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Biometrics and the disciplining of democracy: technology, electoral politics, and liberal interventionism in Chad

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ABSTRACT

In a large number of countries in Africa, biometric identification technologies have become a key element of voter registration procedures. Based on an in-depth study of biometric voter registration in Chad, a country marked by a long history of political violence, the article explains how the technology has been construed as a “solution” to address a situation labelled as a political crisis. To make sense of the unlikely introduction of biometrics in Chad, two main elements are considered: the socially constituted belief in the potential of biometrics and – paradoxically – the unfulfilled promises and fallibility of that same technology. Combining the literature on biometrics, election technologies, and liberal democracy promotion, the analysis concludes that biometric voter registration is a disciplining technology. In addition to capturing the personal data of individuals, it fosters the framing of democracy in narrow technological and procedural terms.

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Introduction

Election technologies are booming in Africa. While Latin America and South Asia have paved the way for innovations in the election realm,¹ Africa is now an important market for the tech companies that provide the equipment and software that enables voter registration, voter authentication, electronic transmission of results, and voting machines. In this article, I focus on biometric voter registration (BVR), that is, the use of biometric identification technology to generate voter rolls. The seemingly simple task of registering voters actually requires both time and resources. It is the single most expensive task in the framework of elections and is also highly sensitive.² Even though the most acclaimed election on the African continent – South Africa’s first multi-racial election, 1994 – was held without registering voters, the accuracy of the electoral roll is now considered essential to the credibility of an election. Since the mid-2000s, registration authorities in Africa have increasingly turned to biometric voter registration.³ According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 25 of the 51 African countries surveyed use both

fingerprint scans and photos to register voters. All but 15 of the countries on the continent use biometrics for voter registration.⁴ A select few countries – Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria – use biometric voter authentication on polling day. While most countries use fingerprinting and photos, technologies are becoming increasingly sophisticated: in 2017, Somaliland was the first country to use iris recognition for an election.

Technological solutionism,⁵ or the enthusiasm for technological fixes, has affected politics, culture, and everyday life on every continent. This confidence in the power of technological approaches compounded by “high-modernist ideologies”⁶ is also key to making sense of the spread of biometric identification technologies in Africa. Despite its imperial history,⁷ biometrics is now being deployed in the name of security, development, and inclusion – as well as democracy. Biometric voter registration has been marketed and sold as both a fix capable of solving administrative problems and an obvious and rational solution for the democratization of Africa. Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis argue that election technologies have been driven by the “fetishization of the technology”: members of election commissions and politicians alike have a deep faith in modernity and are inclined to believe in the transformative impact of biometrics and other technologies.⁸

This article is based on an in-depth study of biometric voter registration and electoral politics in Chad.⁹ The Central African country is a textbook example of militarized politics. In this former French colony marked by a long history of colonial and post-colonial violence, armed violence is a fully-fledged mode of government.¹⁰ The country has never yet experienced a non-violent regime change. A multi-party system was established in the early 1990s, but elections have never been truly competitive. The civilian opposition has negotiated its survival between repression and co-optation. Though the social and political context was not conducive to free and fair elections, electoral biometrics was introduced as a solution to launch a new electoral process that would put an end to the opponents’ boycotting strategy. How had the political crisis been framed, for biometrics to emerge as the obvious solution?

To make sense of the unlikely introduction of biometric voter registration in such a political context, two main elements should be considered: the socially constituted belief in the potential of biometrics and – paradoxically – the unfulfilled promises and fallibility of that same technology. In the same vein as authors such as Kevin Donovan and Philippe Frowd, I first apprehend the social construction of the “biometric imaginary”,¹¹ or the “biometric ideal”¹² that promises both population legibility and symbolic modernity. More concretely, I study how biometric voter registration was introduced in the midst of a political crisis, and how this technical solution to the problem of voter registration has been promoted to the political opposition as an actual gamechanger. I investigate the role played by various domestic and international actors (whose political agendas are as diverse as their backgrounds) in the construction of the biometric imaginary. I ponder not only the financial and strategic interests but also the process through which biometrics has come to be considered as the “solution” to the problems of the country. As will be explained, Chad is a perfect example of the social construction of biometrics as the go-to solution for the holding of elections, even where the political context is not conducive to democratic elections.

After revisiting the literature on the successes and failures of electoral biometrics, I show that it is precisely because the technology is fallible that it is able to succeed politically. Even as it remains compatible with certain longstanding anti-democratic practices, biometric voter registration manages to convey the image of a modern state ready

to embark on the democratization journey. Where the integrity of the vote is seriously compromised, electoral biometrics is more than simply a waste of money. When used to boost the credibility of a problematic vote and ultimately to entrench authoritarian practices, biometrics has troubling implications for democracy.

This analysis leads to broader reflections about the implications of the biometrization of elections. The literature on biometrics has shown that the technology is an instrument through which a certain form of discipline is exercised: “through the body the individual is subjected to power, by being circumscribed (measured) as an object of knowledge”.¹³ In Africa and beyond, the contemporary moment is marked by a “resurgent interest in the body as a source of knowledge”¹⁴ as well as the continued “desires for security, for stable narratives, stable borders, and stable bodies that can be made both visible and knowable”.¹⁵ As I have shown elsewhere, biometric registration campaigns address individuals by capturing their bodies and their biographies according to standardized global norms.¹⁶ As the body itself becomes data,¹⁷ the population becomes more “legible”. However, in this article, I home in on a second dimension of the disciplining effect of the technology. Building on Rita Abrahamsen’s work, I focus on the “disciplining of democracy”,¹⁸ the imposition of specific conceptions and practices of democracy. While a wide critical literature exists on liberal democracy promotion¹⁹ and the “aid and authoritarianism nexus”,²⁰ debates in this field have thus far ignored the turn towards biometric, with one notable exception. In a recent article, Katja Jacobsen shows that “this new technology represents the contours of a new approach to liberal democracy promotion in Africa”.²¹ Combining insights from debates about liberal interventionism and from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), she explores how the framing of biometric voter registration impacts on contemporary interventions. I pursue this avenue for research by showing that biometrics is very much compatible with “tamed”²² democracy assistance programmes. Biometric voter registration offers measurable results (the accuracy of the voter roll can be assessed and measured), while being compatible with a non-democratic regime (it neither prevents rigging nor directly confronts the regime). In addition to the taming of democracy, the introduction of biometrics can foster the framing of democracy in narrow technological terms. In Chad, the empowering aspects of biometrics have been very limited, and an election that had raised high expectations among opponents ended up restricting the domestic democratic space. The opponents urged the implementation of ambitious reforms to the political system; what they got was BVR – and only BVR. Moreover, biometrics was a key element both in engineering a consensus in a highly problematic election, and in disciplining the most vocal opponents and activists.

The article proceeds in five parts. The first reviews the growing literature addressing the benefits and shortcomings of biometric voting as well as the broader literature on biometrics, underlining the productive nature of failures. The second section turns to the case study of Chad and examines the logics and strategies behind a reliance on technology to address a situation labelled as a political crisis. Further exploring the biometric imaginary, the third section examines how the consensus on the necessity of electoral biometrics was construed. The fourth section studies the tactical appropriation of the technology, focusing on its politicization by the opposition. The final section explains why the whole process ended up with a fraudulent – yet internationally accepted – election.

Biometrics and election technologies: revisiting success and failure

There is now a growing academic literature addressing the unfulfilled promises and pitfalls of election technologies. In a nutshell, the evidence that they prevent rigging is very weak. Giulia Piccolino shows that while biometrics has been heralded as a possible solution to failing registration and identification systems, its actual effects are mediated by the political and institutional context – for instance the politicization of citizenship and the role of the electoral administration.²³ Alan Gelb and Anna Diofasi ponder the costs and benefits of biometric elections and show that biometric identification does not significantly reduce the likelihood of post-election violence. They also found that, in countries where democracy is well-institutionalized, the technology is not a worthwhile investment.²⁴

Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis identify three main “digital fallacies”.²⁵ First, election technologies foster neither more robust nor better managed electoral processes. While they can be helpful, they are also capable of introducing serious logistical challenges. In some cases, apparently “technological” failures proved highly political. A study conducted during the 2012 election in Ghana shows that biometric identification machine failures at polling stations were not random; breakdowns were far more common in polling stations devoid of observers.²⁶ Second, while the digitization of elections may improve the quality of certain aspects of an electoral process, it does not ensure that the process as a whole is more transparent or clean. Third, election technologies can even be counterproductive: they create black boxes that are inaccessible to citizens, reinforce election commissions’ dependency on support from donors and foreign experts, and divert resources away from where they could be more useful. While election technologies have been introduced in a bid to build trust and avoid contestation of the results, in many cases (for example in Ghana²⁷ and Kenya²⁸), they have failed to achieve an acceptable election outcome.

What is missing from the literature focusing on the benefits and shortcomings of election technologies is an analysis of the productive nature of their limitations and failures. As will be shown with the case of Chad, fallible technologies have political utility. Though it fails to prevent rigging, biometric voter registration can be successful in terms of symbolic and image effects, showing (for those who believe in it) the ruling party’s commitment to free and fair elections. To borrow Peter Andreas’ term, BVR is often, as is the case in Chad, a “politically successful policy failure”.²⁹

On this matter, the literature focusing on biometrics beyond the realm of elections is particularly helpful. Analyses focusing on national identification systems, border management, law enforcement, or the delivery of social grants show that biometric technology is marked by “its conceptual weaknesses and vulnerability to fraud and misuse”³⁰, and invite us to adopt a more nuanced and complex understanding of the successes and failures of a technology. What does the success of biometrics mean: is it a small number of “failures to enrol” and “false matches”, as the vendors would argue? Or is it a more accurate list of refugees or voters? Or a general improvement in the quality of border management or elections? As Ferenc David Markó has shown, biometric schemes can at once both work and not work.³¹ The very definition of what constitutes success or failure is political. In her pioneering book, Shoshana Magnet looks at the failures of biometrics beyond technical breakdown and demonstrates their productive nature. She shows that, regardless of their failures or cost,

biometric technologies are used to suggest that “something is happening”, that the state and the private sector are working together for the public good – whether this is defined as security, border management, or democracy. In his research on biometrics for border security in Senegal, Philippe Frowd shows that the “biometric ideal” is just that – an ideal – and that this ideal is supported by the transnational professional community arising around biometrics. The experience of welfare programmes in South Africa studied by Kevin Donovan adds to this thesis, suggesting that biometric identification can also be a productive failure. Biometrics is not just any technology: the recording and reading of bodies implies specific risks. The approach inspired by Science and Technology Studies invites us to reconsider this question. In this vein, Katja Jacobsen argues that a distinction should be made between the “risks from failure” and the “risks from success”.³² Technologies that perform successfully also put the registered individuals at risk of being exposed to new forms of intrusion. I draw on this scholarship to explain why the gap between the promises of biometric voting and its real-world deployment, far from being an obstacle to its adoption, is one of the very reasons for both its introduction in Chad and its roll-out in Africa. Taking into account the implications for democracy, the following sections also show that the problems with BVR go beyond the fact that it fails to live up to the claims made by its promoters; it also helps frame democracy in narrow terms.

Chad: a technological “solution” to a political “crisis”?

When faced with intractable political issues, international interventions often turn to technological “solutions”.³³ The introduction of a new technology – whether for elections or humanitarian interventions – has important implications. As Samer Abdelloun and Akbar Saeed show in their study of stoves as a panacea for the risk of sexual violence, “when a technology is associated with a particular problematization, explicit acceptance of that technology involves an implicit (unquestioned) acceptance of underlying (taken-for-granted) discourses”.³⁴ In this section, I trace the marketing and promotion of biometric voter registration in Chad. I show that biometrics was not regarded as a simple technical solution that would generate an accurate voter roll. Rather, it was construed as an efficient solution to the management of a political crisis. In this process, the complex political situation had been reduced to a simple electoral crisis, with the aim of bringing the opposition back into the electoral process. The focus on technology and electoral politics, rather than on other forms of political participation thus had wider implications for the very problematization of “democracy” – as well as for the (de)legitimization of certain forms of political participation.

The idea of using biometrics for voter registration was put forward during the 2007 negotiations between the government, the ruling party and its allies, and the main opposition coalition.³⁵ These negotiations were encouraged and facilitated by the European Union, who “had a 3 billion CFA budget with which to support elections that could not be used without changes in the electoral process, and by France, which wanted to strengthen the power of President Deby by winning over the non-armed opposition and giving his regime a more democratic image”.³⁶ The negotiations took place in a particularly tense situation: a rebel coalition based in neighbouring Darfur attempted to seize power and topple Idriss Déby, a “warlord democrat”.³⁷ who had himself seized power by arms. Despite the demands of an “inclusive dialogue” that would involve all political actors, neither the rebels nor the civil society

organizations were invited to the negotiating table.³⁸ During the discussions, the Europeans supported the thesis that establishes biometrics as capable of reducing the risk of fraud. At that time, electoral biometrics was quite new on the continent, and biometric identification technologies were still unknown in Chad. As a political opponent told me “electoral biometrics was our decision, but we were very much inspired by the people from the EU”.³⁹ Unsurprisingly, the leaders of the political parties were compelled by the rhetoric of biometrics as a problem-solving tool. Biometric voter registration was introduced to build the opposition’s confidence. Foreign diplomats and experts were preoccupied by the urge to build trust in the process among both opponents and voters. Fingerprints increase trust – even in cases where nothing is done with them. An international expert in biometrics on an assignment in Chad told me “anything that can reinforce trust is welcome. The problem is not about the technic, but about the trust”.⁴⁰ Technology was thus used not only to remedy administrative challenges but also to modify the political landscape.

By signing this text known as the “13 August 2007 Agreement”, the main opposition parties agreed to participate in the electoral process. Two years earlier, the opposition had called for a boycott of the constitutional referendum that would remove the two-term limit on the president. Biometrics was one of the so-called guarantees provided to the opposition in exchange for an end to their strategy of boycott and for their participation in the next electoral cycle. The agreement also included several ambitious provisions to promote an appropriate environment for participatory politics and credible elections. The de-politicization and de-militarization of the public administration was among its most important provisions, yet has never been implemented. Interestingly, domestic and international actors have focused on the elections rather than pushing for implementation of these provisions. In Chad as elsewhere, it is easier to organize elections than it is to restructure the state administration or the security forces. Last but not least, this agreement was marked by the occultation of political violence: a few months after the signing of the text, in February 2008, the leader of the coalition of opposition parties, Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh, was victim of a forced disappearance. He was arrested by government forces, as the rebel coalition launched an attack on the capital city.⁴¹ Despite this tragic event, the agreement was still considered valid. At the end of the day, the agreement that was supposed to support an ambitious democratization process had no transformative impact other than in terms of the method and technology used to register voters.

The provision concerning biometric voter registration was, however, not implemented for the 2011 legislative and presidential elections. Instead, there was a “permanent electronic electoral roll”. Though it was meant to be “permanent”, this roll has actually never been updated. As a result, it was anything but. The civilian opposition boycotted the 2011 presidential election. Unsurprisingly, voter turnout was low. In April 2013, the government and the civilian opposition signed another agreement to set up a new Independent National Election Commission, (INEC) as well as a “National Framework for Political Dialogue”. The launch of a new electoral process reinvigorated both interest in, and debates about, electoral biometrics. Opponents and civil society activists were enthusiastic (though not naïve, as will be seen below) about the technology.

After years of delays and controversies, the biometric voter identification process was finally launched in 2015. During the procurement process, political issues mixed with corporate interests. The election commission had to make choices of

both technology and provider, even though its members had only limited understanding of the technological issues. With the vendors adopting “aggressive marketing strategies”,⁴² foreign consultants had to provide expertise in a very tense situation – one UNDP consultant resigned and fled the country after he was accused of being an “expert in electoral fraud”.⁴³ The supplier contract was finally awarded to French company Morpho (also known as Safran Identity and Security, and since 2017 as Idemia), after the initial feasibility study had been carried out by French consulting firm, Sofie. In this former French colony, the presence of the French experts and the choice of a French company did not go unnoticed. The biometric registrations cost 16 billion CFA Francs (almost 24.5 million euros) for 6.3 million voters. This is an enormous amount of money, especially in a country that has been affected by a severe economic crisis. However, biometrics represented only part of the total cost of the presidential election, which was estimated at 47.5 billion CFA Francs (72.5 million euros)⁴⁴ by the Electoral Commission, and at just over 52 billion CFA Francs (nearly 80 million euros) by the re-elected president.⁴⁵ No big donors were involved in this election. The donors who had largely funded the 2011 electoral census (including the European Union, to the tune of almost 11 million euros) were more cautious in 2015–2016.⁴⁶ Despite the limited involvement of the donors, this history of biometric voting in Chad shows the prominent role of foreign (especially French) actors.

The “biometric imaginary” and the engineering of a consensus

We have seen so far that electoral biometrics was initially introduced in Chad under the influence of European diplomats and experts as a “solution” to a situation considered a political crisis. Biometrics also met with often-uncritical enthusiasm for technological change among a wide range of political and social actors in Chad. A consensus soon formed regarding the necessity of the biometric “solution”. This section explains why biometrics has been widely accepted, and how the government used this particular moment to co-opt members of the opposition and of the civil society.

Initially, the strongest supporters of biometrics were opposition parties and professionalized civil society. At the traditional May Day demonstration in 2015, trade unions marched in defence of electoral biometrics. At this stage of the process, what was striking was the absence of conflict over the need for biometrics. The national debate was intertwined with a wider transnational debate. Back in 2015, the peaceful transfer of power in neighbouring Nigeria had been construed as a model, with both the Nigerian political elite and the international press issuing enthusiastic statements supporting the narrative.⁴⁷ The Chadian opposition also considered election technologies to have played a major role in the Nigeria election, even though there had been serious problems with both the distribution of permanent voter cards and with voter authentication on polling day.⁴⁸

While the opposition considered biometrics as an improvement over the old system, international actors created various incentives aimed at bringing political parties and civil society organizations on board. The UNDP provided expertise on voter education and supported a vast awareness-raising campaign aimed at encouraging voters to register. The project had a budget of \$2.8 million, funded by the UNDP itself as well as the Chadian government, together with a grant from Japan.⁴⁹

25,000 A3-size panels, 2,600 banners and 200,000 information brochures about biometric voter registration were produced. The main slogan of the campaign, which was disseminated in both French and Chadian Arabic, was “I’ve got my biometric card – I’m voting.” Presented as impartial and apolitical, this campaign promoted a certain form of political participation, namely elections, and supported the idea that registering on the electoral roll and voting reflect the correct civic attitudes to have.

Political actors who had promoted the boycott of elections during the previous election cycle were involved in the civic education and awareness-raising campaigns. The country’s 195 political parties initially received funding from the European Union (5 million FCFA each, about 7622 euros) to conduct these campaigns. At the same time, ten Chadian civil society organizations (including the country’s most important human rights organizations) were also involved in the programmes supported by the UNDP. They received funding to “raise awareness among citizens on the importance of their participation in the elections”. The methodological guide distributed to those running the awareness campaign warned against the risk of political bias. However, while the guide did not call into question the eminently political dimension of the rhetoric that equated voter registration with electoral participation and democratization, it did provide a model answer to those arguing that voting was pointless and would not bring change.⁵⁰ This was all the more problematic in a country where election boycotting and voter abstention were fully-fledged protestations rather than mere expressions of voter fatigue. Refusal to participate in an election can be a political act in its own right, and this is truer still in a militarized, authoritarian political context.

In addition to their participation in the awareness-raising campaign, both the opposition and civil society were co-opted into the two most important structures for the organization of the election. The agreement signed in April 2013 provided for government and opposition to have equal representation in both the National Framework for Political Dialogue (NFPD) and the new Electoral Commission. More unusual: the agreement also provided for civil society organizations to send representatives to the election commission: the opposition and majority each being represented by 12 members, while civil society organizations had six seats. Trade unions and civil society organizations found themselves in a delicate political situation. While they were part of the institutions and were supposed to participate in the organization of the election, a broad civil society platform called “Enough is Enough” was being established. It demanded that President Idriss Déby refrain from being a candidate in the upcoming election. Four civil society leaders were arrested and imprisoned for attempting to organize a demonstration against President Déby’s candidacy. As a result, the civil society organization representatives either resigned, or were removed from their positions in the NFPD and the INEC in the days leading up to the election.

Last but not least, the registration campaign was readily accepted by the public.⁵¹ Biometrics was deployed in a legal void, and civil society organizations did not raise awareness of either privacy rights or the risks of “massive political data mining”.⁵² While human rights groups knew how to handle political violence, they had received no training on biometrics and lacked the resources to work on the risks of mass surveillance and the profiling of populations. The only risks that were publicly discussed were those of being left out. The potential harm stemming from the masses of digitalized biometric data being collected⁵³ was concealed. Whether they intended to vote in the upcoming election or not, Chadians had a powerful incentive to register on the list: it was an opportunity to obtain ID without having to pay. The biometric national

identity card currently costs 10,000 CFA Francs (15 euros) – plus, in many cases, bribe money. After the registration campaign, voter ID was used as an identity document and considered as such by the police. In a country where fewer than 30% of adults had hitherto been in possession of national ID, the voter registration process was also a form of legal empowerment.⁵⁴ As a result of enthusiasm for the technology among opposition politicians and activists alike – compounded by their involvement in the organization of the election and coupled with the popular appeal of free ID, a relative consensus on the necessity of biometric voting was engineered. The construction of biometrics as a self-evident solution modified the terms of the political debate and partook in framing elections as the sole appropriate path to democratization. As a result, technical and technological issues dominated the political debate and relegated key political questions to the background: how can a social and political environment that is conducive to political participation be created? What kind of democracy do people want? Do elections even make sense in a country where the opposition struggles to exist or have a voice?

Tactical appropriations: the politicization of biometrics

We have seen that the belief in the potential of biometrics permeated both government and opposition discourses. While the inherent value of biometric voter registration had been left unquestioned, biometrics has been re-politicized by controversies over the “right” technology and its practical modes of implementation. The technology itself has become the subject of caustic public debate.

The opposition politicized every aspect of the biometric voting. Choices about the “right” technology and its practical modes of implementation were at the heart of the political debate, overshadowing economic and social issues. First, the opponents denounced irregularities: potential voters in remote regions were forgotten (whether deliberately or not) during the census, foreigners were allegedly enrolled as nationals, and minors as adults.⁵⁵ Second, political actors close to the opposition contested the choice of Morpho, the French supplier. Voter cards were produced in France, which triggered debates. However, opponents were even more suspicious when told that a small number of voter cards – those that needed correction or were for voters who had just turned 18 – were produced in Chad. There was nothing unusual about this, yet opponents denounced a potential source of fraud. They argued that the printer in Chad would be used by the ruling party to issue additional cards for its supporters. Third, the opposition urged for the implementation of biometrics at every step of the electoral process. The distribution of voter cards triggered contestation because it was organized without the use of biometric authentication – the electoral commission claimed that the biometric authentication of the voters would have caused delays. Though carefully packed in alphabetical order, voter cards were distributed to voters in a chaotic manner. Many voters did not come to the polling station and entrusted relatives with the task of collecting their cards. This social distribution of cards was efficient, even though it was against the procedure. However, opponents saw this apparent disorder as another potential source of fraud.

Furthermore, the opposition campaigned for the implementation of what they called “comprehensive biometrics” (“biométrie complète”). They argued for the use of biometric voter authentication kits on polling day and wanted to replicate the apparent success of the 2015 Nigerian general election. The government rejected this

measure, arguing that it would be too expensive, and the government was not isolated on this issue: international actors considered biometric authentication as both unnecessary and carrying a high risk of delaying the election.⁵⁶ On polling day, a cheaper, low-tech way of preventing multiple voting was used: polling agents checked photos and cards against voter lists, and each voter dipped a finger in indelible ink. For opponents, the absence of verification kits at the polls remained a major concern.

With new elections are coming up in 2021, the debate continues, with opposition figures like Mahamat Ahmat Alhabo claiming that the biometric voter card is “worthless” if there is no identification kit on polling day.⁵⁷ Political opponents are strategic actors who formulate their own strategies: calling the election rigged or simply pointing to technical flaws before the election even takes place, are well-known strategic moves across the globe. What is striking in the case under study is how the debate has focused on the technology: the opponents have portrayed it as impartial and neutral, and social activities as suspicious. The fantasy of being able to limit the human handprint on the electoral process is an important aspect of the “biometric imaginary”.⁵⁸ Biometric voting is popular precisely because of its image as a modern, efficient and impersonal tool capable of removing human agency (and the corruption associated with it) from the electoral process.

New technology, same old political tricks

As we were waiting for the election results, one pro-biometrics civil society activist confided in me: “We, the civil society, wanted biometrics for the elections. We thought it would protect the citizens’ votes. (...) Biometrics was however used to deceive people”.⁵⁹ In this last section, I explain that the inability of electoral biometrics to prevent rigging was not exactly a failure.

What were the actual effects of the introduction of biometrics? Thanks to the de-duplication process, BVR did minimize the multiple registrations that had resulted from either deliberate fraud or the zeal of local authority figures having an interest in increasing the number of inhabitants in the area they administer. This is significant in a country where opponents had complained about multiple registrations by members and supporters of the ruling party during previous electoral processes. A comparison of the 2011 and 2016 electoral rolls reveals a population drop in certain regions perceived as presidential strongholds. In 2016, nearly 6.3 million voters were registered – compared to just over 4.8 million five years earlier. Some regions in the east of the country, considered electoral strongholds for the ruling party, have seen their voting age population stagnate (or even fall) in the space of just a few years. By contrast, regions in the south, which are historically close to the opposition, have seen a strong increase in the population. Interestingly, the proportion of women on the voter rolls increased from 43% in 2011–52.3% in 2015 – most likely a result of the awareness campaign that targeted women to register. However, women remain under-represented on the list in the northernmost regions (27.61% in Tibesti, 44.79% in Borku and 35.45% in Ennedi West).⁶⁰ While the 2016 voter roll was more accurate than the previous one, it was not (and in any event could not be) a “true” snapshot of the country. The real-world deployment of biometrics is socially and politically embedded.⁶¹

Unsurprisingly, Idriss Déby was re-elected in the first round with 59.92% of the vote and a turnout of 65.95%, according to the final results validated by the Constitutional Council. There were 13 candidates – all men, as the candidacies of the four women who wanted to run had been invalidated by the Constitutional Council. The historic opponent, Saleh Kebzabo, came in second place, winning just 12.77% of the vote. Details of the results reveal fraudulent practices – or, at the very least, extremely unlikely behaviours. Both voter turnout and the incumbent president's scores were highest in the eastern and northern departments, where political and social control was strongest and civil society associations virtually absent. In these departments, voter turnout approached (and sometimes exceeded) 100%. In the department of Amdjarass, where Idriss Déby comes from, voter turnout reached a record 106.71% and the incumbent President Déby won 93.48% of the vote. His highest score was in the Borkou region, with 99.64%, which means that just 79 of 22,096 voters supposedly chose another candidate. Not everyone in these areas is a supporter of the regime. Ironically, the rebels who had been active between 2004 and 2009 (based in Darfur, Sudan) as well as those of today (based in the South of Libya) were mostly recruited from the regions in which Idriss Déby had fared best. The explanations for these unlikely results are to be found in voter intimidation, coupled with the zealous practices of local authorities keen to show that their constituencies were presidential strongholds. In May 2016, the Constitutional Council rejected an appeal lodged by six opposition candidates.

In Chad as elsewhere, there is no technological response to eminently political problems. Biometric voter registration only marginally strengthened the reliability of the voting process: the voter roll was more accurate than it had been for previous elections, but expectations raised by the new technology were not met. There were five main problems that technology could not solve. First, there were serious cases of voter intimidation. Most worrying was the military vote, which took place the day before the civilian vote. Officers made sure that the troops voted for the “right” candidate. A few dozen soldiers who did not comply were arrested, detained, and allegedly tortured. About 15 of them were victims of forced disappearance.⁶² Second, there was a huge discrepancy between the resources of the ruling party and those of the opposition. The ruling party used to be a rebel group and is now a powerful crony network that stretches across the whole country. Third, the opposition failed to place party agents in polling stations in many regions of the country; voting was overseen by national observers from an influential civil society organization having close ties to the ruling party. These observers complained of not being supported by international donors, yet were still headquartered in one of the capital's luxury hotels (where the international observers were also headquartered.). Fourth, the only international observers were from the African Union, an organization then headed up by none other than Idriss Déby himself. The 30 or so observers deployed across the expansive country noted some “operational, logistical, and technical challenges”, but declared that the “election took place in a peaceful climate” and was “an important step in the standardization process of Chadian politics”.⁶³ Fifth, a texting and social media blackout prevented party agents and people from sharing results from the various polling stations. This measure was also meant to slow down possible action by the opposition and by civil society. There was palpable fear and tension in N'Djamena, and the texting and social media blackout neither appeased the situation nor assuaged rumours.⁶⁴ The blackout continued until December.⁶⁵

Idriss Déby and his allies played the electoral biometrics card successfully. By introducing this technology, they addressed several audiences: opponents who were invited to stop the boycott, voters who were expected to register and vote, and Chad's international partners in the "war on terror" (mainly France and the United States) who preferred their key ally in the Sahel to be a democratic regime – even if only for the façade.⁶⁶ A few months after the election, the French Minister of Defence interrupted his summer vacation to attend Idriss Déby's inauguration. The French turned a blind eye to the human rights violations and fraudulent practices and approved the poor-quality polling. They endorsed the election for the sake of preserving their military base and supporting their ally in the "war on terror". Like Chad's other Western allies, France tends to favour stability and predictability over democracy. Ultimately, the election was used as a prop to legitimise Idriss Déby, who was able to re-establish his political dominance. Domestic and international actors with various political agendas all needed the election to be perceived as trustworthy and biometrics was a means to achieve this.

Conclusion

The roll-out of electoral biometrics across Africa has been fuelled by corporate interests as well as the framing of the technology as both a solution to political problems and a rational means of transcending human corruption. This article has documented how the quest for the perfect technologies and procedures has had significant political impacts as well as unintended consequences. I have also argued that the failure of electoral biometrics (which is the norm rather than the exception) is productive. Chad, who has recently been dubbed "the latest African ID hotspot" by an industry publication,⁶⁷ is a case in point. In this country, although there was an absence of conflict over the need of biometrics, there has been heated controversy over the choice of technology and how it was deployed. At the end of the day, the technology improved the electoral process only marginally. The voter roll was more accurate and reliable, but fraudulent and violent practices did not wither away. Biometrics, then, is not only compatible with tamed democracy assistance – it can also help sustain an undemocratic political order.

Moreover, the introduction of biometrics technicalized the relationship between voters and the state – which is in itself a political process. If biometrics is instrumental in "the emergence of a new and seemingly lighter approach to liberal democracy promotion",⁶⁸ then it has significant political implications. I have suggested here that biometrics is a mechanism that partakes in the disciplining of democracy: beyond capturing the personal data of individuals, it also produces a peculiar conception of democracy. In Chad, the introduction of biometrics standardized elections while fostering a procedural and narrow conception of democracy, marginalizing and delegitimizing other forms of political action, such as the boycotting of elections by opponents and voters. Biometrics was about the making of a consensus over the benefits of an election held in a militarized political climate. It was about acceptance of the results and endorsement of the election, rather than the promotion of democracy. My argument calls for a wider discussion of the political implications of electoral biometrics, beyond the risks associated with cost and technological shortcomings. This conversation should question the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the models of

democracy promoted by donors, vendors, and experts in the biometrics industry, and their effects on domestic politics.

Notes

1. Brazil adopted electronic voting in 2000. India, the pioneer of biometric identification with the Aadhaar database, has deployed electronic voting machines since 2004.
2. Yard, *Civil and voter Registries*; Evrensel, *Voter Registration in Africa*; Wang, *Voter Identification Requirements*.
3. The first country in Africa that used fingerprint technology to generate the voter roll was Lesotho, for its 2002 elections. The Democratic Republic of Congo (2006), Nigeria, Senegal, Togo (2007), Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda (2008) followed. Piccolino, "Infrastructural State Capacity for Democratization," 498-519.
4. International IDEA, ICTS in elections database.
5. Morozov, *To Save Everything*.
6. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
7. On the origins and the spread of biometrics, see Breckenridge, *Biometric State*.
8. Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, "The Unintended Consequences of Election Technology," 1397-1418.
9. This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Chad before (December 2014), during (April-May 2016) and after (June 2017) the election. I interviewed domestic and international actors: politicians, activists, members of the election management body, technical electoral advisers, domestic and international election observers and foreign diplomats, as well as experts from the industry.
10. Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad*.
11. Donovan, "Bureaucratic Technopolitics in Post-Apartheid Welfare," 815-833.
12. Frowd, "Promises and Pitfalls of Biometric Security," 343-359.
13. Epstein, "Crossing the Biometric Borders," 153.
14. Maguire, Rao, and Zurawski eds. *Bodies as Evidence*, 1.
15. Magnet, *When Biometrics Fails*, 152-153.
16. I elaborate on this dimension in "Legible Bodies and Lives."
17. Van der Ploeg, "Biometrics and the Body as Information," 57-73.
18. Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy*; Abrahamsen, "African Democracy – Still Disciplined," 241-246.
19. Carapico, *Political Aid and Arab Activism*; Guillhot, *The Democracy Makers*; Peiffer and Englebert, "Extraversion, Vulnerability and Political Liberalization," 355-78; Kurki, *Democratic Futures*.
20. Hagmann and Reyntjens, *Aid and Authoritarianism in Africa*.
21. Jacobsen, "Biometric Voter Registration," 14.
22. Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*.
23. Piccolino, "Infrastructural State Capacity for Democratization," 498-519.
24. Gelb and Diofasi, "Biometric Elections in Poor Countries." For an assessment of the rising cost of elections in Africa, see Van der Straaten, "Of Democracy, and Elections"
25. Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, "The Unintended Consequences of Election Technology," 1397-1418.
26. Golden, Kramon and Ofori, "Electoral Fraud and Biometric Identification Failure."
27. Debrah, Effah and Owusu-Mensah, "Does a Biometric System Guarantee an Outcome?"
28. Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analog Politics*; Passanti and Pommerolle, "The Politics of Knowledge, Trust and Truth."
29. Andreas, "A Tale of Two Borders," 1-23.
30. Privacy International, "Biometrics: Friend or Foe of Privacy?"
31. Markó, "We Are Not a Failed State," 113-132.
32. Jacobsen, "Experimentation in Humanitarian Locations," 144-164.
33. Jacobsen, "Biometric Voter Registration," 1-22.
34. Abdelnour and Saeed, "Technologizing Humanitarian Space," 145-163.

35. The rebel factions were defeated in 2009. They were supported by Sudan. In January 2010, the signing of the agreement by Chad and Sudan put an end to the proxy war between the two countries. On the war in Chad, see Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad*; Marchal, "An Emerging Military Power."
36. ICG, *Chad: A New Conflict Resolution Framework*, 10.
37. Themnér, *Warlord Democrats in Africa*.
38. On civil society organizations in Chad, see de Bruijn, "The Impossibility of Civil Organizations."
39. Interview, N'Djamena, June 2017.
40. Interview, N'Djamena, April 2016.
41. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the events of 28 January to 8 February 2008.
42. This expression has been used by several informants who work in the field of democracy assistance.
43. Interview with the consultant, Paris, February 2019.
44. CENI, *Rapport final sur le processus électoral 2013-2016*.
45. Interview with Idriss Déby on Radio France Internationale: RFI, "Au Tchad, le président Déby annonce le report des législatives 'sine die'".
46. European Union, *Tchad: rapport final sur les élections législatives*.
47. Gelb and Diofasi, "Biometric Elections in Poor Countries."
48. Orji, "The 2015 Nigerian General Elections," 73–85.
49. UNDP, *Évaluation finale du projet d'appui au cycle électoral au Tchad*. The financial contribution of Japan is mentioned in the UNDP report. Strangely, there is no mention of it in the report published by the election commission.
50. CENI, *Guide méthodologique de sensibilisation électorale*, 32.
51. Manatouma, *Identifier les individus au Tchad*.
52. Makulilo, "Rebooting Democracy?," 198–212.
53. Lyon, *Identifying Citizens*, 42.
54. Ahmat Ali Hissein, Bureau Permanent des Elections, "Le recensement électoral biométrique de la population."
55. Coordination des Partis Politiques pour la Défense de la Constitution (CPDC), Communiqué de presse.
56. Interviews with French and European diplomats in Chad as well as experts of the UNDP, N'Djamena, May and June 2016.
57. Interview with Mahamat Ahmat Alhabo on Radio France Internationale : RFI, "On ne peut pas renvoyer aux calendes grecques les législatives."
58. Debos, "La biométrie électorale au Tchad," 101–120; Donovan, "Bureaucratic Technopolitics in Post-Apartheid Welfare," 815–833.
59. Interview, N'Djamena, May 2016.
60. CENI, *Rapport final sur le processus électoral 2013-2016*.
61. Awenengo Dalberto and Banégas, eds., *Identification and Citizenship in Africa*.
62. LTDH, *Rapport sur la situation des droits de l'Homme*.
63. African Union, "Electoral Observation Mission for the Presidential Election in Chad Republic."
64. Field notes taken by the author.
65. Barma, "Tchad : l'addition salée."
66. Tubiana and Debos, *Déby's Chad*.
67. Hersey, "Digital ID in Africa this Week."
68. Jacobsen, "Biometric Voter Registration," 3.

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