hidden transcripts, public compliance may coexist with privately held grievances and alternative political views. These cases do not show that silence inevitably produces regime collapse; rather, they illustrate how political quiet may conceal tensions that become visible when crises, political openings, elite divisions, or collective mobilization alter the conditions under which citizens act.

The cases of Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, Rwanda, and Togo further demonstrate that regime durability can persist despite restricted public expression of dissent. Consistent with Bratton and van de Walle (1997), Joseph (1987), and Chabal and Daloz (1999), political survival may be supported by patronage, elite accommodation, resource distribution, institutional control, security structures, and the strategic management of political competition. In such contexts, political compliance may derive from dependency or accommodation as well as from genuine support. The coexistence of these mechanisms underscores the need to distinguish between the appearance of political consent and the social processes that produce it.

The analysis also highlights the limits of formal democratic institutions as indicators of legitimacy. As Cheeseman (2015) demonstrates, electoral institutions and democratic reforms do not necessarily guarantee meaningful political competition, accountability, or citizen empowerment. Elections may coexist with institutional advantages for incumbents, constrained opposition, and unequal access to political resources. Consequently, neither the existence of formal political institutions nor the absence of sustained public opposition should be interpreted automatically as evidence of democratic legitimacy or popular approval.

The broader sociological implication is that political stability and political legitimacy are related but analytically distinct concepts. Stability concerns a regime's capacity to maintain authority, manage challenges, and preserve political order, whereas legitimacy concerns the extent to which citizens perceive that authority as justified, responsive, and worthy of acceptance. As Ake (1996) and Mamdani (1996) show, political order can coexist with exclusion and limited participation, while Chabal and Daloz (1999) show how informal political arrangements and elite management can produce apparent stability without necessarily generating strong institutional legitimacy.

Ultimately, political silence should be understood not as the absence of politics but as a form of political behavior whose meaning depends on its historical,

institutional, and social context. The absence of protest does not necessarily demonstrate consent, just as regime survival does not necessarily establish legitimacy. Silence may reflect genuine acceptance, but it may also result from fear, conformity, dependency, strategic accommodation, political resignation, or concealed opposition. Future research should therefore examine the conditions under which these different mechanisms operate and how they vary across social groups, political systems, and historical periods. Such an approach can provide a more nuanced understanding of political legitimacy, regime durability, authoritarian resilience, and citizen–state relations in Africa and other societies characterized by contested political authority.

### 9.0. Practical Recommendations

Based on the analysis, this article proposes several practical recommendations for strengthening political legitimacy, responsive governance, and sustainable state–society relations in Africa.

First, governments should not interpret political silence as evidence of genuine public support. The absence of criticism, protest, or visible opposition may reflect satisfaction, but it may also result from fear, exclusion, political fatigue, dependency, or limited opportunities for participation. Governments should therefore develop more reliable mechanisms for assessing public attitudes, including independent opinion surveys, inclusive public consultations, transparent policy dialogue, and accessible channels for citizen feedback.

Second, African states should strengthen institutional protections for political expression and participation. Sustainable political stability requires more than the absence of protest or unrest; it requires legitimate channels for citizens to express grievances and influence public decisions. Protecting freedom of expression, media independence, civil society participation, and peaceful political competition can help governments identify and address grievances before they become more difficult to manage.

Third, governments should reduce reliance on coercion, patronage, and political exclusion to sustain regimes. Although such mechanisms may

contribute to short-term political control, they do not necessarily generate durable legitimacy. Sustainable political order is more likely to depend on accountable institutions, responsive governance, effective public services, equitable access to political opportunities, and citizens’ perception that public authority serves broader societal interests.

Fourth, civil society organizations, researchers, and policy institutions should treat political silence as an outcome requiring interpretation. Monitoring only visible forms of dissent may overlook concealed grievances, political disengagement, social exclusion, or strategic accommodation. Governance and social research should therefore incorporate evidence from marginalized communities, informal political networks, community-level engagement, public-opinion research, and other indirect forms of political expression.

Fifth, international organizations and development partners should incorporate political legitimacy and citizen trust into assessments of governance and stability. Conventional measures of stability often emphasize the absence of conflict, political disruption, or large-scale protest. Such indicators may not adequately capture deteriorating state–society relations. Governance assessments should therefore consider both observable political stability and the institutional conditions that shape citizens’ trust, participation, and perceptions of political authority.

Finally, future research should move beyond the assumption that political silence has a single meaning. Comparative studies should examine the conditions under which silence reflects genuine acceptance, strategic accommodation, fear, political disengagement, conformity, or concealed opposition. Greater use of mixed-method and comparative approaches could help distinguish these mechanisms and clarify how they interact across different social groups, political systems, and historical periods. Such research would deepen understanding of how citizens negotiate power, authority, legitimacy, and political change.

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