Democratisation Processes: Constrains and Perspective of Democratisation in Africa

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Abstract

The ousting of authoritarian regimes in Africa paved a way for democratic processes which for the pass decades has been metamorphosing since the period of independence as the transformational systems of government was not highly welcomed. If democracy and good governance is anything to be achievable in Africa the democratisation processes must be strong and acceptable by the citizens in line with best practices and international standards among others. Democracy and good governance can only be attain if peace, stability, popular participation, respect for human rights, regular free and fair elections, constitutionalism etc. are well respected and fulfilled. However, efforts displayed by a majority of African countries to build, restored or institute democratic structures within their constituencies have left a lot to be desired.

Keywords: Authoritarian, Conflict, Consociational democracy, Constitutionalism, Democracy, Democratisation, Democratic Governance, Governments, Multi-party, Single-party.

Introduction

In places from Latin America to Africa, Europe and Asia, Numbers of authoritarian regimes have given way to democratic forces, increasingly responsive Governments and increasingly open societies. Many States and their peoples have embarked upon a process of democratisation for the first time. Others have moved to restore their democratic roots [1]. This global trend has promoted proponents of democracy to speak of the third wave of democratisation in the world history (the first two waves began in the 1820s and 1940s) and in the case of Africa, this third wave was sparked by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The collapse of single-party regimes throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union set powerful precedents for African pro-democracy activists who had already begun organising against human rights abuses and political repression. Severe economic stagnation and decline in most African economies served set the blueprint for political dissatisfaction and the most notable outcome of this historic turning point, often called Africa’s second independence or Africa’s second liberation, was the dishonour of more than 30 years of experimentation with single-party political systems in favour of more democratic forms of governance based on multiparty politics and the protection of human rights (ibid) as was the case of Tanzania under J. Nyererer and Kenya under Jomo Kenyatta shortly after the country’s independence just to name a few and Africa now had the chance to experience multiparty and participatory politic by shifting away from authoritarianism. However, our discussion will be focus on factor promoting democratisation in Africa with major emphasis on constrains and prospects of democratisation that are presently unfolding throughout the African continent.

Definition of Terms

In this section our definition of terms will centre more on democracy and democratisation as other key terms will be discuss in preceding sections.
**Democracy**

To be able to outline the prospects and constrains of democratisation processes in Africa, it would be necessary to understand two distinct major terms which include: African and Liberal democracy and its merits. Thus, hardly is there any unify definition for the term democracy. Therefore our definition will be based on two major terms:

**African Democracy**

Differentiating the term African democracy from liberal democracy as used in this discussion, the African leaders of post-independence Africa such as Nyerere of Tanzania, Nkrumah of Ghana, and Kenyatta of Kenya, dismissed multiparty democracy, a fundamental principle of liberal democracy, as incompatible with the African traditions [2]. They argued that a system of one-party government was African and an essential part of the African tradition. Therefore, according to their definition, “an African democracy is a form of government based on one-party rule. Political parties may exist nominally but may not freely organise political activities in opposition to the rulers and the ruling party”. Meaning the African democracy put forward by African leaders of the post-African independence is based on their argument that traditional African societies rested on a politics of consensus not competition a principle they perceived to be promoted by proponents of multiparty democracy.

**Liberal Democracy**

While regular elections is one of the necessary prerequisites for creating and sustaining a democratic regime, liberal democracy (western liberal democracy) is, as both Obama and Clinton have pointed out, “more than just holding elections” [2]. According to Clapham, “it is not sufficient to measure democracy by simply looking at whether elections are held regularly and according to national standards”. Clinton and Clapham are of the view that, in order to ensure good and sustained governance, a true democratic system needs more than regular elections [2]. Hence, democracy is refers to a system of Government which embodies, in a variety of institutions and mechanisms, the ideal of political power based on the will of the people [1].

**Democratisation**

Democratisation is a process which leads to a more open, more participatory, less authoritarian society [1].

**Factors Promoting Democratisation in Africa**

One of the major factors that prompted democratisation in Africa was the downfall of single communist party system throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union beginning in 1989 that sent shock wave throughout the African continent. The rejection of single party rule in its intellectual heartland ensured that African leaders could no longer justify the continuation of this model on the African continent. Secondly as earlier mentioned, authoritarian leaders could no longer use cold war oratory as the means for ensuring super-power attention and therefore the financial and military support necessary to prevent opposition movements from taking power; Soviet Union had ceased to exist and a new Russian regime preoccupied with domestic economic restricting had largely withdrawn from the African Continent, while the United States and its Western allies were increasingly prone to link African support for democratisation and economic liberalisation future commitments of foreign assistance and preferential trade agreements. (ibid)

Thirdly, rise of increasingly powerful African pro-democracy movements is said to emerge from the materialisation of a Western agreement in favour of promoting democratic principle within the African continent. The convergence of these domestic and international trends resulted in period of democratic transition previously unknown in African history and whereas many of these experiments resulted in the replacement of single-party system with more inclusive forms of multiparty politics (ibid). In this regards, Dahl, in an attempt to describe the connections between “the Ideal” and “the Actual”, suggests five criteria that a system should fulfil in order to be seen as democratic. He emphasises that these, while
belonging to the realm of “the Ideal”, can and should serve as a standard towards which “the Actual” should strive, and against which it should be compared. These are, in his opinion: Effective participation; voting equality; enlightened understanding; control of the agenda and Inclusion of adults [3].

Dahl went further by observing modern highlighted elected officials; free, fair and frequent elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy; inclusive citizenship as the six institutions that should exist in a country in order for it to be seen as a democracy (ibid). Thus, substantiate with what Dahl, and those who followed and expanded the idea of polyarchical democracy. Nonetheless, having accepted and contented the very idea of democracy and democratisation in Africa since the early 1990s, Africa still face major challenges till date which hinders political growth and development. Consequently, understanding of Boutros Boutros-Ghali definition of democratisation as a process which leads to a more open, more participatory, less authoritarian society, seem to reflect the contra-direction in modern day Africa as many but one regimes are more often than not more authoritarian, less open and less participatory in nature. Several reasons accounts for this constrains and challenges that hinder the promotion of democratisation. They will be discussed in the preceding sections.

Constrains

Despite efforts by citizens, civil society organisations and the cry to institute democratic institutions, challenges have been encountered as the dictators and authoritarian leaders in Africa controlling political institutions seemed reluctant to provide prospect for democracy to flourish, be safeguarded, strengthened and even sustain it. Both democratisation and democracy raise difficult questions of prioritisation and timing. It is therefore not surprising that the acceleration of democratisation and the renaissance of the idea of democracy have met with some resistances. On the practical level, the World and Africa in particular has seen some slowing and erosion in democratisation processes and, in some cases, reversals [1]. Hence, setting the ground for constrains. This justifies the sudden resurgence of civil society groups strikes and recurrent conflicts that ravage the continent coupled with the fight to restore political regime structures, the sovereignty of the people, and separation of power not leaving out the need to encourage free and fairer elections, accountability, transparency, human rights, inclusive governance, free press and freedom of expression just to name a few. Thus the constrains that hamper democratisation in Africa will include;

Authoritarian Reaction

Authoritarian reaction entails the use of state-sponsors violence against proponent of democracy to preserve the status quo. In this case, the incumbent leaders conduct elections that are neither free nor fair with the intent of stealing vote and the promotion of ethnic fighting to divide the opposition and intimidate the general population is often one of the hallmarks of this model. Such political leaders after “winning” the election, subsequently seeks to silence the opposition through such varied means as imprisonment, exile, and in extreme cases execution. The example of Cameroon demonstrates the extent to which incumbent leaders are willing to maintain themselves in office through the use of authoritarian tactics. In October 1992, President Paul Biya and his Ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) declared victory in the country’s first multiparty presidential elections with 40% of the popular votes. During the two years preceding the elections, Human right groups estimate that at least 400 people associated with the democratisation movement were killed by the Biya regime and the elections themselves were fraud with gross violations of human rights and electoral procedures (ibid). Such brutal practice by regimes in power is not only unique to Cameroon but a common practice of regime in other African Countries. It discourages popular
participation in to the democratisation processes and is totally against democratic principles. Hence, remain a major constrain to democratisation in Africa.

**Failure to Implement ‘Western’ Imported Constitution**

One of the major constrains of democratisation in Africa is the problem of the implementation of the so-called imported western oriented constitutions as the principle enshrined in them was not only new to the indigenous people, but in many aspects culturally out of context. However, Victor T. Levine seemed to rule out the significance of cultural contextualization. He argues that the implementation of imported western constitution failed as a result of the bad faith on the African Leaders to promote the values of the said constitution which foster democratic principles for selfish political aims or ambitions (ibid). This is evident in the frequent change of Article 6(2) of the Cameroonian constitution in reference to the terms of the Presidential mandate 2008 and the recent attempted to amend the Burundi Constitution to allow the sitting president to seek another term in office. Such changes signify nothing more than the return to authoritarian regimes and the death of democratisation processes in that country thus hinders democratisation.

**Frequent Conflict, Civil Wars and the Unconstitutional Change of Government**

The frequent conflicts and civil wars that ravage the African continent also serve as a setback in the adherence of democratisation. The occurrence of such conflicts prevent electoral process and which makes it difficult to organise elections and political campaigns, lead to gross violation of human rights and displacement of peoples which becomes difficult for them to exercise their voting rights. The Central Africa Republic conflict, Sudan Darfur conflict, DRC, South Sudan and the recent Libyan conflicts after the ousting of the then president Mohamed Gadhafi are clear examples with no prospect of returning to normal democratic processes till date. The coming into power by a coup d’état of the military equally served as a major setback for the democratisation process in Africa. As Lord Acton warned that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” with a military government in power and false promises to return power to a civilian government greatly hinders democratisation. For example, the unconstitutional change of government in Burkina Faso (2015), Central Africa Republic (2013), Mali (2012), Guinea Bissau (2009/2012), Niger (2010), Guinea Conakry (2008), and Mauritania (2008) among others have retard democratisation for a term period before the return to civilian government.

**Political Regime Structures**

Madison argues that “the accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive and judicial in the hands, whether of one, a few, or many and whether hereditary, self-appointed or elected may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny”. This justifies the separation of power doctrine which can best be seen from the view of Montesquieu who believes in promoting rational government that “when the legislative power is limited to the executive, there is no liberty, nor is there liberty if judicial power is not separated from the legislative”. Hence the enhancement of democratisation process and democratic governance depend on the nature of the political regime in place, the structure and functioning of the regime, kind of leadership and the capacity of the regime to ensure the articulation and aggregation of its policies. The President of the political regime in power together with his/her political counterparts use their influence to manipulate the other arms of government by passing the fine line of power separation for selfish political ambition. Thus, the tendency is that in Africa one witness single political party for several years in power and the return to monolithic party system is for sure. The 33 years rule experience of the CPDM in Cameroon with similar experience in Uganda and Zimbabwe are clear cut examples and such political leader have no prospect of leaving power. This promoted the return to a monolithic political system leading to political stagnation and hinders to democratisation process.
**Co-Opted Transition**

Equally, another constrain of democratization. It is a situation that occurs when leaders are able to co-opt the transition process and maintain themselves in power despite the holding of relatively free and fair elections. The co-optation of the democratic process usually follows three major steps. Foremost, the case of transition by national conference, the President under this scenario is acutely aware of the precarious nature of his political rule and acts in a quick, although fairly peaceful, manner to hinder the democratisation forces. The usual course of action is to quickly assent to resistance demands to dismantle the single-party system and to legalize all opposition parties in a new multiparty framework. Second, rather than giving the new opposition parties time to organise, and therefore present a viable and competitive alternative to the voters, “snap” elections (often to be held within months) are announced by the ruling party. In this case, the ruling party, which usually still commands a formidable organisational structure and supporters in every region of the country, advocates for the proliferation of numerous new parties so as to divide the opposition vote. Finally, during the period immediately preceding the elections, the ruling party uses its monopoly of the government-controlled print, radio, and television media to dominate the political debate. The net is a “peaceful,” albeit tainted, victory by the ruling President and party (ibid 232). This can be clearly observed in the manner in which elections are organised within the Cameroonian political arena as from the 1992 to the October 9th 2011 Presidential elections and the elections held in Cote d’Ivore October 1990 elections with the ruling party, the CPDM in Cameroon co-opting democratisation process which hinders democratisation in Africa in states that engage it as it encourage monolithic political practice.

**Fragile and Weak or Captive Institution**

President Obama at the Accra International Conference Centre Accra, Ghana on the 11th July 2009 said ‘Africa doesn't need strong men, it needs strong institutions’ In the 21st century, capable, reliable, and transparent institutions are the key to success; strong parliaments; honest police forces; independent judges; an independent press; a vibrant private sector; a civil society. Those are the things that give life to democracy, because that is what matters in people’s everyday lives. But in Africa the tendency is rather that of strong men and weak and captive institutions easily manipulated by autocratic and authoritarian heads of states for their political interest. This often results in recurrent coups or change constitutions to stay in power which greatly destabilize the whole democratization process and bring it to a standstill. Equally, short-lived democracies is the common phenomenon witnessed in Africa when Britain and France gave up their colonies, they left fragile democratic governments in place. Soon problems threatened those governments. Rival ethnic groups often fought for power for example the 1994 Rwanda genocide; strong militaries became tools for ambitious leaders and in many cases, a military dictatorship replaced democracy. As much as Africa needs strong men/leaders we also and mostly importantly need strong, capable, accountable and transparent institutions for the country to function well.

**External Vulnerability**

European powers had viewed colonies as sources of wealth for the home country. The colonial powers encouraged the export of minerals such as crude oil, gold, diamonds, timber and other minerals; one or two cash crops, such as coffee or rubber, rather than the production of a range of products to serve local needs. They developed plantations and mines in African countries and the raw materials imported to serve European markets. For this reason, they will readily grant foreign support to state of bad governance and will readily offer protection and prolonged stay in government of political leaders who safeguard their sole interest. This is the case evident in most of the francophone African countries and some English speaking counterpart. On the other hand, the same former colonial masters will subsequently provoke an outrage conflict or civil wars and instability in these countries.
for later foreign exploitation thus forfeiting the very essence of democracy and democratisation they propagated.

**Poverty; Weak and Passive Civil Societies**

The post-independence era has been in recent years, experiencing debates on the restoration of democracy. The excitement that encompassed many African countries soon after the attainment of political independence has since been replaced by gloom, instability and civil wars which led to high poverty levels. The high poverty levels have resulted in governments failing to sustain their own people. And there is a strong assertion that a viable economy is a major pillar for democracy. Hence, poverty and the practice of democracy or democratisation are incompatible as the poor can’t freely participate in politics due to financial restrain.

As a result same people due to their massive acquisition of wealth remain in power as long as they can. Worst affected by these developments have been civil society whose high illiteracy rate among its members have even exacerbated the situation and their ability to participate in governance processes. These policies left new African nations with unbalanced economies and a small middle class. Such economic problems lessened their chances to create democratic stability which slows down democratisation process.

**Perspectives**

On the normative level, resistance has arisen which in some cases seeks to cloak authoritarianism in claims of cultural differences and in others reflects the undeniable fact that there is no one model of democratisation or democracy suitable to all societies. The reality is that individual societies decide if and when to begin democratisation. Throughout the process, each society decides its nature and it space [1] and African societies (countries) are not left out. The prospects would be explained from general perspective then under various sub divided headings as follows. That is

A. Through the evolution of political rights enjoyed by the African population including

- The ability to form and political organisation free from Government institution;
- Meaningful representation of ethnic groups, racial, religious, and other minorities in the political process; and
- The right to choose a national political leader through free and fair competitive election e.g. Botswana, Senegal, South Africa etc.

B. And also to determine the nature and depth of civil liberties enjoys by African population such as;

- The rights to freedom of speech and assembly;
- Access to vigorous independent media;
- Constitutional guarantee of the process of independent judiciary;
- Freedom of religion, worship and general protection of individual rights regardless of the ethnicity, race, religion etc.

It is thus the following are necessary to encouraging factors (Prospects) fostering democratisation in Africa which will include:

**Transformation via Elections**

The impact on Africa of the third wave of democratisation is demonstrated by the dramatic expansion of multiparty competition in Africa political systems from 1990 to 1994. During the preceding 5-year period (1985-89), truly competitive elections were held in only five African countries: Botswana, The Gambia, Mauritius, Senegal and Zimbabwe. From 1990 to 1994, more than thirty-eight countries held competitive elections. Most important, twenty-nine of the multiparty contests of the 1990-94 eras constituted founding elections in which “the office of the head of government is openly contested following a period during which multiparty political competition was denied.” However, the major problems encountered are the problems of the constitution of the election commission, constitutional
abrogation and the conduct of free and fair election and as earlier stated above as both Obama and Clinton have pointed out, liberal democracy (western liberal democracy) is, “more than just holding elections” [2]. The regular elections in most African countries shows a promising step toward organising more fairer elections in the days ahead which foster democratisation in Africa. Nonetheless, the constituted election commission needs to operate with a fairer vision to engineer a successful democratisation in Africa.

**Change via National Conference**

Another important factor for transition process, which became predominantly influential in francophone Africa, is the national conference, in which a board coalition of leaders from all sectors of society, including elders and the head of women’s organisations, labour and student activist, and ruling and opposition political leaders, ethnic and religious leaders, hold a national gathering that serves as the foundation for debating the outline of a new democratic political order. Such a conference builds on the traditional African concept of consensus building in which all participants have the right to voice their opinions and decision are made only when agree on by all members present (unlike the more widespread Western concept of majority rule) (ibid). The democratisation process under the guidance of the national conference generally follows five major steps. First, a board coalition of leaders responds to a growing crisis of governance in the country by convening a national conference in the capital city. The guiding principle of this body is its self-appointed “sovereignty” (i.e. independence) from either the existing constitutional framework or any interference on the part of the ruling regime. Second, the national conference appoints a transitional government that initially seeks a dialogue with the ruling regime. Overtime, however, a weakened president is either gradually robed of his executive powers or is simply declared an illegitimate authority that no longer has the authority to lead. In either case, the President is usually reduced to a figurehead. Also, the national conference transforms itself into a transitional legislative body (often called the High council) that, in turn, formally elects a prime minister who manages a transition process. Finally, the transitional government adopts a new constitution and hold legislative and presidential elections, subsequently dissolving itself on the inauguration of the newly elected democratic regime (ibid). The strong appeal of the national conference model was essentially due to the dramatic success achieved in the case of Benin.

**A. Conversion Via Consociationalism (through Consociational Democracy)**

Consociational democracy is that which recognises group identities derived from ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences and grants collective rights in addition to individual rights. Thus, consociationalism emphasises the need for divided societies to develop mechanisms for elite power-sharing if democracy is to survive [4]. This type of democracy demonstrates four unique characteristics in the process of recognising and alleviating group differences in a country. The first and most important element is government by a grand coalition of the political leaders (representative) of all significant segments of the plural society. The other three elements consist of (ii) Proportional representation involving different groups in the distribution of legislative seats and in the civil service; (iii) a high degree of segmental autonomy via federalism or similar devices; (iv) and a power of veto over key decisions by minority groups [4]. As such, democratisation would be promoted where various ethnic, cultural, and linguistic fragment of a country are fully represented in the power-sharing deal to escape the danger of any future arising conflict so as to create a safe platform for the practice of democracy and effective democratisation.

**Guided Democracy**

The model of guided democratisation is one in which an authoritarian (often military) regime that is nonetheless committed to democratisation maintain tight control over the transition process. The hallmark of this model is a powerful and usually charismatic leader who, due to the lack of any major competing centres of power, can slowly institute democratisation from above.
according to his own timetable and conferences. The Ghanaian military regime under Flt. Lt. Jerry Rawlings is a precise example of the process of guided democratisation. Assuming power in a military coup d'état in June 1979, Rawlings led the Ghanaian Armed Forces back to the barracks in September 1979 after Dr. Hilla Limann was elected president in democratic elections [5-7].

**Conclusion**

Efforts displayed by the majority of African countries to build, restore or institute democratic structures within their constituencies have leave a lot to be desired. The attainment, promotion and restoration of democracy stand as an abyss, given the high levels of poverty and illiteracy rates among many African grassroots people have disempowered and disabled them. Civil society efforts to contribute to the democratisation process on the African continent have encountered a plethora of challenges, most of which are inevitable unless democratic principles are respected and implemented to the latter. Diminishing participatory spaces, high poverty levels on the African continent as well the continued erosion of democratic institutions have all contributed to making democratization in Africa a remote dream hence living Africa with much to be desired. However, copying from the examples from democratisation processes in countries like Botswana and Senegal could be helpful to some African countries.

**References**


